

Disaster, Environmental Justice, and Eco-Therapy: Social Work in the Face of Climate Change

By: [Meredith C.F. Powers](#)

Powers, M.C.F. (2018). Disaster, Environmental Justice, and Eco-Therapy: Social Work in the Face of Climate Change. NASW-NC Newsletter, Winter 2018, 10.

Made available courtesy of Meredith C.F. Powers and the National Association of Social Workers North Carolina Chapter: <https://www.naswnc.org/page/Newsletter>

Abstract:

We live in a world plagued with environmental disasters and injustices of all kinds and we know the increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters are due to climate change¹-- which is directly exacerbated by global human behavior. Thankfully, our profession is ideally situated to address these very issues. Social workers in North Carolina (NC) are continuing to take up the call to respond to issues of climate change and environmental injustices that have surfaced during the recent devastation from Hurricanes Florence and Michael and the related storms and flooding. Simply put, environmental injustice² means that people do not have the same access to benefits of the environment (such as clean air and water, access to healthy food and green spaces for physical and mental health) and/or they experience more of the burden from environmental degradation and disasters (such as only being able to afford housing in high risk areas, or having to take jobs that subject them to industrial toxins).

Keywords: climate justice | social work | North Carolina | eco-therapy

Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

Disaster, Environmental Justice, and Eco-Therapy: Social Work in the Face of Climate Change

By Meredith C.F. Powers,
PhD, MSW
UNC Greensboro



We live in a world plagued with environmental disasters and injustices of all kinds and we know the increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters are due to [climate change](#)¹-- which is directly exacerbated by global human behavior. Thankfully, our profession is ideally situated to address these very issues.

Social workers in North Carolina (NC) are continuing to take up the call to respond to issues of climate change and environmental injustices that have surfaced during the recent devastation from Hurricanes Florence and Michael and the related storms and flooding. Simply put, [environmental injustice](#)² means that people do not have the same access to benefits of the environment (such as clean air and water, access to healthy food and green spaces for physical and mental health) and/or they experience more of the burden from environmental degradation and disasters (such as only being able to afford housing in high risk areas, or having to take jobs that subject them to industrial toxins).

We recently have seen this in NC with [coal-ash](#)³ and [pig farm waste](#)⁴ spilling into our waterways and toxifying the land, soil, and air in vulnerable communities. We have also seen the devastation of the flooding on people's homes and entire communities, some of which have been suffering for decades due to unfulfilled promises for recovery aid from previous storms (e.g., the [Town of Princeville](#)⁵ which was one of the first towns established by former slaves in the South). These environmental injustices play out in the ways that some communities are more vulnerable to storms and flooding - not only in the ways that they may not be able to sufficiently prepare or evacuate, but also in the ways they are not as able to recover due to economic constraints and/or because they are being further neglected as others are prioritized (often due to [environmental racism](#)⁶).

Social workers all over the world have recently come together to contribute lessons for a workbook series, published by the [International Federation of Social Work](#)⁷, which contains many topics around disaster, environmental justice, and eco-therapy and are useful for training social workers in the field, as well as students. They are free as PDF downloads and you may share them with anyone you think would find them useful:

Social Work Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability: A Workbook for Global Social Workers and Educators (Vol.1)

<http://ifsw.org/product/books/social-work-promoting-community-and-environmental-sustainability-free-pdf/>

AND

Social Work Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability: A Workbook for Global Social Workers and Educators (Vol.2)

<https://www.ifsw.org/product/books/global-agenda-for-social-work-and-social-development-3rd-report/>

It is also important to highlight that in the face of such disasters and environmental injustices, social workers must be encouraged to take time for self-care. These issues may create additional eco-grief and climate anxieties, on top of the normal stress of working with clients and communities. They could do this through various eco-therapeutic practices that could be useful for themselves and their loved ones, as well as their clients. Such eco-therapeutic practices include taking a walk in a park or wooded trail, sitting on the beach, visiting the mountains, or even when one may be confined to indoor spaces, practicing mindfulness meditation while holding a seashell in your hand or admiring an indoor potted plant, or enjoying the company of a loving pet (more examples and research supporting these interventions are presented in the IFSW workbook series noted above).

As social workers, we are part of a global profession that rises to the challenge to help individuals and communities as we come alongside them to change policies and practices that promote justice in all of its various forms. Let's all take time to reach out to our fellow social workers, near and far (did you know that Typhoon Manghut hit parts of the Philippines and China just as Florence was hitting NC?), and come alongside each other in solidarity as we seek to address community and environmental sustainability to mitigate and respond to such disasters, to welcome [environmental migrants](#)⁸, and to address environmental injustices. Let's also pause to appreciate the environment with which we are inextricably connected and to acknowledge the historical and current caretakers of our Mother Earth, especially Indigenous peoples here in NC.

Thank you for the great work you are doing in your communities! And thank you to the leadership in our profession for setting [The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development](#)⁹ that unites us all with the common aims to promote social and economic equalities, the dignity and worth of all peoples, [community and environmental sustainability](#)¹⁰, and the strengthening of human relationships. ●

References:

¹<http://www.ipcc.ch/>

²<https://www.cswe.org/Centers-Initiatives/Center-for-Diversity/About/Stakeholders/Commission-for-Diversity-and-Social-and-Economic-J/Committee-on-Environmental-Justice.aspx>

³https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/duke-energy-coal-ash-spill-north-carolina_us_5b9dbce0e4b04d32ebf92af7

⁴<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/19/climate/florence-hog-farms.html>

⁵<http://articles.latimes.com/2000/feb/06/news/mn-61544>

⁶<https://psmag.com/social-justice/environmental-racism-in-north-carolina>

⁷<https://www.ifsw.org/>

⁸<https://journals.iupui.edu/index.php/advancesinsocialwork/article/view/21678/22063>

⁹<https://www.ifsw.org/wp-content/uploads/ifsw-cdn/assets/globalagenda2012.pdf>

¹⁰<https://www.ifsw.org/product/books/global-agenda-for-social-work-and-social-development-3rd-report/>

