Carl Anthony: Earth Day and EJ

Interview by B. Jesse Clarke

Carl Anthony co-founded Race, Poverty & the Environment in 1990. In this interview with RP&E editor B. Jesse Clarke, Anthony shares his reflections on some of the key milestones that led to the creation of the journal and its role in the ever-evolving environmental justice movement. Recorded at the studios of the National Radio Project, this interview introduces Radio RP&E—podcasts and broadcasts from the national journal of social and environmental justice. Read an edited excerpt below or listen to the full interview at www.urbanhabitat.org/20years.

Jesse Clarke: Can you talk a little bit about where the environmental movement was on Earth Day 1970?

Carl Anthony: Earth Day 1970 was started, in part, as a result of the work of Rachel Carson who wrote Silent Spring in 1962. That book and similar research on the effects of DDT sparked a growing interest in the environment that went beyond protecting wildlife and open spaces. In some ways, it was paradoxical, because it became a powerful protest movement that was also distancing itself from issues of race and social justice.

Some proponents of environmentalism sought to use it to put a closure on the struggles of the 1960s and launch a new kind of consciousness about the earth and the environment, without really addressing issues of social and racial justice. But in fact, all these movements were interrelated. Many people, for innumerable reasons, were really upset with the dominant society and the way in which it was destroying both culture and places. Indeed, the new environmental movement owed something to the civil rights movement.

Earth Day was organized as a “teach in” about the earth as proposed by then Senator Gaylord Nelson. The teach-in can be traced back to the anti-war movement and before that, to the freedom schools of the civil rights movement. And so, the first Earth Day actually came out of that tradition.

The anti-war movement gathered steam just as the civil rights movement was winding down, and the environmental movement came in and got a lot of energy from the anti-war movement. The environmentalists learned from the civil rights movement how to mobilize a large number of people. But it was mostly a white movement... European Americans.

Clarke: Jumping ahead two decades, in 1990 environmentalism was still basically a white, middle class movement.

Anthony: Yes, it was. So much so that 150 civil rights groups wrote a letter to the "Big Ten" mainstream environmental groups in January 1990, complaining that the memberships, the staffs, and the boards of directors of these organizations were almost all white. But most devastating of all, their priorities really reflected the issues of concern to predominantly suburban constituencies, and not those of people of color. Many actually went against the interests of the communities of color.

Then in 1987, the United Church of Christ put out a report entitled Toxic Wastes and Race, which touched off a shift. That report revealed that the most reliable predictor of where toxic waste dumps are located was “among communities of color.” Three out of five communities of color were at risk from these toxic waste dumps.1

Clarke: How did the launch of RP&E come about?

Anthony: At about this time, Luke Cole and I went to a public interest legal conference in Oregon. A thou-
sand lawyers were there, all of whom were white. In reaction to this experience, when we got home we had a little caucus with a few people to talk about issues that concern people of color and the environment. We wanted to reach out to others who had similar concerns and to publish them. We were hit by a barrage of stories from all over the country. Apparently, people all over were becoming aware that the time had come for this movement. We published their work in a journal that became the forerunner of RP&E.

Then in October 1991, the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice convened a conference in Washington to which about 600 people came from across the United States. About 400 of these people were actually from communities of color grassroots organizations. The conference managed to synthesize all the different issues and concerns into 17 principles of environmental justice, which were then published in many journals and books.

Clarke: How did you begin to develop this concept of moving environmentalism into an urban context?

Anthony: Because of the white bias of the environmental movement, there was almost no talk about cities, even though 85 percent of the population of the United States lived in cities and metropolitan areas. The white environmental movement was focused mostly on wilderness protection... on protecting the water, the land, the air; and also increasingly on looking at biological resources. But the fact of the matter is that all this pollution actually comes from the cities.

Even though there was a lot of focus on the issue of toxic pollution, which was becoming a huge problem for everybody in the country in 1990, there was a full range of issues that was not being discussed. Many of the problems in our communities came from the fact that there had been this rapid expansion of the suburbs, which was contributing to sprawl and to the abandonment of the inner city.

I had the honor and the privilege of introducing the issue of transportation justice at the first people-of-color environmental leadership summit along with Eric Mann, who started the Bus Riders’ Union in Los Angeles, and Barry Commoner, who had run for President of the United States under the Peace and Justice Party.

Although we introduced this idea of transportation justice at that summit, the issues go back a long way. It was really a new framing of an old issue. People who know about civil rights realize that transportation justice is deeply embedded in the civil rights movement.

Clarke: All the way back to Plessy...

Anthony: Yes, to Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896) and more recently to Brown vs. Board of Education (1954), which came to the fore because of the inequitable investment in school buses. And of
course, we have Rosa Parks. So, in many ways, it was just us putting a new label on something that people already understood deeply.

One of the really remarkable things that we have grown used to, yet have a very shallow historical perception of, is our over-reliance on automobiles. In 1900 there were, practically speaking, no automobiles, no paved roads. In an incredibly short period of time—just over 100 years—the automobile has changed all the countries and all the people in the world. Freeways have literally paved the way for the abandonment of our cities.

In terms of transportation policy in this country, the government has been underwriting people running from each other. Not just from the black people—they’re running from each other.

And this is simply not sustainable because of the direct relationship between this pattern of over-reliance on automobiles as an escape and the CO₂ emissions that come from the automobiles. This has to come to an end.

Clarke: As you look at the trajectory of the environmental justice movement, what do you consider some of its key victories over the course of this time?

Anthony: It’s now a worldwide movement. Putting the concept of environmental justice on the global radar screen is one big accomplishment. Also, the whole issue of the intersection of public health and the environment and the growing awareness of the public health challenges of the way we build our cities.

Clarke: In what respect has the movement fallen short? What remains basically unchanged?

Anthony: Well, I’m actually a bit of an optimist about all this. I remember seeing a television program with [former Secretary of State Henry] Kissinger about two weeks before the fall of the Berlin Wall where he said: “This is absolutely stable. This will never fall.” Within two years we saw the demise of the Soviet Union.

I believe that there are changes that take a long time to come to fruition but when they happen, they are big. Right now, the biggest challenge that we’re facing is global warming and climate change. And although the climate issue is unique, in some ways, it is still the same old thing. It’s about who’s in power, who makes the decisions, who reaps the benefits, and who bears the burden.

Clarke: What are some of the intellectual issues you’d like to see RP&E bring to the fore? And what kinds of discussions do you believe should be engendered amongst the current generation that’s talking about these issues but has not framed them in these terms?

Anthony: I have a funny story about the San Francisco school district. They came out with a report about 15 years ago that said: “Eighty-six percent of
the population in the school district of San Francisco are minorities, and sixteen percent are the majority.

Clarke: New math.

Anthony: Yes, but seriously, this big demographic shift is going to cause us to rethink a lot of things. In California now, the majority population is people of color. By 2023, the children of the people of color will be the majority of children in the United States and by 2043, people of color will be the majority population in the United States of America. This is a radical transformation that we have not quite caught up with. It’s going to make everybody redefine who we are as a people and as a country.

Clarke: In fact, the people who have been running the country have been the minority all along. It’s about three or four percent of the population controlling the key levers of power.

Anthony: Exactly.

Clarke: So, back to the question of what coalition of people could really gain political power to change the direction of this country and the world?

Anthony: All of the social movements that we have thought about over the last couple of decades—the women’s movement, the environmental movement, the gay and lesbian movement, the labor movement, the indigenous people’s movement—have evolved in the last couple of hundred years and have a common root. This is a global movement. We’re a little behind. The transnational corporations have been two or three steps ahead of us. But we have the numbers—if only we can really begin to understand our relationship to each other. And I feel pretty optimistic about that.

Clarke: But if you look at the fundamental power relationships and the methodologies available to movements to challenge power—the legal track, the legislative track, the popular movement track, the direct action track—which tracks can lead us to that critical moment of the sudden dissolution of the empire?

Anthony: One of the things that came out of my own journey in the environmental movement is that my own sense of time has really expanded. This sense of deep time is something that I really didn’t have before. As an African American, my sense was that everything terrible began in 1619 when the black people were brought over here, enslaved, and forced to work in the plantations.

In order for us to make sense of this, we have to have a story that goes back to the beginning of creation. The crisis that we’re facing globally is actually disturbing the basic patterns of life on the planet and is the worst period of extinction for creatures on this planet in 65 million years.

This is bigger than capitalism. It’s bigger than imperialism. It’s bigger than all the isms, all the movements, and all the struggles we’ve had. And there’s gonna be hell to pay!

As a result, we have a global consciousness that’s beginning to emerge at the grassroots level. People all over the world are engaged in a collaboration even if they don’t know who the other people are. And even though corporate interests—and the one percent of the population that controls over half of the global wealth—are making all the decisions that are putting us at huge risk, there is something much bigger going on.

You know that poem, The Charge of the Light Brigade, about the British soldiers who were charging into this battle unaware that there were thousands and thousands of people on the other side of the mountain? They were up against something much bigger than they expected. The British thought the sun would never set on their empire, but it did.

So, you know, as bad as the corporations are at a transnational level, there’s something bigger happening here. And being a part of that is really inspiring for me.

Endnotes
2 According to the U.S. Census Bureau, white persons of non-hispanic origin are 42.3 percent. However, as a racial category, most Latinos are counted as white, in which case the white population including Hispanics is counted at 76.6%. California QuickFacts from the U.S. Census Bureau. http://quickfacts.census.gov.
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