

Grassy Narrows mercury disaster a form of environmental racism

By [STEPHEN BEDE SCHARPER](#) Christianity
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There is a pattern in Canada and across the world of marginalized groups being forced to put up with pollution in their neighbourhoods



A protest at Queen's Park this year about the lack of action on cleaning up the mercury poisoning at the Grassy Narrows reserve (TORONTOSTAR FILEPHOTO)

“No more fancy talk, no more studies. We just want it cleaned up.”

So declared Chief Simon Fobister of the Grassy Narrows First Nation earlier this month, commenting on the continuing, unconscionable mercury levels in the waters flowing through his community.

His exasperation is warranted.

For over half a century, the Grassy Narrows First Nation of Northwestern Ontario has been plagued by this odious chemical intruder in their water, fish, and bloodstreams, with appallingly flaccid government responses.

From 1962 to 1970, a now-defunct Dryden paper mill poured 10 tonnes of mercury into the Wabigoon-English River system. Though the contamination of the river and the Grassy Narrows community has been long-known and well-documented, the perduring poisoning, and apparently the leaching of mercury, continues.

While Chief Fobister suggests his community’s unaddressed mercury contamination is a result of “wilful neglect,” it might also be the result of something more insidious.

It also smacks of racism, specifically, environmental racism.

The notion of “environmental racism” was first articulated in the 1980s by Rev. Benjamin Chavis, then with the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice in the U.S. The commission, after opposing a proposed toxic-waste site slated for a poor, largely African-American community in North Carolina, launched a regional study that revealed a disturbing pattern.

Hazardous waste sites, landfills, incinerators and coal-fired plants were often placed in areas comprised largely of African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and the working poor. Such marginalized groups were perceived as weak, vulnerable citizens unable to rally against the poisoning of their neighbourhoods. Such targeting was often deliberate.

Sociologist Robert Bullard’s groundbreaking 1990 work, *Dumping in Dixie*, confirmed this trend, showing that to be impoverished, or a person of colour, in the U.S. often meant enduring a disproportionate share of pollution.

Yet, environmental racism is not relegated to the U.S. The citing of dangerous chemical plants in impoverished communities, such as the Union Carbide Plant

in Bhopal, India, where more than 8,000 were killed in a poisonous gas explosion in December 1984, provides a ghastly example.

In Canada, as the environmental law group Ecojustice has argued, examples of environmental racism can be found among black communities in Nova Scotia, and in the contaminated water that pockmarks dozens of indigenous communities across Canada.

In Nova Scotia last year, an attempt was made to establish a legal precedent for environmental racism. A hotly debated private member's bill sought to introduce an environmental racism "framework" that would "acknowledge, validate and address the problem of environmental racism in Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotia communities."

As MLA Karla MacFarlane argued in pressing for the bill's adoption, "What we have to realize is that environmental racism remains a reality for all people, and has been for generations."

Claiming the legislature must recognize the connection "between race, socioeconomic status and environmental risk," MacFarlane concluded, "we can't continue to keep the blinders on."

Though defeated, there is speculation the bill might be reintroduced.

In the tragic case of Grassy Narrows, we also cannot afford to "keep the blinders on." As Chief Fobister recounts, when the mercury exposure came to light in the 1970s, the commercial fishing industry, the backbone of the Grassy Narrows economy, collapsed. A team of Japanese scientists confirmed the community was suffering from mercury poisoning, and a provincial and federal scientific panel reported in 1984 the river should be cleaned up.

A decision was made, however, to let the river remediate itself. It hasn't. And no systematic government monitoring has taken place since that time.

Why not?

For Craig Benjamin, indigenous rights co-ordinator for Amnesty International, Grassy Narrows is a clear example of environmental racism. He noted in a recent email to me that the government's failure to acknowledge the nature of the harm inflicted on the community, to conduct ongoing health monitoring, to provide specialized health services for mercury poisoning, and to clean up the river spelled out something more than neglect.

In light of these and other failings, Benjamin cannot but interpret the saga as one of “racism and discrimination against indigenous peoples.”

Sadly, it seems Benjamin is right.

Another hard truth to confront, and remedy, on the path to truth and reconciliation.

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