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From the Guest Editor

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Contemporary Rural Social Work

Special Issue

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Guest Editor's Introduction

Why here, why now? What is environmental justice, and why is *Contemporary Rural Social Work* publishing a special issue focused on environmental justice and rural communities at this time? The Environmental Protection Agency notes in its definition of environmental justice that this concept is about ensuring that we all share “the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn and work” (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2015). Our present context provides ample evidence that we have not achieved this goal. The authors in this special issue make clear that environmental hazards are not equitably distributed, and rural areas are far from immune to disproportionate environmental risks.

As the world's population grows, demands for energy, drinkable water, and food also grow. Life-sustaining food and energy sources needed by growing urban populations are frequently found side-by-side in rural areas. Large tracts of land that are home to dispersed, isolated, rural populations are ideal sites for large-scale agribusiness, energy extraction, and other industrial activities. The isolation and small population density in these areas appear to make the environmental burdens borne by rural peoples and communities less visible, and their representation on the political agenda less viable. The world seems to take little notice of the area in northern China, 8,000 square miles in size, which is at risk of collapse due to underground mining, or the rural Chinese villagers sending their children to live elsewhere for their safety (Moore, 2011, September 2). Across the United States we have sludge ponds holding billions of gallons of coal slurry, and containment failures in Tennessee and Kentucky sent millions of gallons of sludge into waterways (Eilperin, J., & Mufson, S., 2013, April 24; Simone, 2008, December 24), environmental accidents involving very large toxic spills yet receiving far less sustained media attention than the Exxon Valdez incident. Miles and miles of water are also “dead” due to acid mine drainage. Environmental justice advocates in Appalachia have long wondered if they and their communities were simply considered expendable by the rest of the country and the world. As House and Howard (2009) write, “Today's culture puts little stock in a rural place like Appalachia . . .” (p. 9). This region and many others in the U.S. and abroad are now also home to a new form of drilling for unconventional energy resources: horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing. This new energy boom, like booms before it, brings economic opportunities and environmental challenges, including but not limited to spills involving chemicals, well casing issues, storage and disposal of drill cuttings and production water.

Simply put, this is the time and we cannot afford to wait a moment longer to address the environmental justice issues confronting rural communities throughout the world. We are in excellent company in acknowledging the importance of this moment. The Council on Social Work Education's Board of Directors passed new educational policy standards for social work

education in March of 2015 that acknowledge the fundamental importance of environmental justice concerns within our discipline. These new standards include Competency 3: Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). At a global level, the United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon has called for a focus on “people and planet” in the development of sustainable development goals in 2015 (Ban, June 27, 2014). These bodies, one national and focused on our discipline, and one global and focused on international security and human rights, are both influenced by and responding to compelling global developments.

As social workers steeped in a systems perspective, we know that we cannot ignore these developments. Rural and urban populations are interdependent, exchanging goods and services. Urban areas rely upon more rural areas for food and basic resources. Rural areas rely on urban customers and large-scale buyers (as well as regional medical centers and other resources common to more urban areas). Communities across the globe are increasingly interconnected economically and socially. The authors who submitted articles for this special issue call our attention to these relationships, to the water-energy nexus, to the slow-violence of climate change that currently threatens rural Kenyans, to the potential for toxins to spill into our drinking water sources at any time. They offer us paths forward: to teach our students principles for *permaculture design* and sustainable development as well as contemporary models for organizing and social action; to examine environmental justice issues globally; to practice and model sustainable development practices. I thank these authors for their work and their commitment to promoting understanding of rural environmental justice issues. I thank the Editorial Board of *Contemporary Rural Social Work* for giving me the opportunity to serve as guest editor of this special issue and for issuing a clarion call to our profession: let us embrace our heritage and long-standing commitment to vulnerable populations, and let us make a commitment to rural people and their communities that will evidence concern in equal measure for “people and planet” (Ban, June 27, 2014)

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