

Nehanda Imara, Oakland's mother of environmental justice

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BY: KUJICHAGULIAPHAVIA KUJICHAGULIA

Seventy million tons of carbon dioxide are spewed into our atmosphere on a daily basis. Over-consumption, mass production, and the endless accumulation of tech toys and synthetic trinkets continue to compromise the delicate ecological balance that has taken the earth more than four billion years to create. Although the earth is completely capable of surviving this man-made threat, human beings are not.

After more than four million years of human evolution just one century of industrialization threatens to seal the polluted fate of the human species. Every day our unrestrained worship of industrialized things brings us ever closer to extinction. Yet many refuse to acknowledge the connection or consequences. Increasingly dangerous levels of carbon dioxide, diminishing ozone protection, unpredictable weather patterns, and an obvious increase of natural disasters are forcing many people to come to grips with the reality of global warming. Unfortunately, the 21st century could very well be the final curtain call for Homo sapiens and mother earth as we know it.

Fortunately, there are many people and organizations working tirelessly to reverse this threat. One of these unsung heroes, environmental justice advocate, Nehanda Imara, resides right here in East Oakland. Just as mother earth quietly goes about the business of sustaining life, community organizer, Nehanda Imara goes about the business of doing her part to sustain mother earth. The essence of efficiency and effectiveness, Nehanda has been an environmentalist and powerful advocate for environmental justice for more than thirty years.

For as long as she can remember, Nehanda Imara has always wanted to protect the environment. Even as a curious child, she has always had a sacred relationship to mother earth. "As I became more aware and more informed, I began questioning things. As an African woman, however, I'm not only concerned about nature or saving other animal species, I'm more concerned about saving people. So I began doing what I could in order to help sustain the environment. I began riding a bike. I became a vegetarian and made a commitment to recycle regularly". Nehanda even decided to earn a master's degree in environmental justice long before it was considered a legitimate field of study. Nehanda Imara could very well be the

mother of environmental justice because it was her insightful dedication and ground-breaking research that paved the way for environmental justice to be recognized by the academic community.

Now armed with a Masters degree in environmental studies from San Jose State University, Nehanda puts her energies into organizing the neighborhoods of East Oakland. She also teaches an Environmental Justice course at Merritt College, where she trains the next generation of environmental advocates and activists. Her hard work proved that clean water and air are a human right. Her evidence further revealed that environmental pollution has a greater impact on Blacks and other melanin-dominant (non-white) human beings, causing disproportionately high rates of asthma, bronchitis and other respiratory and pulmonary ailments in these populations. Nehanda's efforts and evidence documented how the social consequences of environmental contamination are not only a serious human hazard; they are a serious social justice hazard as well.

She revealed that environmental injustice attacks families and communities at both physical and social levels. At a physical level, biochemical toxins attack the body, compromising one's immune system. In addition to this however, resulting medical expenses threaten to compromise a family's entire financial system – wages/income, assets, and savings. These families are also severely impacted by increasing medical expenses, doctor visits, and lost wages due to absenteeism, while insurance companies and health organizations are profiting from their plights.

The hazardous consequences of climate pollution translate into death for some and spiked profit margins for others. In 2007 the major health insurance organizations received upwards of \$12 billion (that's billion with a "b") in profits. During this same period, the CEOs of the top insurance providers were paid an average of \$21 million a year. In short, many corporations get rich by endangering the public health. While the major corporations, stock holders, and individuals responsible for this human suffering are busy living lavish lifestyles in sterile, secluded, neighborhoods, Nehanda Imara is busy on the frontlines mobilizing communities to counter the toxic effects of environmental injustice.

Although there are no refineries or foundries in Oakland, the toxic impacts on health and wellness still exist. As the East Oakland organizer for Communities for a Better Environment (CBE), Nehanda Imara trains individuals, families and communities how to protect their health and their livelihoods. CBE is a 30-year-old organization fighting to improve the quality of life for the multitude of citizens living in harm's way along the San Leandro corridor, home to a number of major industrial polluters and the main thoroughfare for exhaust spewing container trucks and freight trains.

Studies executed by CBE, Youth Uprising, and the East Bay Academy of Young Scientists monitor air quality and the quantity of hazardous chemicals, toxic materials, diesel trucks and other dangerous pollutants transported through East Oakland's San Leandro corridor. It was estimated that 10,000 diesel trucks and other industrial polluters travel this route weekly. In

cooperation with The California Endowment (TCE), these organizations are working to bring an end to the chemical contamination plaguing the families of this area.

Together they are engaging residents and community stakeholders in a 10 year strategic planning process that will be funded with over 10 million dollars from 2010-2020. Community input will guide how these funds will be spent. The Freedom to Breathe Campaign invites all east Oakland residents to participate and get involved in this 6 month process in order to circumvent the toxic onslaught endangering the health and livelihood of east Oakland residents. If you are interested you can contact Nehanda Imara with Communities for a Better Environment at (510) 302-0430, or www.cbecal.org.

<http://www.examiner.com/article/nehanda-imara-oakland-s-mother-of-environmental-justice>