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Stinky Water and Other Ills: Environmental Justice for Rural Services

Abstract. Environmental justice concerns affect rural communities and the people who are members of them. Social workers' long-standing involvement in improving living conditions of the people and communities with whom they work make environmental justice an important responsibility. Yet there is a rural-urban divide on topics related to the environment, and rural and urban communities tend to establish different environmental priorities. Rural communities tend to prioritize local conditions and solutions over global and societal ones. Rural people distrust national policies especially those established by governmental as not being responsive to their interest. Some common environmental rural problems are identified. Environmental justice intervention for rural social workers should involve humility in understanding the local culture, judicious use of language, and involvement of local people in environmental assessments and interventions.

Keywords: environmental justice, social work, rural social work

Everyone who has pursued a degree in social work should be familiar with the terms social and economic justice, and their importance to the purposes of the profession. These concepts have been embedded in the Code of Ethics for the National Association of Social Workers (NASW 1996; NASW, 2017) for the last quarter century, and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accreditation policy and standards for social work programs going back over a generation (CSWE, 2015; CSWE, 2003). The concept of environmental justice is a term that is less familiar to many in the social work profession, probably because it has been included much less commonly in social work education and practice literature until recently. Although NASW introduced environmental language to its ethical responsibilities to the broader society in its code of ethics in 1996, environmental justice was not added by the CSWE to its competencies until 2015 (CSWE, 2015; NASW, 1996). As a result, many social workers were never formally exposed to environmental justice and are now left on their own to determine its relevance and application to practice.

Environmental justice concepts may present even more of a challenge for those social workers whose field of practice is rural social work. Their work with small town people and communities typically gets less attention because of social work's decidedly urban centric focus (Daley, 2021). One of the things that the national elections of 2016 and 2020 have made clear is that there are a multitude of issues that divide rural and urban America, and this certainly holds true for the way people view environmental issues (American University School of Public Affairs, 2020). While good social work principles hold for rural or urban practice, one must often adapt to the context in which services are delivered. Divisions between rural and urban contexts affect the ways in which social workers interface with clients and communities because rural beliefs and culture are deeply ingrained and affect behavior of everyone. Although a high percentage of rural people think that both the environment and conservation are important, many are wary of environmentally based policies because they tend to see them as being written by a distant government or urban elite that is out of touch with rural people (American University School of Public Affairs, 2020). While rural people and communities can be disadvantaged from environmental sources, many country people perceive the environmental language that is commonly used in society and by social work with suspicion and tend to disengage from such

discussions (Daley, 2021). Social workers in rural practice should be aware of this and adjust their environmental justice strategies accordingly.

Environmental justice is a concept that focuses on involving all people in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws and policy (NASW, 2018). In other words, promoting environmental justice entails social workers trying to engage people in promoting a better living environment. This is an important focus for social work because environmental factors can certainly have a profound effect on peoples' health, mental health, and employment – all issues with which social workers frequently deal. And generally, the disenfranchised, the lower income groups, and people of color are more likely to be exposed to environmental hazards. Rural areas have higher than the average percentages of these groups (Daley, 2021; NASW, 2018). However, relying on long held myths about the idyllic countryside, leads some to believe that rural areas do not face as many environmental challenges because of its geographic isolation and beauty. But that is often not the case as the cool, clear flowing mountain stream can be as full of toxins as corroded urban plumbing. Indeed, environmental justice is important for rural people as well as urban.

Distrust of outside efforts to improve the environment and an innate traditionalism often makes it appear that small communities do not want to change. But to assume this to be the case would be an oversimplification, and very misleading. Country people want clean water, air, and a healthy environment as much as anyone else. Yet they need to be engaged in the change process using language with which they are comfortable, and in a way that respects their views.

Yet when a social worker approaches them from an urban perspective and relies on much of the current environmental justice literature may be creating barriers to engaging rural people or the community, thus making the work much more difficult. Once perceived as an outsider, it is difficult for a rural social worker to establish working relationships. As a result, social workers in small communities need to exercise caution in how they approach rural people about environmental issues, lest they be seen as out of touch or allies of outside interests.

The purpose of this manuscript is to discuss rural environmental justice issues affecting small communities and rural people, the effects that these environmental factors have, the relevance for social work practice, and general methods to make this type of social work more effective. Environmental concepts from the social work literature are briefly explored, as well as how environmental work may have to be modified to reflect the needs of rural people. The importance of social work involvement in advocacy and policy development for rural areas will be discussed. Hopefully the information presented here will help social workers adapt their practice approaches and methods to better serve the needs of the small community and the people who compose it.

Environmental Social Work

Although the current interest in environmental justice into the social work landscape is relatively recent, social workers have been concerned with the broader effects of the environment on peoples' lives for a long time. In the latter part of the 19th and early 20th centuries a number of socially conscious writers put pen to paper to call attention to the detrimental effects of

environmental conditions on the poor and working classes. Journalist Jacob Riis (1890) *How the Other Half Lives* was well known in its time for portraying in words and photographs the deplorable and overcrowded living conditions among the poor living in tenements in New York City. Riis did not neglect to observe the connections between the living and working conditions and the social problems that arose. Social workers were well aware of Riis's work as he delivered an opening address (Riis, 1901) to a major social work forum of the day -The National Conference of Charities and Correction. Novelist Upton Sinclair's (2012) *The Jungle*, published in 1906, was a well-known novel about the plight of working-class immigrants in Chicago. Still considered one of the most influential novels in the U.S., it was based on extensive first-person research by the author. Some of the author's message was lost as readers focused on the filth of the meat packing industry rather than the difficult living and working conditions of the main characters.

Social workers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries also expressed concern for the deplorable conditions under which many immigrant families lived and worked. During a discussion at the 1891 National Conference of Charities and Correction Miss Richmond (Mary) stated "There is no use wasting a moment of time on the question that bad sanitation is undoubtedly one cause of poverty" (Discussion on Charity Organization, 1891, p. 366). Richmond (1911) also spoke further of environmental conditions related to housing including bad toilet arrangements, dampness, overcrowding, and insufficient water. Settlement House workers were similarly concerned about the effects of environmental conditions where the poor and working classes lived. Jane Addams (1938, p. 283) writing in 1911 about the poor sanitation in Chicago stated "...in a crowded city quarter, if the garbage is not properly collected and destroyed, a tenement-house mother may see her children sicken and die...". But these views were urban centric and focused on conditions of the poor in the larger industrial cities and with little or no thought given to rural residents.

Those working in and with rural communities also saw environmental challenges for the residents. Blackmar (1900) noted that among the problems experienced by rural communities were bad sanitation including improper treatment of sewage, lack of care in disposing of garbage, and the use of poor water. The concern was the effect that it had on health and the outbreak of epidemics. Bailey (1908, p. 86, 91) believed that:

The lack of attention to health regulations is a little less than appalling in its consequences. ... Public health information is likely to meagre. ... well enforced sanitary regulations are powerful educators, and the country does not have the benefit of them ... you should be cautioned that (public health) should have due regard to the existing rural conditions and not be imposed as a piece of theoretical legislation.

Clark (1916) of the U.S. Public Health Service identified the effects of environmental influences and nutrition in producing mental retardation in rural children that were distinct from those experienced in urban settings. One factor specifically mentioned was hookworm which can be transmitted by poor sanitation and is a resurgent problem even today.

Shifting to the present, Erickson (2018) suggests that the current environmental focus of social work is a natural extension of the profession's long-standing interest in the concept of

justice. While social work addressed the social and economic aspects of justice, it was slower to embrace the environment component. Increasing recognition of the physical and natural environmental effects on the human condition have not gone unnoticed. Through climate change and contamination of the air and water social workers have become increasingly concerned about the health and economic effects on populations (Erickson, 2018; NASW, 2018). Progressively the profession has become concerned that these effects fall most heavily on those least able to bear them – the socially and economically disadvantaged.

The introduction of environmental justice language into the competencies required for social work education (CSWE, 2015) has influenced social workers to give increased attention to this aspect of their work. Inclusion of social responses to climate change as one of the 12 Grand Challenges for social work has given greater emphasis to social workers' role in regard to the environment (Erickson, 2018; American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare, n.d.). Yet environmental responses in the Grand Challenges specifically references urban development and both the CSWE educational standards and the NASW Environmental Policy statement have a decidedly global slant. This leads one to consider how well the social worker educated in the United States is prepared to engage in environmental justice interventions with rural people and small communities.

Environmental Justice in the Rural Context

Implementing environmental justice in one's practice presents a classic type of dilemma for a rural social worker – that of how to adapt what is essentially an urban based model for use with smaller communities and country people. The foundation for much of social work has a decidedly urban focus and this can create issues for engagement of people from rural communities in the helping process (Daley, 2021). In the case of environmental justice what may be perceived as an urban approach used in a country setting may create both misunderstanding and resentment that can lead to either resistance or opposition.

Essentially rural people approach environmental issues with a different outlook, set of priorities, and language than their urban counterparts. Long distrustful of politicians, city dwellers, and people they don't know well small communities tend to approach change with a mix of skepticism and a response firmly rooted in tradition. They are wary and resentful of laws and policies made in distant places where they believe their views and interests are seldom considered. As a result, country people have not usually been quick to embrace environmental causes no matter how well intended.

Rural communities tend to perceive the environmental movement as focused on global and international concerns, while their own outlook tends to be specific and more local. They may have some general concerns about melting polar ice caps and general warming of the climate but, rural people are more centered on the shorter- term effects on agriculture, ranching, logging, mining, and energy production that will affect their economy. Environmentalists are often seen as arising from politically liberal groups, whereas the overall rural approach tends to be more traditional and conservative. Frequently environmentalists are perceived as a real threat to the economies and employment of rural areas and the fear of losing jobs is consciously fanned by opponents of environmental change, often to promote their own ends. For example,

proponents of solar and wind power may be viewed as threats to local oil, gas, and coal production that may be a major employer in the area.

The specific environmental concerns that arise for rural communities tend to differ some from those of the cities. For example, urban dwellers may be more concerned with air quality and smog, whereas those in the country worry about runoff from mining or agricultural operations. Finally, the language used by country people regarding environmental concerns may differ markedly from that used in the cities. For example, while sustainability may be used in some quarters to refer to maintaining the long-term balance with nature, this may be an alienating term for those in a small town. However, they are likely familiar and comfortable with crop rotation to maintain productive agriculture, which is a similar concept.

Consequently, as social workers begin to work with rural communities about matters related to the environment it is important to approach that work sensitively and from a rural perspective. To do that effectively it may be productive to examine some of the most pressing environmental justice issues facing small communities and country people.

Environmental Challenges Facing Rural America

Water is one of the necessities of life, and difficulty accessing clean drinking water is a major challenge facing some rural communities in the United States today. Poor quality water in smaller communities tends to occur for one of three reasons. There are naturally occurring substances in the soil that dissolve into ground water, small communities lack the funding to keep water treatment facilities up to date with modern water quality standards, and water pollution from local industry. Any of these factors can contribute to rural people consuming unsafe water that has long term health effects.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2018b) there are roughly thirteen million people who are dependent on groundwater and this is often untreated. Many of these people live in rural areas and their groundwater may contain unsafe levels of elements from natural sources. For example, residents of some Central Texas counties may be drinking water with high levels of Radium, a known carcinogen (Sadasivam, 2018). In parts of the Southwestern United States arsenic and fluoride may transfer from the aquifer into the groundwater that people drink (Philip et al., 2018). In California there is concern about unhealthy levels of Chromium that enter ground water from natural sources (Tucker, 2018). Of course, in other areas naturally occurring substances like asbestos and lead may also contaminate groundwater.

Human activity can be an additional source of groundwater contamination. Many of these pollutants are by-products of common rural activity used to increase economic productivity. The fertilizers used in agricultural work can be a significant source of pollution (USEPA, 2017). Nitrogen and phosphorus are key ingredients of fertilizer, and both occur in nature, however high concentrations of these elements can pollute water, kill aquatic life, destroy habitats, and produce health problems. Once fertilizer runoff seeps into the groundwater or streams it can become a major environmental problem for rural areas. Like fertilizer pesticides and herbicides are used in agriculture to increase crop yields. Pesticides and herbicides can remain in the soil and create a risk of prolonged exposure, and they may get into groundwater

and streams, creating additional health risks for rural people. Many of these have compounds have toxic health effects such as cancer and respiratory problems effects and agricultural workers face high levels of exposure to them in the preparation and application of these chemicals (Farmworker Justice, 2016; Zanolli, 2019). It is not just that fertilizer, herbicides and pesticides are used, but they are used over large areas and volume of their use may present a problem to the local ecology.

Yet agricultural activity is not limited to growing crops, as it often involves raising animals. Like growing plant, raising livestock can serve as a source of food, but those involved in agriculture typically raise more than they can eat to support themselves. The primary environmental issues that stems from raising animals is the waste they produce. With low concentrations of livestock, the waste is often not a particular problem, but where animals are highly concentrated to increase commercial production, this waste represents a significant environmental problem (USEPA, 2018a). Animal waste is high in nitrogen and phosphorous as well as containing bacteria. Possible fears about high levels of animal waste pollution are health conditions from contaminated water, transmission of bacteria, killing fish and aquatic life, and promoting algae growth. In larger agricultural operations, such as feed lots, and corporate farms, animals tend to be more highly concentrated and pools are used to store animal waste. These pools can be sources for overflow, spillage, and seepage into groundwater and streams. Animal waste can also produce a noxious smell. This waste can release nitrous oxide, ammonia, hydrogen sulfide, and toxins into the air (Schwartz, 2017). When there are high concentrations of these substances there is the potential for producing health problems for people, and the closer they are to the source are the more likely the effects. There are also concerns raised about the effects of raising grazing animals which produce methane gas, a factor in climate change (Watts, 2020). This has resulted in calls from some to some to reduce meat consumption to reduce methane emissions. But the role of livestock-based agriculture in climate change is still somewhat controversial and there appear to be ways to reduce the methane production without reducing the number of livestock and putting people out of work (Schlossenberg, 2020).

Human waste can present a potential problem for rural residents as well, and untreated sewage can have a number of harmful effects. Twenty million Americans are not connected to an external sewage system, and many of them live in rural areas and small communities (Evans, 2015). These residents are responsible for treating their own sewage, usually through a septic system. A septic system works by using a collection tank, a drain field, and bacteria to process sewage. Building and maintaining individual septic systems to treat sewage is expensive and may be prohibitive for some poor families (Whitehead, 2017). And septic tanks require maintenance. As a result, some poor rural families drain their sewage into the open, where untreated sewage can lead to several diseases including hookworms, and gastrointestinal ailments (Davies, 2020; Pilkington, 2017). Heavy rains can spread the effects of open sewage to a broader area.

Extraction based industries have also been a traditional part of the economy in many rural areas. While these industries have been sources of employment, they can have an adverse environmental impact, especially on water. One of the more controversial methods of energy extraction is fracking. The process is used to produce natural gas and includes injection chemicals and water into the ground to help liberate the gas. Chemicals that are used include

heavy metals that can produce mental health conditions like anxiety and schizophrenia, and affect neurological and cognitive development (Davis, 2017). The compounds used in fracking can leak from holding pools or remain in the ground once injected and may make their way into groundwater. Traditional production of oil and natural presents another set of environmental problems. These include venting of methane and potentially toxic gasses, dumping of toxic chemicals that may enter groundwater, disruption to wildlife, and oil spills (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2018; Wilderness Society, 2018). Mining the tar sands for energy is traditionally considered a Canadian activity, but this type of energy production has been adopted in the United States (Fessenden, 2015). Tar Sands production releases carbon dioxide, pollution can come from the tailing ponds use to separate particulates, and uses large amounts of fresh water (Berman, 2017).

Mining is used to extract energy and natural resources from the land and can generate other environmental worries for rural areas. The activities associate with mining can release harmful substances into the environment air, ground, and groundwater (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2016). Strip and open pit mines may distribute radiation, metals, and asbestos into the environment. These kinds of mining can cause significant scarring of the land, which affects the drainage patterns, generate blowing dust that affects air quality, and pollute the air and water in a way that may affect the health of area residents (Hill, 2014). It can also cause soil erosion.

Rural non-agricultural industries can create environmental issues. They can emit pollutants into the water and air. For example, in January 2014 a chemical company leaked several thousand gallons of a corrosive chemical used for treating coal into the Elk River in West Virginia and over 300,000 residents were unable to drink the water (Hersher, 2016). Several short-term health effects resulted including nausea, vomiting, and eye irritation, but the long-term effects are unknown. Rural industries can also produce air and thermal pollution for streams. Logging, especially clear cutting, may produce erosion that silts up streams, creates increased emission of greenhouse gasses, and destroys ecosystems (Rogers, 2018).

The ongoing issue is that rural communities may not have either the facilities for water treatment or the funds to entirely clear up many sources of water pollution. This may result in local people having to resort to the use of bottled water for drinking, cooking, or even bathing. For small communities where incomes are typically lower, this may be an expense that many cannot afford.

Challenges for Addressing Environmental Justice in Rural Area

Based the environmental issues facing rural communities, a significant point needs to be made, and that is the environmental issues facing these small communities are often perceived very differently than the ones expressed in urban locales. There is truly a rural-urban divide evident. And there are differences in both priorities and solutions for rural environmental matters. Thus, while the amount of fertilizer or pesticide used on one's suburban yard is unlikely to be a huge concern for the homeowner, rural agriculture tends to use large amounts of fertilizer as it boosts productivity. And while a family in the country may care little about air quality produced by cars, that might not be the case for an urban family. Rural residents and urban

residents may be worried about poor water, although in one case it may come from groundwater contamination, and in the latter from bad plumbing. Even though it may be argued that climate change affects everyone equally, rural people tend not to be as concerned about it as those in urban settings.

Rural communities may face specific challenges in addressing even their most concerning environmental challenges. Consider the treatment of water to improve its quality. Groundwater is typically unregulated, and it used by those who cannot afford, or are too distant to connect to existing water systems. As a result, water treatment and testing is entirely up to the individual. The systems for water treatment in small communities tend to be small and operate on limited budgets. Based on limited funding rural water treatment systems tend to be older and have difficulty making improvements as water quality standards change (Daley, 2021; Sadasivam, 2018). Raising rates to keep up with changes in water quality standards may force some rural residents to use groundwater.

Many of the potential rural environmental issues that are raised appear to most residents of small communities to be directly or indirectly connected to the local economy and employment. In rural communities the economy is typically less varied and often dependent on a primary industry, and there are fewer alternatives for employment if the primary sector is affected (Daley, 2021). Hence, attempts to take actions, develop policies, or legislation that have the potential to threaten the primary sources of income are serious business indeed, and are often met with hostility and active resistance. Rural people also tend to view politicians with a jaundiced eye, and especially distrust much that is done in the state and national capitols. Some segments of society use rural fears and prejudices about government interference in local affairs as attempts to restrict freedom as a means to promote their own agendas and gain political power. Environmental policies and laws are often viewed in this way, and that view is often a negative one.

At times, based on the way rural people vote, it appears that the divide between rural and urban residents on environmental issues arises because rural residents either do not care or know much about environmental issues. But a study by Bonnie, Diamond, and Rowe (2020) challenges that. They suggest that rural voters do care about the environment but tend to care about different issues than those who live in urban and suburban areas. Rural people are most concerned about clean water and farmland conservation, while they are less concerned about climate change. The study also found that rural people tend to be influenced by strong core values including community, environmental stewardship, and a connection to nature. Rural people also tend to be skeptical of governmental environmental policies, especially those from the federal government.

These kinds of rural beliefs are part of a general view that outsiders don't understand, stereotype and devalue them, and fail to include them in discussions about what happens to them in regard to environmental matters (Shigeoka, 2019). Thus, they are less trusting of the science of climate change and less likely to discuss climate change. Remember that country people recognized bad water long before the science behind it was understood, and they are familiar with changes in the weather. Rural people are knowledgeable about environmental issues, but oppose current environmental policies, and favor local solutions (Bonnie, Diamond & Rowe,

2020). At times these characteristics may appear contrarian or contradictory. What they may fear is something like the example of a project in Texas meant to address drought conditions. One logical way to store water for dry conditions is to build a reservoir. This may sound like a good idea to those in communities in the distant Dallas metropolitan area where most of the water would be sent, but means the loss of valuable farm land that would be very difficult to replace for rural families near the reservoir site (Collins, 2019).

Very clearly rural people are starting from a very different place and have divergent perspectives, values, and ideas about the environment than those in the larger cities, and they favor different types of solutions. Nonetheless people in the country tend to be concerned about the environment, understand many of the issues, and are realistic about the tradeoffs involved in environmental based interventions. They are generally concerned that many environmental decisions rarely take their best interests into account.

Social Work and Rural Environmental Justice

Involvement in improving the physical environment has been an important part of social work for a long time. Links between physical as well as social environmental factors in helping to generate many of the problems with which social workers deal appear to be clear, and those effects fall most heavily on those who are socially and economically disadvantaged (Daley, 2021; NASW, 2018; Willett, Tomayo, & Kern 2020). And actions to help alleviate social, economic, and environmental challenges are an important part of social workers' ethical responsibility.

Then how is it that social workers get engaged with environmental justice issues? One way is the old-fashioned case to case approach in which a social worker begins to notice a number of similar sets of circumstances with multiple clients. For example, when multiple clients in a particular neighborhood show high rates of respiratory illness, one may begin to question factors like air quality, surrounding pollutants, or even water quality. The other way is through the course of responsible citizenship, where social and political actions are taken to maintain good living conditions for all.

How does this begin to translate to practice for the rural social worker? When a social worker begins to identify what may be systematic environmental problems, then the collection of information to begin an assessment becomes important. Engaging clients in a strong professional relationship is key to getting the information for developing a sound assessment and ultimately to developing strategies of intervention. With rural people and rural communities, it is especially important to build that relationship by starting where the client or community is. Indeed, if rural people engage with the social worker in a guarded way, it will be difficult to be successful. For example, in a study done by Willett, Tomayo, & Kern (2020) in Nevada several of the people they interviewed were concerned about local environmental issues but were not well connected to the agencies attempting to promote environmental justice. One of the reasons is because people felt that these organizations did not particularly understand or listen to them and acted in ways that were counter to locally identified wishes and needs.

This leads one back to basic engagement for organizational and community practice which involves learning the culture and the local context in order to involve community people in identifying problems and solutions. A major barrier in this regard is the very language that is often used to discuss environmental issues. For example, a common term in environmental social work is sustainability (Dewayne, 2011; NASW, 2018) indicating natural resources should not be consumed faster than they can be renewed. Environmental social work may also focus on global issues, climate change, and the use of clean energy. Rural people might argue that they were for sustainability before it was in vogue as they understood the value of renewing the soil to keep it productive (Bonnie, Diamond & Rowe, 2020). But they are not as likely to use the terminology sustainability. Country people are often wise about environmental issues as they generally see themselves in closer touch with the land and nature than urban dwellers (Author, 2021; Bonnie, Diamond & Rowe, 2020). They are more concerned about local environmental issues, especially water availability and quality, while climate change is highly polarizing, and resource exploitation and clean energy discussions can be polarizing as well. Some of these issues may be seen as an attempt by outsiders to work against the social and economic priorities for rural communities. Reducing dependence on fossil fuels may be good for the environment but may raise the specter of a bleak economic outlook for those who live where oil, gas, and coal production are key to the economy. Indeed in small communities there is seldom a place to plug in an electric car, recycling is challenging if not impossible, burning trash is the most practical and economical way to get rid of it, and moving to a paperless system of commerce is not practical in the large areas that have difficulty in getting cell phone service and adequate broadband. Therefore, social workers have to be sensitive to rural concerns in using language and terms that tend to provoke high degrees of negative responses.

Conclusion and Discussion

There is, indeed a rural-urban divide on environmental concerns which can affect the environmental justice issues that can be addressed and the way in which they are addressed. This rural-urban divide is not so much one of a difference of being for and against improving the environment but represents legitimate differences of opinion about the key issues and the means that should be used to address them. Whereas urban environmental discussions often center on global issues, climate change, and going green, these are often not the primary concerns of rural communities. Actually, this kind of language can be polarizing and generate opposition as is seen as aligned with urban interests.

Rural people are more concerned with local and state issues, often distrust governmental environmental interventions, and tend to focus on water, maintaining the land, and employment concerns. And, however it may appear to outsiders, country people do care about the environment and its very real effects on their lives. They often feel neglected and misunderstood by governmental policy makers and people who live in the cities and distrust their intentions. In areas like water and disposal of waste and hazardous material rural and urban areas are often in direct conflict in terms of their interests.

Thus, it is important for rural social workers to engage people in environmental justice by first learning their specific concerns and the language they use about them. In this sense social workers will have to act with cultural humility towards rural people and not approach them as an

expert. Being viewed as having a genuine interest, understanding, and listening to them is an important part of the helping process. Then using participatory groups to assess local problems and generate community-based solutions is essential for success. Too often country people see outsiders see professionals come to the community to change the people and fit them into pre-planned solutions. That usually results in local opposition and difficulty in making changes.

Rural people and communities have real environmental problems that confront them every day. These problems are often conceptualized differently in the local area than they are outside it. Given social work's traditional focus on addressing both the physical and social environment as part of a person-in environment paradigm, there are important opportunities for rural social workers to influence important environmental changes in smaller communities. But making the transition to rural communities by adapting social work knowledge, values, and skills and developing sensitivity to the needs of the rural community as significant parts of making rural living environments better for their residents.

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