

Distilling the Public Discourses and Nexus between Water Quality and Social Inequality

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Principal Investigator:

Helen Rosko, Clark University

Mitchell Owens, Indiana University Bloomington

Kristin Sleeper, University of Montana

Associated Program:

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Access to clean water is a fundamental human right. Though water quality has been examined in environmental justice research, the degradation of domestic water resources has been overlooked, especially in areas with a legacy of extractive industries. Water quality environmental justice research almost exclusively studies after-the-tap water quality, rather than ambient surface water and groundwater. To fill this gap in the research, we aim to spatially relate ambient water quality and social inequality in the Central Appalachian states from 1970 to present. Water quality does not exist in a vacuum, making the need for a synthesis approach crucial. We aim to expand the traditional scope of environmental justice research by exploring how socio-ecological relationships around water quality influence discourse in selected “hotspots” within the region. Specifically, we will determine how the socio-ecological relationship helps influence, create, maintain, and possibly resist dominant and alternative discourses relating to ambient water quality. Through a novel methodological approach, we will integrate the outputs from the water quality and socio-economic research into traditional discourse analysis through the text selection and code development processes. Ultimately, we think this research benefits communities by providing a more holistic understanding of how socio-ecological systems work to inform policy makers and community members about the best ways to address persistent water quality injustices going forward.

Participants:

Jackie Guz, Clark University

Josh Brummett, Arizona State University

Justine Neville, North Carolina State University

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