

Lurking Beneath the Surface:

UNVEILING CANADA'S ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

by HELENA XU

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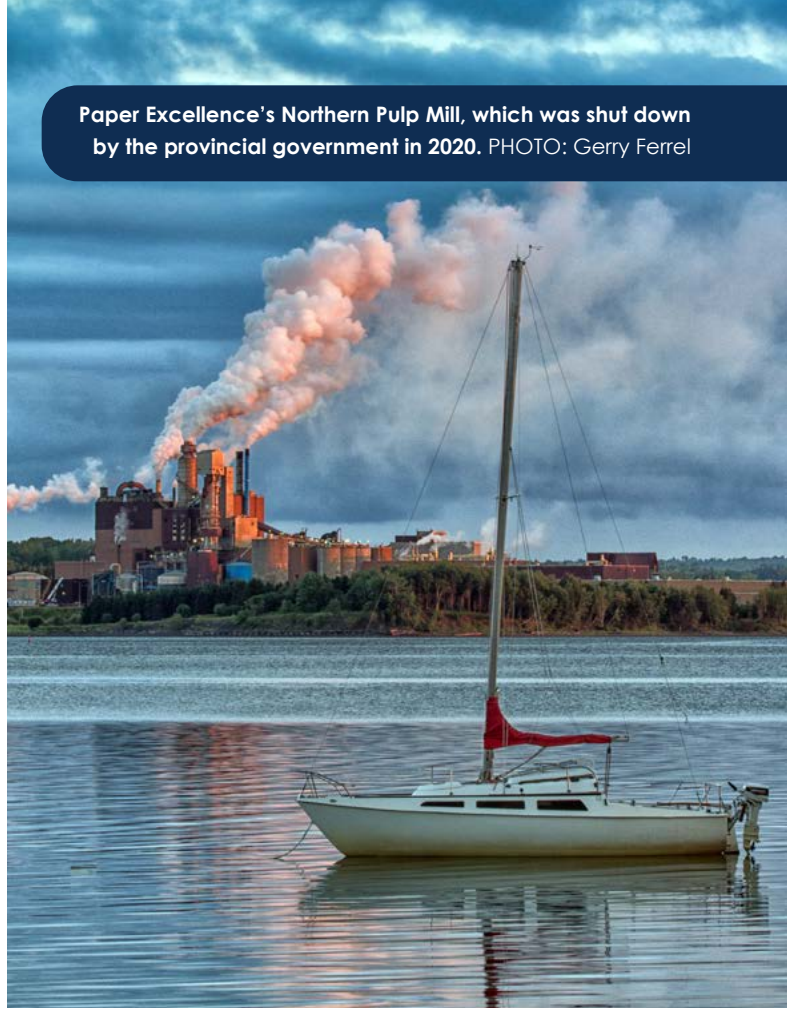
TAKE ACTION

Take part in change! Advocate for Bill C-226 and work to combat environmental racism. Join letter-writing campaigns, amplify and learn from marginalized voices, stay informed and engage with officials. Together we can build a just, equitable and sustainable future!

In a land of natural beauty, Canada is home to the longest coastline in the world, vast mountains and boreal forests. But lurking beneath the surface lies a troubling reality known as environmental racism. It is defined by Encyclopedia Canada as “the disproportionate proximity and greater exposure of Indigenous, Black and other racialized communities to polluting industries and environmentally hazardous activities.” Beyond impacting these marginalized communities simply by creating physical pollution and engaging in destructive activities, environmental racism is further characterized by a history of exclusion of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) perspectives from environmental policymaking.

Environmental racism often involves the targeting of marginalized and BIPOC communities with harmful environmental practices supported by unfair policies and environmental regulations. For example, in Nova Scotia, BIPOC communities including Mi’kmaq and African Nova Scotians are affected by this unjust practice. As a result, not only do they need to fight for the preservation of their land, but for the culture and connection that the natural environment offers to them.

The Pictou Landing First Nation, a Mi’kmaq band located in Pictou Landing, N.S., provides a good example of this history. It spent the last 50+ years battling against the discharge of untreated effluent from operations of Paper Excellence’s Northern Pulp Mill, which was only shut down by the provincial government in 2020. Once a fertile hunting and fishing ground, the land and waterways surrounding the pulp mill degraded into a toxic wasteland, leading the First Nations community to cease activities such as fishing, clam digging and hunting, perhaps for generations to come. In an interview with the CBC News Network, Francis-Denny, a member of the Boat Harbor Remediation Project recounts stories of the elders, “Of the white rock that people used to swim to, of being able to hunt and fish and bring home food, to be healthy and live off the land. And of the moment that was taken away ... the devastation.” She says, “when you look at the elders and they talk about that devastation, you can feel the hurt, their pain.” Considering the long lasting and generational impacts, Francis-Denny reflects, “would our suicide rates be so high? Our drug and alcoholism rates? We were deprived of a chance to live in a healthy environment. We’ve adapted to just surviving.”



Another example in Nova Scotia is that of the Shelburne Dump, located in a predominantly black community, and only closed in 2016. A site for the storing and handling of contaminated garbage from industrial to medical waste, the Shelburne Dump was often lit ablaze. Louise Delisle grew up and lived only a kilometer away from the dump. Not only have members of her family succumbed to cancer-related deaths, but she, like many others, carries deep psychological wounds from living in that environment. She states, "It's not only about health and stress. It's also about lack of power, that you've placed certain industries in certain communities without consulting with them. You've taken away their power, you've taken away their voice, and you've placed it (a toxic dump) in communities that are not only racialized but that are also poor".

Various political, structural and regulatory elements facilitate these kinds of environmental racism. Lack of economic and political power, as well as non-inclusion on regulatory and political bodies, lead to BIPOC communities being unfairly impacted by toxic environmental practices and industries. Lax zoning regulations and the granting of variances to accommodate polluting companies in BIPOC communities are another. Other kinds of regulations also discriminate against BIPOC communities. For example, in British Columbia, David Boyd, U.N. special rapporteur on environment and human rights noted that maximum penalties for dumping garbage or waste on crown land ranged from \$2,000 to \$1,000,000 whereas the maximum penalty for dumping on Indigenous reserves was only \$100.

However, hope is emerging for addressing environmental racism in Canada as more communities begin to identify the historical roots of this issue. Beyond community-specific actions such as shutting down the Shelburne Dump, sustainable development plans are slowly being created and implemented. Encouragement and resources for such transitions are emerging from many places, including from the United Nations 2030 Agenda's Sustainable Development Goals. This document describes a multitude of strategic actions for the creation of healthy, sustainable communities including those for marginalized and BIPOC communities.

Additionally, a number of Canadian provinces have now established an Environmental Bill of Rights. The province of Nova Scotia is the first, and so far, the only one to have given first and second reading to a bill specifically addressing environmental racism, "The Environmental Racism Prevention Act" (Bill 111), although as of August 2023 it has not yet been passed. The federal government is also taking steps to confront this country's history of environmental

racism. Bill C-226, defined as "an Act respecting the development of a national strategy to assess, prevent and address environmental racism and to advance environmental justice" illustrates this effort. Considering many aspects of the problem, including "the link between race, socio-economic status and environmental risk" as well as "the involvement of community groups in environmental policymaking", Bill C-226 will not eradicate environmental racism in its entirety but is a step in the right direction. The bill was given first reading in the House of Commons in early 2022 and is currently proceeding to the Senate. From across the country, members of parliament are hearing from their constituents that environmental racism is a problem for which we as a country must take responsibility and bring to an end.

Each of us can also contribute to this process. Several civil society and environmental groups have been hard at work, urging the Senate to quickly address Bill C-226. We can assist by joining letter writing campaigns such as those hosted by KAIROS, a Canadian inter-church justice coalition, and the Canadian Coalition for Environmental and Climate Justice. In Nova Scotia everyone should advocate with their MLAs for the adoption of Bill 111. Above all, we can endeavor to amplify marginalized voices and to hold ourselves accountable for the upholding of environmental justice required to create an equitable and sustainable future for all.

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