

Environmental Justice and Regional Change in the Delta

Julie Sze (American Studies) and Jonathan London (Human and Community Development)

During the 2007-2008 academic year, the EJP regional decision making research collaborative conducted two research projects to elucidate how politically disenfranchised communities, particularly (although not exclusively) communities of color, are impacted by regional resource use and planning processes. Our collaborative is comprised of an interdisciplinary group of scholars (environmental and plant sciences, sociology, urban design, American Studies and geography) both faculty and graduate, interested in issues of space, place and power in California, particularly in the Central Valley region. The first research project examined several regional decision-making processes implemented by various agencies within the State of California. In particular, we examined the way that the decision-making processes overtly, covertly, and simultaneously recognize and reject the publically expressed concerns of environmental justice. One decision making process, the Delta Vision process, became the primary focus of our attention. The second research project examined the ways in which science is acknowledged, used, co-opted, (mis/re)interpreted, and otherwise involved with regional decision making, specifically regarding the Delta Vision process.

Regional Decision Making Project

We attended, observed, and documented a variety of meetings dealing with the following regional planning processes: 1) the Delta Vision, a reassessment of the management of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, mandated by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2005; 2) the Blueprint Planning Process, an attempt by the eight counties comprising the Central Valley to come to a region-wide agreement on coordinating transportation, growth, environmental, and other pending planning dilemmas; and 3) the Environmental Justice Advisory Committee (EJAC) sessions for the California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006 (AB 32), another piece of Governor-sponsored legislation, the purpose of which is to determine the best (market-based) mechanisms for lowering state greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020, without adversely impacting already-impacted (EJ) communities. After a few months, it became clear that the Blueprint Planning Process was not proceeding at the same pace as the other two decision-making scenarios. Therefore, we discontinued our observations of this process. Though the AB 32 EJAC is an important process, we focused on it less during the summer months of 2008. Consequently, the Delta Vision process has been our primary focus.

This research has made plain the complex ways in which powerful forces- political, cultural, technical- work both in concert and at odds with one another to shape the future of the regions we examine (primarily the Delta and the San Joaquin) and the state's economy and environment.

Science- and Policy Making Project

From Sept 2007-May 2008, we attended XXX number of meetings and XXX (more on methods). During the summer of 2008, we interviewed over 20 people about the intersections of science and policy-making in current Delta planning and management and how these intersections might pertain to EJ and other communities. Some of those interviewed were participants in the Delta Vision process and others were involved in science-making about the Delta but not directly involved with Delta Vision. We spoke with long-time Delta scientists, state agency science and technical staff members, scientists and legislative analysts with several Delta and Bay Area non-profit groups, university professors, and other people with vested interests in the Delta and its management and policy fates.

So far these interviews have revealed that while "science" is ostensibly an important factor in the policy process, ultimately, it is a distraction from the "real" business of policy making. The practices of "science" and the scientists themselves are viewed as a slightly vexing addition to a conversation that otherwise would be tightly controlled to produce results desired by a select contingent of interests – none of which have environmental justice as a primary goal.