"We are all in this together": Critiquing the Issue of Water Equity through a Lens of Intersectional Environmentalism

Sean P. Connors, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, USA

Abstract

As carbon emissions from the burning of fossil fuels warm the planet, altering the climate and causing severe drought in some regions and unprecedented flooding in others, and as state and local governments privatize once-public water systems in the name of fiscal austerity, the connection between water equity and social justice is increasingly evident. This article introduces a critical lens of intersectional environmentalism and identifies three questions that teachers and students can ask to examine how a society's treatment of water is connected to its treatment of people. When students understand how the well-being of people, animals, natural resources, and the Earth itself are interconnected, they are better prepared to explain how working for environmental justice necessitates their working for social justice as well.

Keywords

water equity, intersectional environmentalism, social justice, environmental justice

In Eliot Schrefer's (2012) young adult novel *Endangered*, the protagonist, a biracial, Congolese American teenage girl named Sophie, summarizes her conservationist mother's philosophy as follows: "The way we treat animals goes hand in hand with the way we treat people'' (p. 51). When I ask the predominantly white, middle-class college students that I work with to talk in groups and decide whether they agree or disagree with this assertion, some dismiss it, but many more are willing to accept it, presumably because they recognize animals as sentient beings that warrant respect. When I amend the assertion, however, and substitute the word "water" in place of "animals," the opposite is the case: the vast majority of students struggle to connect caring for water, a resource that many of them don't often think about due to its ready availability, with caring for people.

As carbon emissions from the burning of fossil fuels continue to warm the planet and alter the climate, giving rise to severe drought in some regions and unprecedented flooding in others, and as state and local governments privatize once-public water systems in the name of fiscal austerity (Hutton, 2024), the connection between water equity and social justice is becoming more evident. In this article, I argue that teachers can use a critical lens of intersectional environmentalism to support students' examining how social justice and environmental justice are connected. In the section that follows, I define intersectional environmentalism and identify three questions that teachers and students can ask to investigate the connection between water equity and social justice. To demonstrate how a society's treatment of water reflects its treatment of people, I next apply the questions to a water equity issue that people on the Navajo Nation confront. To conclude, I examine the implications for educators of inviting young people to apply a lens of intersectional environmentalism to investigate water equity issues and recommend two works of literature for young people they can use to do so.

What is Intersectional Environmentalism?

Intersectional environmentalism builds on the work of ecofeminist scholars, who argue that the same hierarchical thinking that rationalizes human exploitation of nature is also behind different systems of oppression, including sexism, racism, and classism (Warren, 2000). As Connors and Trites (2021) explain, hierarchical thinking relies on oppositional

binaries that privilege one group over another. In the case of sexism, racism, and classism, these binaries include *male/female*, *white/black*, and *rich/poor*. Oppositional binaries also shape people's understanding of their relationship with the natural world. In positioning people over and above animals, for example, the *human/animal* binary (which conveniently ignores that humans are a type of animal) offers an implicit rationale for anthropocentrism, and thus a justification for our slaughtering animals for food, using them as test subjects for research, and confining them in zoos for our entertainment. For ecofeminists, then, addressing systems of oppression necessitates exposing and critiquing the hierarchical thinking on which they depend.

Intersectional environmentalism also owes a debt of gratitude to Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) work on intersectionality, which acknowledges that marginalized groups of people can experience multiple forms of discrimination in ways that amplify their oppression. This includes forms of oppression that are attributable to environmental racism (Washington, 2019). Recent scholarship demonstrates how Indigenous peoples, Black people, and other marginalized communities are more likely to experience the consequences of environmental degradation than are people in affluent white communities (Taylor, 2014; Washington, 2019). Likewise, though industrial nations in the Global North are largely responsible for producing the carbon emissions that have led to global warming, Kings (2017) describes research which suggests that women and girls in the Global South are more likely to "bear the brunt of the extra burdens created by climate change and environmental degradation" (p. 73). This includes a "higher risk of reproductive/fertility health issues caused by drinking from a contaminated water supply" (p. 73). With that in mind, in this article, I rely on Thomas's (2022) definition of intersectional environmentalism as "acknowledg[ing] how social justice and environmentalism are intrinsically linked and how *both* must be considered to achieve environmental justice" (Thomas, 2022, p. 32, emphasis added).

It is worth noting that in its rejection of hierarchical thinking, intersectional environmentalism bears a resemblance to Indigenous epistemologies that value interdependence and co-existence over self-enclosed individualism and exploitation. Justice (2018), for example, argues that "Indigenous traditions are well stocked with warnings against human destructiveness and lessons for more respectful co-existence with our other-than-human relatives" (p. 39). He cautions, "When we don't recognize

or respect our interdependencies, we don't have the full context that's necessary for healthy or effective action" (p. 5). Similarly, Tynan (2021) notes that "Relationality with land is understood by many Indigenous Peoples as an ethic of responsibility, in contrast to an ethic of rights-based entitlement that is present in many Western logics" (p. 604). In asking us to consider how our actions could impact other people, non-human animals, and plants and vegetation, intersectional environmental invites us to reject these same logics.

To support students' applying a lens of intersectional environmentalism to critique the topic of water equity, teachers can invite them to investigate the following:

1) What is the nature of the water equity issue under consideration?
2) Who is affected by the water equity issue, and who is not?
3) How does addressing the water equity issue also necessitate addressing social inequities?

In the next section, I apply these questions to a water equity topic that people on the Navajo Nation confront to demonstrate how applying a critical lens of intersectional environmentalism can support students' teasing out connections between environmental justice and social justice.

Critiquing the Topic of Water Equity

Early in my career teaching high school English, I worked with students at a charter school in a small community on the western Navajo Nation. According to the most recent census report, the median household income on the Navajo Nation, which occupies land in parts of northern Arizona, northwestern New Mexico, and southern Utah, is $33,578, and approximately 35.5% of people live below the poverty line (Navajo Nation Reservation, n.d.). The Navajo Nation is also plagued by infrastructural challenges, one of which involves people's ability to access potable water. According to the Navajo Nation Department of Water Resources (n.d.), approximately 30% of people living on the Navajo Nation lack access "to clean reliable drinking water" (para 5). Likewise, Gerlak, Louder, and Ingram (2022) argue that in some areas, people and livestock are "exposed to groundwater contamination" that is attributable to "industrial waste from uranium mining, raising issues of safety and quality of available well water;

this, in turn, necessitates [people's] buying water from expensive and faraway sources" (p. 5).

Aside from retail and construction jobs in smaller communities, such as the one where I lived and worked, and subsistence farming and sheep and cattle grazing, mines and power plants have historically represented one of the largest employers of people on the Navajo Nation (Rainey, 2017, para. 10). On the western part of the reservation, this included a power plant and two strip coal mines that were owned and operated by Peabody Energy (formerly Peabody Western Coal Company). One of these mines used train cars to deliver coal to other parts of the US, but up until 2005, the second relied on a slurry pipeline to transport coal to a plant in southern Nevada, where it was burned to generate electricity for parts of southern Arizona, California, and Nevada (but *not* the Navajo Nation).

To facilitate this process, Peabody Energy annually extracted approximately 1.3 billion gallons of pristine water, estimated to be between 10,000 and 35,000 years old, from a local aquifer (Glennon, 2002, p. 157). In addition to lowering the water table, this process is thought to have led once reliable springs to run dry, further impacting people's access to reliable water, and thus their ability to raise crops and livestock (Glennon, 2002). Global warming attributed to the burning of coal and other fossil fuels will likely compound this problem in the future. Thus, in response to the first two questions—*What is the nature of the water equity issue under consideration*, and *who is affected by it, and who is not*?—the ability to access clean, reliable water constitutes a significant challenge for many people on the Navajo Nation. On the other hand, corporate executives, investors, customers, and other people who directly benefit from the electricity that Peabody Energy, which is headquartered in Saint Louis, Missouri, produces each year are unaffected by these problems due to their geographical distance.

A third question that one can ask of the water equity issue described above is this: *How does addressing the water equity topic also necessitate addressing social inequities?* While the threat of global warming makes transitioning to more sustainable energy sources crucial moving forward, it is also important to consider how these changes will impact people on the Navajo Nation. In addition to losing some of the few well-compensated jobs available to people, a shift away from fossil fuels will adversely

affect the tribal government, which has traditionally relied on revenues generated from land lease agreements and coal royalties to support a range of public services, "from police patrols, to food banks, to health care for the elderly" (Rainey, 2017, para. 12). From this perspective, addressing the water equity issues the Navajo Nation faces will also necessitate rectifying the many economic and infrastructural challenges that the Navajo people have historically confronted as a result of white supremacist policies, environmental racism, and systemic oppression.

Conclusion

Critiquing the water equity issues that adversely affect the welfare of people on the Navajo Nation, one subsistence farmer explained, "The health of our animals is directly tied to the health of the plants and the health of the plants is tied to the health of the air and water …. So *we are all in this togethe*r" (Jacobs, 2017, para. 51, emphasis added). This critique perfectly encapsulates an intersectional environmentalist perspective on the problem: policies and practices that are injurious to plants, animals, and the Earth are also detrimental to people. When students acknowledge and accept their "*togetherness,*" they are better prepared to explain how rectifying environmental problems such as water inequity, climate change, and global warming also necessitates working for social justice and advocating for the rights of people.

Intersectional environmentalism stands in contrast to what I refer to as neoliberal environmentalism. Unlike the former, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of people, animals, and the Earth, neoliberal environmentalism depicts caring for the environment as a purely individual undertaking. From this perspective, an environmentally conscious person is one who practices recycling, properly disposes of waste, limits their consumption, and so on. While these behaviors are undoubtedly important, they are not sufficient to address the scope and complexities of the environmental problems that people around the world confront in the 21st century. In addition to water and air pollution, this includes rapid species extinction, an accumulation of plastics in our oceans, the presence of "forever chemicals" in groundwater, climate change, and global warming. These are systemic problems, and as such, they necessitate systemic solutions that account not only for the welfare of people, but also the well-being of plants, animals, and the Earth.

For teachers who are interested in investigating the relationship between water equity and social justice with students, children's and young adult literature offers a valuable resource. Two recent books in particular examine water equity issues like those that I have argued confront people on the Navajo Nation. For teachers who work with younger students, Alice McGinty and Shonto Begay's (2021) *The Water Lady: How Darlene Arviso Helps a Thirsty Navajo Nation* is a non-fiction picturebook that tells the true story of a Navajo woman who assists her local community by using her water truck to deliver thousands of gallons of water to her neighbors. Likewise, Brian Young's *Healer of the Water Monster* is a gorgeously written work of middle grade fiction that tells the story of eleven-year-old Nathan Todacheenie, who, struggling in the aftermath of his parents' divorce, decides to spend the summer with his grandmother at her remote home on the eastern Navajo Nation. There, he unexpectedly befriends a young Water Monster, a Holy Being who is suffering from a mysterious illness that impedes his ability to bring rain to the region, resulting in a decades-long drought. When Nathan deduces that the Water Monster's illness is likely attributable to contamination from a nearby uranium mine, he embarks on a journey to find a cure for his newfound friend. In examining these books with students, teachers can also direct them to the Navajo Water Project website, where they can learn more about the challenges that water equity poses for not only people on the Navajo Nation reservation, but elsewhere in the United States.

Preparing young people to become responsible stewards of the environment entails more than simply calling their attention to environmental problems that affect their local communities and encouraging them to take individual action. Acknowledging our togetherness, as the aforementioned literary texts invite readers to do, and considering how policies and practices enacted in one part of the world impact people and the environment elsewhere, necessitates nothing less than a paradigm shift.

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