

# Stream Restoration and Environmental Justice: Confluence or Countercurrent?



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# Land Acknowledgement

*We collectively acknowledge that this location occupies the ancestral hunting and traditional Lands of the Cherokee, Shawnee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek peoples, groups that were subjected to forced removals from their Homelands.\**

\*Adapted from Vanderbilt University's Indigenous VU program, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/diversity/identity-initiatives/indigenousvu/>



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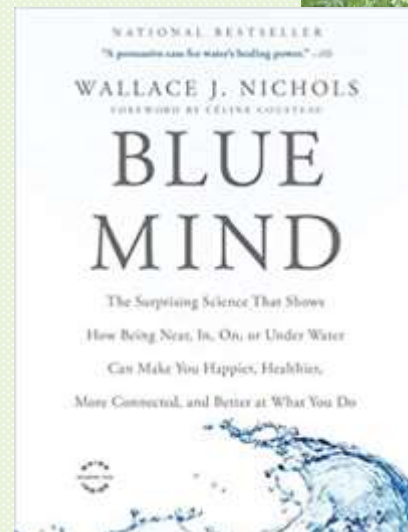
## **1 What People Think About It**

2 The State of the Art

3 Directions Toward Change

# Why is this a Topic at NSRC

- Social Awakening Environmental Justice (EJ) knowledge in 2020
- Blue Mind, Wallace J. Nichols
  - My job makes happy places
- Who gets restoration investment
- Is EJ on anyone's mind in selecting projects



# Survey Says

- Most respondents do not have EJ focus or projects
- Non-profits leading the way in EJ based projects
- Grant funding leading the “mandate” to include EJ
- Preventing more EJ investment
  - Urban locations
  - MS4 projects take priority/funding
  - Lack of uplift
  - Squeaky wheel, repairs
  - Property ownership

# Stream Restoration and Environmental Justice: Confluence or Countercurrent?

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# Environmental Justice

“The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies”  
(US EPA 2017)



# How to be an Anti-Racist (2019)



Ibram Kendi has shown how people can be unwittingly supporting racism through: ignorance, silence, not-the-time, not-the-place, not me.

To help achieve environmental justice, it is essential that environmental equity gets advanced, not just held as-is, and certainly not reversed.



Using the lens of environmental justice, we identify several things about how stream restoration projects have been happening, and here are a few:

- *Projects are not always as well-represented and communicated as they could be.*

# Communication to People?



# Effective Messaging



**WARNING!**



Fish from these waters contain chemicals and should not be eaten by women or children. Others should limit what they eat.

**Warning:**  
If you are pregnant, nursing, or trying to get pregnant, do not eat fish from these waters. Others should limit what they eat.

**အချက်အလက်:**  
မိသားစုဝင်များအတွက် အန္တရာယ်ရှိသော ဓာတ်ပစ္စည်းများ ပါရှိသည့် မိသားစုဝင်များသည် ဤဒေသရှိ ရေကန်များမှ ဖမ်းယူသော ချောင့်ငါးများကို မသုံးစွဲရပါ။ အခြားသူများသည် ချောင့်ငါးများကို သုံးစွဲရာတွင် သတိပြုရမည်။

**Advertencia:**  
¡Peligro! Los peces de estas aguas contienen químicos y no deben ser consumidos por mujeres o niños. Los demás pescadores deben limitar lo que comen. Para excepciones por favor visite la página:

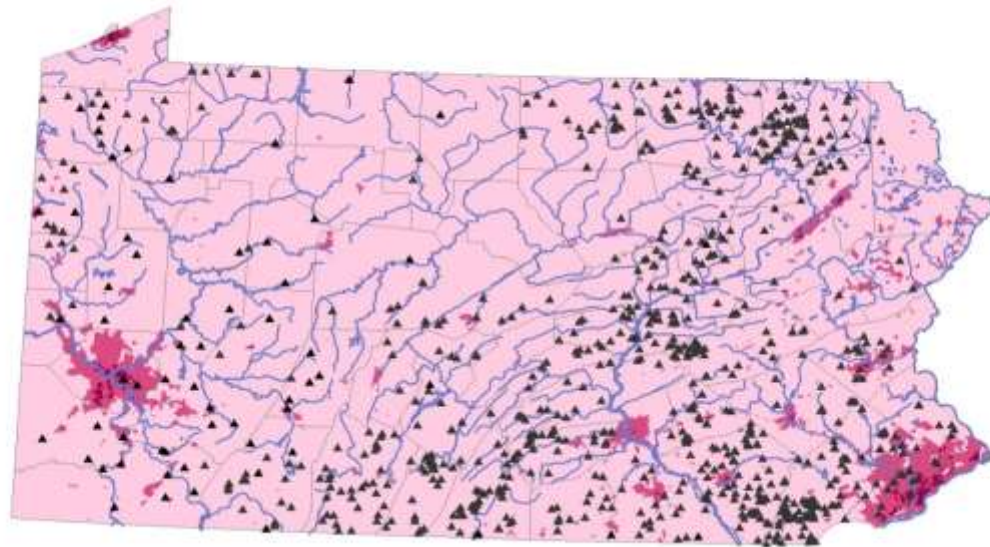
Para más información: [www.health.ny.gov/fish](http://www.health.ny.gov/fish) or  
call the NYS Department of Health at 1-800-780-0000

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- *Projects goals may not target and advance environmental justice.*

# Who Benefits, Who Pays?



## Urban Intensity



## Stream Restoration Sites and Urban Areas in Pennsylvania



## River Features

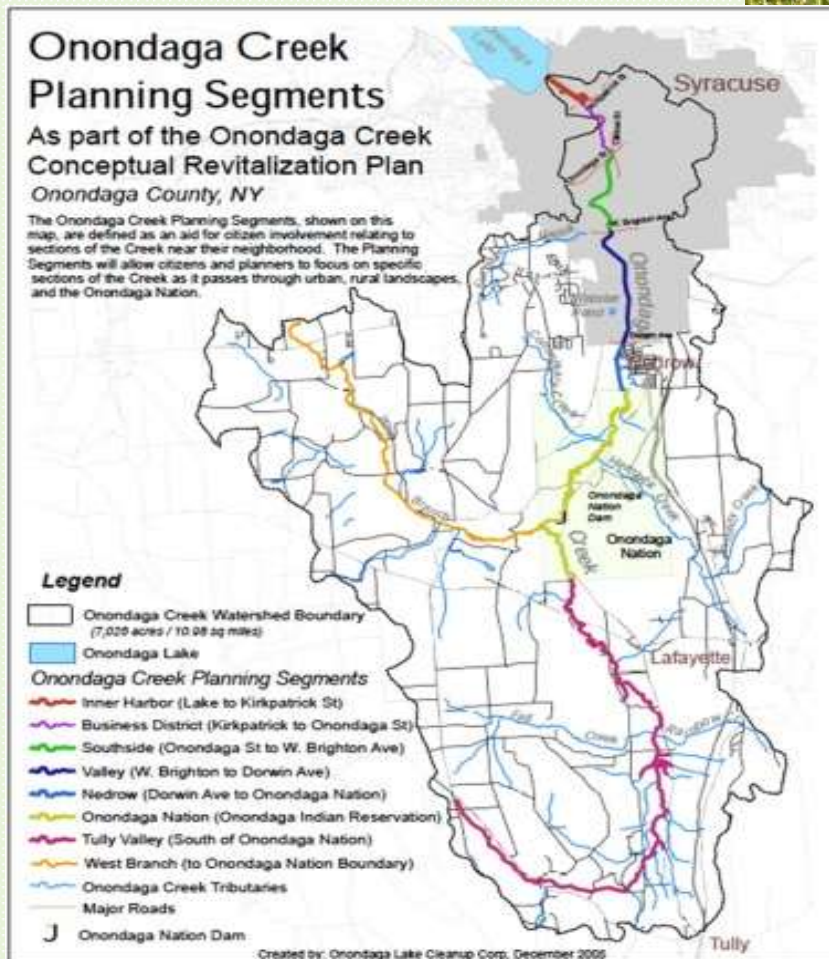
- ▲ Stream Restoration Sites
- Major Water Channels

Data Sources: National River Restoration Science Synthesis, ESRI, Pennsylvania Dept. of Environmental Protection, and U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Nat'l Agricultural Statistics Service

Using the lens of environmental justice, we identify a few things about how stream restoration projects have been happening, and here are a few:

- *Projects are not always as well-represented and communicated themselves as well as they could be.*
- *Projects goals may not target and advance environmental justice.*
- *Existing project metrics may not be the best indicators of the extent to which environmental justice goals are being served.*

# From 'Dead' to 'Life Sustaining'



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Gentrification is a major threat when a stream restoration improves a watershed, increasing the market value of properties, especially in a community lacking in planning capacity.

Regulators do have some planning tools to help head this off, and these tools would include:  
rent control, zoning, taxation,  
easement, partnerships with NGOs,  
and capacity building.

Nonetheless, they are not being used as effectively as we might hope, and perhaps better tools can be developed.



# Racial Justice is Tough to Think about:

- many of us simply want it now, already. We want the past stuff gone and behind us.
- for white people there can be emotions including guilt, shame, and feeling overwhelmed.
- and for BIPOC, thinking about racial justice can be enraging, exhausting, as well as overwhelming.
- the only consolation for everyone listening is that while none of us get to influence what has already happened, we can help steer things in the future.

Important to track new information about:

- structural racism
- the doctrine of discovery
- reparations
- Indigenous environmental knowledge / belief systems
- movements for land back / water back



# Dam removal, Akwesasne Indigenous Nation



Near Hogansburg, NY. St. Regis Mohawk  
Tribe, SRMT

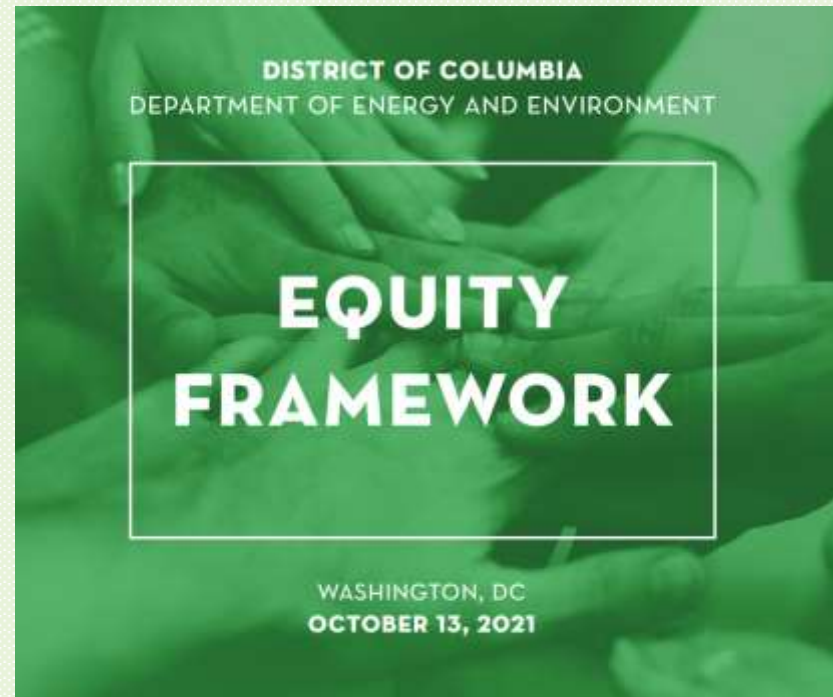
# Targeted Community Engagement and Advocacy



Atlanta, GA, South River Watershed Association

# Getting Serious about Environmental Equity/Justice Programmatically

- Example: Washington DC
  - Racial Equity Impact Assessment (REIA)
  - The Racial Equity Budget Tool (REBT)
  - Trainings on history, cultural, racial disparity issues



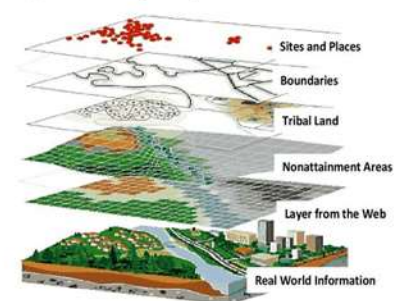
# Getting Serious about Environmental Equity/Justice Culturally

- Know your community
  - How are resources used
  - EJ Screen, EPA
  - Community leaders
- Partner with/Learn from Those Leading EJ Efforts



## EJSCREEN has Many Other Map Layers

EJSCREEN adds many other types of data by overlaying various datasets (called "layers")



# In Summary

Change is already happening, so there can be a confluence between stream restoration and environmental justice, but so far it has been slow and incremental.

For change to be sustained and durable, it will require improved systems and practices; without it, there will be backsliding.

The best way to get meaningful change will be with lots of input from communities, managers, and from practitioners representing a range of stream restoration specialties.



# Image Sources

- National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/trte/learn/historyculture/upload/The-Trail-Where-They-Cried-508.pdf>
- Author photos
- US EPA
- Syracuse.com
- Onondaga Environmental Institute
- NYWEA
- American Rivers <https://www.americanrivers.org/threats-solutions/restoring-damaged-rivers/>
- South River Watershed Association <https://www.southriverga.org/advocacy>
- Anacostia River, Tyrone Turner/WAMU
- George Tames/NYT, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/18/us/martin-luther-king-resurrection-city.html>
- Gerald Herbert/AP for the *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/26/climate/epa-environmental-justice-regan.html>
- Baltimore Sun



# Continued Topic Engagement

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