How to Advocate for Environmental Justice

What exactly is Environmental Justice? There are so many issues out there. Where to start? What’s right for you? Many people seem knowledgeable and tied into their own path and passion and cause, but perhaps you are not yet sure of your own role in protecting the environment... which can be intimidating and discouraging all at the same time.

What issue attracts you most: Top 30 Environmental Concerns
From water pollution to global warming, environmental issues affect every person, animal, community, and nation on the planet. As increasing evidence supports the devastating effect humans have on the environment, more people are taking steps to protect the environment and educate others about environmental problems by looking at the top 30 environmental concerns. (Courtesy LoveToKnow.com)

Top 5 Public Concerns
According to a series of Gallup polls conducted between 1997 and 2008, Americans are most concerned about the following five environmental issues:

1. Contamination of Drinking Water: Contamination of fresh water used for household needs, including pollution of oceans, rivers, lakes, and reservoirs, ranks top on the list of environmental concerns for many Americans. More than half of respondents stated they worry about the safety of their drinking water a great deal.

2. Water Pollution: General worry over water pollution and associated environmental issues greatly concerns half of all Americans who participated in the 2008 poll. Related issues include acid rain, ocean dumping, urban runoff, oil spills, ocean acidification, and wastewater.

3. Soil Contamination: Soil erosion, soil conservation, soil salination, and soil contamination by waste, pesticides, and lead worries 50 percent of Americans.

4. Wildlife Conservation: More than 40 percent of Americans expressed concern about wildlife conservation and associated environmental issues, such as endangered species, animal and plant extinction, coral bleaching, introduction of invasive species, poaching, and loss of natural animal habitats resulting in relocation and a break in the food chain.
5. **Air pollution**: Concerns over air pollution have remained steady over the last decade, with more than 40 percent of Americans worried about indoor and outdoor air quality, carbon emissions, tropospheric ozone, particulate matter, sulfur oxides, volatile organic compounds, radon, refrigerants, and methane emissions.

**Other Top Concerns (in Alphabetical Order)**

6. **Biological pollutants**, including bacteria, viruses, molds, mildew, dander, dust, mites, pollen, ventilation and infection.

7. **Carbon footprint** and the responsibility of individuals to reduce their effect on the environment, including the use of renewable energy sources (solar power, geothermal heat pumps), recycling, and sustainable living.

8. **Climate change** and issues related to global warming, such as the greenhouse effect, global dimming, and the gradual rise in sea level.

9. **Consumerism** and over-consumption and their effect on the planet.

10. **Dams** and the impact of dams on the environment.

11. **Ecosystem destruction** and associated environmental concerns, such as aquaculture, estuaries, shellfish protection, landscaping, wetlands, and ecological restoration.

12. **Energy conservation issues**, including renewable energy for home and business, energy efficiency, and fossil fuel depletion.

13. **Fishing** and its effect on marine ecosystems, blast fishing, cyanide fishing, bottom trawling, whaling, and over-fishing.

14. **Food safety concerns** and the effects of hormones, antibiotics, preservatives, toxic contamination, and lack of quality control on health.

15. **Genetic engineering**, including concerns about genetically modified foods and genetic pollution.


17. **Land degradation** and related problems, such as desertification and soil and land pollution.
18. **Land use**, urban sprawl, lack of free space, and habitat destruction and fragmentation.

19. **Logging**, deforestation, clear-cutting, destruction of wildlife habitats, and greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global warming.

20. **Mining** and its role in global warming, acid mine drainage, and soil and air pollution resulting from toxic emissions and heavy metals.

21. **Nanotechnology** (the manipulation of matter on an atomic, molecular, and supramolecular scale) and the future effects of nano-pollution and nano-toxicology.

22. **Natural disasters** and their impact on all aspects of the environment.

23. **Nuclear issues**, including the effects of nuclear fallout, nuclear meltdown, radioactive waste, and the population's reliance on nuclear power.

24. **Other pollution issues**, such as light pollution and noise pollution, and their effects on human health and behavior.

25. **Overpopulation** concerns, such as continued building and burial.

26. **Ozone depletion** and damage to the Earth's ozone layer caused by CFC.

27. **Resource depletion**, the need for newer, cleaner energy sources, and exploitation of natural resources.

28. **Sustainable communities** and issues such as reducing reliance on fossil fuels, supporting local farmers and merchants, encouraging green practices and building, consideration of native wildlife, and adoption of mass transportation and cleaner methods of commuting.

29. **Toxins**, including chlorofluorocarbons, heavy metals, pesticides, herbicides, toxic waste, PCB, DDT, bioaccumulation, endocrine disruptors, asbestos, and poorly implemented hazardous waste management.

30. **Waste** and associated environmental issues, such as litter, landfills, recycling, incineration, marine debris, E-waste, and contamination of water and soil caused by improper disposal and leaching toxins.
Turning Concern into Action

Everyone must act!
Environmental protection and preservation of the planet is the responsibility of every individual and community on Earth. If you share any of the above top 30 environmental concerns, you must take action to reduce your personal and household impact on the planet and to educate other members of your community on environmental issues.

Become an advocate. With today’s modern communication tools of smart phones and digital cameras and social media – everyone can be an advocate for environmental justice and change.

Speak up! Every time you post a photo about the environment around you, every time you ask a question at a local municipal meeting about how your local government is working, every time you tweet or blog about your community and what is going on with the environment in it, you are acting as an environmental advocate! If you notice water being wasted, speak up! If you see products being sold with too much throw-away packaging, call the company to register your complaint. Almost every product lists a toll free number, web site, or address. Become aware of group actions such as boycotts, write-in campaigns, and posted online reviews – and be an active participant.

Small steps matter. If everyone takes even these small steps to expose injustices, promote good practices, question municipal decisions, we are preventing things from being hidden. So write it, photograph it, blog it and tweet it! Participate in your local government and become an environmental justice advocate!
Organize for change

You may also take a specific action to advocate for change. If you’re a leader, then you’re being called to step forward now and let yours and others’ voices be heard. You could:

► Hold a citizen house party
► Write letters to the editor of your local newspaper
► Attend a town hall meeting to raise your issue
► Invite an elected official to an event
► Contact public officials quickly via email

See below for suggestions about each of these advocacy strategies.

(Some of this material is courtesy NCOA.)

A Citizen House Party

A house party or meet up is an informal gathering of your friends, family, neighbors, and other members of your community or parish in order to educate them about the issues of environmental concern on which you focus. It is also a time to discuss various ways that participants can be a part of the decision making process within your community. House parties can be held at your home, in a church, a local coffee shop, or anywhere people can gather and feel comfortable.

These are a few easy steps to hosting a successful house party

1. Find someone who is willing to host or cohost with you and help to organize the event. This may be a neighbor, fellow parishioner, co-worker or representative of a local community group.

2. Put together a list of people to be invited. A good rule of thumb is to invite twice as many people as you want to attend, since not everyone will be able to make it, and you’ll have some no-shows. Before sending out invitations, contact the parish staff, other local church groups, or members of the education community to see if there are others in your area who could be invited. You can also invite people via email, the phone, social media, announcements in the parish newsletter, and by word of mouth.

3. Carefully choose the topic and prepare a presentation to inform people of this area of concern and help them understand it. Be sure to leave plenty of time for questions and
discussion. Breaking into small groups if your number is large will allow more people to speak. Keep your presentation relatively short. Your purpose is not to fully educate everyone on this issue but to raise awareness. And have ready a resource list for people who want more information.

4. Make sure you have enough seating & refreshments to accommodate all of your guests. Refreshments are not a requirement for a gathering like this, but it can only help to make for a comfortable atmosphere. At the start, let each guest share why they are there. This allows you to get an idea of how to tap into each person’s interest in order to motivate them to stay involved. It’s a good idea to have music playing in the background as people arrive; such meetings can have a morgue-like feel otherwise. Use name tags if appropriate. Be sure to have everyone sign in and provide contact information for follow up.

5. Be ready with a “call to action.” What are you asking your guests to do as a follow up to this event? If you want them to write to members of congress, have the resources ready to make this easy (names, addresses, a sample letter). If you want them to volunteer at a new used clothing distribution program you’re advocating, have sign-up sheets, times, and job descriptions ready. And so forth.

6. Send a follow-up and thank you letter to each participant. Evaluate your event and learn what worked and what did not.

**Write letters-to-the-editor** about issues. Surveys show that letters to the editor are among the best-read portions of a newspaper. Members of Congress always read the letters in the major newspapers of their districts and states, so it’s critical that editorials on environmental issues, the poor, and related topics are included.

The best way to get a letter published in a newspaper is to write in response to a news story or editorial soon after it is printed. If you see an article on a relevant program, consider sending a letter to the editor. In general, most daily newspapers want short letters to the editor, in the range of 100 words. Below is a sample. To make the most impact, you should adapt your letter to include your personal interests, ideas, experiences, and circumstances. Include your full name, address, phone number, and email.
Sample Letter to the Editor

The article on [name the article and the date of publication] should have mentioned [here list what you felt was missing]. [Here tell why you feel this way. Keep this part of the letter to four sentences. Writing short letters is more difficult than long ones, but discipline yourself to keep it brief!]

Congress [is currently considering] [should consider] long overdue [say what bill Congress is or should consider]. [In one sentence, say again why this is so important, without repeating what you wrote in the last paragraph.]

Sincerely,
[Your full name, address, phone, and email]

Go to town hall meetings that your members of Congress hold and ask questions about environmental issues. Or make an appointment to meet with your member of Congress in the local office. Don’t forget the state and county fairs that politicians frequent on weekends and during the August Congressional recess.

Tips for attending town hall meetings

While members of Congress spend a lot of their time in Washington, DC, they’re keenly interested in the thoughts and opinions of their constituents back home.

One way lawmakers get a pulse on what constituents are thinking is to hold town hall meetings when they return to their districts during a Congressional recess. This gives lawmakers and constituents alike a direct line to make their voices heard.

To see if there’s a town hall scheduled in your district, visit the websites or call the local offices of your Senators and Representative. To find your member of Congress, visit this website: http://www.contactingthecongress.org/

If you’ve never attended a town hall meeting before, it might feel a bit intimidating. Here are some tips:

1. Be prepared.
   Have thoughtful arguments, specific points, good data, and a clear agenda.

2. Bring your personal stories.
   You want to be remembered. They always want to hear your story, whether or not they will act upon it. Think about how the specific policy will affect you, your family, and your community. Limit your story to about 2 minutes and make it genuine and from the heart. Explain why the issue is so important to you personally and how it can make a difference for you and others like you.

3. Use numbers if you can.
   Often, you represent more than one person. You can be part of a company, advocacy group, or union—just say the number that you are one of. There is...
strength in numbers, and legislators are always looking for more numbers to vote them back into office.

4. Be respectful.
People often show up to these town hall meetings with a sense of entitlement to be heard. While this may be true, it will not help you be remembered in a good way unless you are very respectful to the legislator and his or her staff members.

5. Go in groups.
If you show some kind of coalition force, you’re more like a force to be reckoned with. It’s hard for a legislator to ignore a mass of like-minded people with the same agenda. Build a support group of people who are also interested in attending the meeting.

6. Find staff members.
They will be there. Find them beforehand, talk to them, and make sure you tell your story.

7. Leave paper.
Leave something (talking points, etc.) that can be faxed or sent back to Washington. Staff members at town hall meetings aren’t always directly connected to Washington, so it’s a safe bet to leave something that can forwarded to the legislative assistant specific to your cause.

8. Follow up and be polite.
Reinforce your presence and comments by following up after a town hall meeting with a phone call or email to the congressman’s office. And remember, always be polite. It always helps.

9. Show that you’re not going away.
Keep showing up to town hall meetings, keep displaying interest. It will be hard for you to be ignored if you stick with it and make your interest known persistently.

**Invite a member of Congress to attend your event**

Invite your members of Congress to visit your organization. If one accepts, you can show off your work, but also ask some direct questions about what they are doing in Congress that supports your work. Contact staff prior to the visit for possible questions and talking points.

Build relationships with Congressional staff who work in the state or local offices (District Offices). They represent the member of Congress at local meetings and events, and serve as caseworkers to help constituents with federal programs and benefits. Invite them to regular meetings and events on your calendar, and let them know how you can help them serve the community. Then when the Senator or Representative needs to know how legislation might affect constituents, local staff will know who to turn to for input.
Share information and ideas with others in your community who care about environmental issues, perhaps starting or contributing to an email list on these issues. Remember, you are building a relationship that may last for years, and that puts you in a valued position where a member of Congress trusts you and may seek out your help or opinion. Keep the lines of communication open and well-used.

How to invite an elected official to an event
Whether you're inviting the President of the United States, or your local Sheriff, you can easily enhance your event by following the guidelines below. And always remember, when dealing with politicians: Be Persistent – Be Polite – Be Patient.

Plan as far in advance as possible
- Politicians’ schedules fill up rapidly. Create a list of your top three choices and get the invitation out to your first choice ASAP. This will put you on their radar and, in case your first choice declines, gives you enough time to reach out to other options.
- For federal (and some state) officials, contact their local office. This shows that you are respectful of their time and will almost always get you a response.
- If relevant, describe the benefits of the official attending (e.g., ability to talk about an issue that is important to him or her or the chance to meet with a significant number of older voters in the district).

Prepare for the event
- Work in coordination with the official’s staff so that everyone is on the same page as to what the expectations are. Be clear about what you hope the official will do (e.g., present an award or introduce a part of the program). Try to make it as easy for them as you can.
- Provide staff with a complete agenda and alert them to any media you think will attend. Give them a full list of the media you expect to attend as you get closer to the date.
- If you present an award to the official (always a great idea), alert his or her staff in advance and ask that the official say a few words of thanks and support.

During and after the event
- Have a staff photographer on hand to record your event. Put it in your newsletter or other communications and be sure to send copies to the official and his staff.
- To get the ball rolling, have one of your staff ask the first question if there is a Q & A session. Be sure to let the official’s staff know which question is coming.
- Following the event, thank the official with a note or card, photos, feedback, stories, and anything you’d like to share.
• Be sure to follow up in a timely manner to any questions they may have asked you during the event that you couldn’t answer. This allows you to continue your connection with the official after the event.

• Finally, don’t be offended if a staff member shows up for the official at the last minute. Politicians are very busy and are often pulled in multiple directions.

Advocate with elected officials, corporate leaders, and others via email

Email Tips
• Keep your email short and to the point.
• Do not mention multiple issues in the same email. Each email message is typically routed within the Congressional or corporate office of a staffer who handles a specific public policy portfolio, and you are more likely to receive a detailed response to a single request or topic.
• According to research, personalized messages to Congress have more influence on lawmakers’ decision-making than identical form messages.
• Do not use harsh or threatening language. Be thoughtful, straightforward, and clear.
• Do not try to write to Representatives and Senators who do not represent you. It is a waste of effort. They have filters that automatically delete your emails.