

“Throwing everything at the wall”: Fighting Environmental Racism Through a Diversity of Tactics, an Interview with Ingrid Waldron

In this interview, Hannah Tollefson interviews Ingrid Waldron.

HT: Ingrid, what led you to work on environmental racism in Canada?

IW: Environmental racism was brought to me by an environmental racism activist. I didn't know about it. I wasn't engaging environmental issues in my work in any way and it wasn't a research area that I was involved in. He was seeking someone to continue the work he had been doing, so he went to the [North End Community Health Centre](#) in Halifax. They asked him, “Have you heard of Ingrid Waldron?” I got an email from him and we met in my office. He introduced this topic, which was new to me, called “Environmental Racism.” I had never heard of it. I remember thinking to myself, what a strange concept.

I am a health researcher. At the time, I was doing a project on gentrification in the North End of Halifax because the Black community there was being pushed out. When he asked me to take his environmental racism project on, I thought, I don't think I'm the right person to do it. I was very hesitant because I didn't have degrees in environmental science or environmental studies. I thought those were something I would need to have. I wasn't sure why he was asking me, but he kept insisting that I was the right person to do it.

In the end I said yes. This activist was telling me about these dumps and waste sites in different communities. I realized that these environmental

issues were obviously also health issues. He talked about the communities that were most vulnerable: African Nova Scotians and Mi'kmaq communities, the Indigenous community in Nova Scotia. I was still trying to develop relationships with those communities— I was still relatively new to Halifax, having arrived four years prior— so I thought this would be a good opportunity to start to get to know them.

I was initially quite hesitant because I felt I was not prepared to engage with the environmental aspects of the work. That there was going to be a lot to learn. In a way, it definitely scared me— but that is one of the reasons I took it on. I saw this environmental racism project as one that seemed to be very political. Up until that point my research projects had not been that political. While that made me anxious and slightly fearful, it also excited me: it seemed like a challenge.

HT: When you shifted from health justice to environmental justice research, was there a significant shift in your approach?

IW: There's an issue within environmental science: many departments teach about the environment without any focus on health. They tend to focus on pollution and contaminants rather than on the health effects for communities. To me, it was really obvious: I needed to connect the two. I see environmental racism and climate change as health issues.

Communities affected by environmental racism share their concerns about higher rates of **cancer**, **respiratory illnesses**, **reproductive health issues**, **skin rashes**, **gastrointestinal issues**— even **autism** and **dementia**— due to environmental exposures. If you go to the **EPA’s website** and look at their **listings** of contaminants and pollutants, they have a very long list of how each is connected to various health issues. So many chronic illnesses are shaped by **environmental exposures**. So it’s always been strange to me that many people who teach or research in environmental science don’t talk about health.

HT: How do you see this in discussions around climate issues? Do people see the connections with health?

IW: It’s similar. With climate change, people don’t talk about health much. They do talk about climate grief— some call it climate anxiety or **solastalgia**— the young people I know are concerned about it. But climate is definitely a health issue as well— people have researched **different illnesses** and **negative physical impacts** that people can get from a changing climate. I see this as very similar to environmental racism, but I don’t feel the physical aspects of climate change are being discussed as much. Again, the experts dominant in the field of climate are environmental scientists, who are probably being trained in a way devoid of health. If health is not a part of that training, it makes sense that they would not be considering health.

HT: It sounds like in your work you have to navigate between different types of knowledge and experiences: on one hand, you’re working with communities and their concerns, while on the other, you’re working with scientists and speaking the language of technical knowledge and expertise. How do you approach this?

IW: At this point, that’s just what I do: my research has become multidisciplinary because I’m learning that solutions to environmental racism and climate change have to be interdisciplinary. You need

different people from different fields at the table in order to solve some of these complex problems. Staying within your siloes will really limit you. When I think of my ENRICH Project and what I’ve done over the years, almost all of my projects have had an environmental scientist on board— someone who does work different from me, but they offer something really valuable.

I bring expertise about community health and engagement to these environmental projects. Many scientists are interested in this but don’t know how to do it. I’ve had to correct some “hard scientists” about the way they engage communities in their research. I’ve had to say, “This is not ethical. This is not what the community is going to want.” I think a lot of people think community work is easy— you just be nice to the community and that’s it. I’ve had to really speak up about what is and isn’t ethical when working with communities. You can’t just bring someone else in from the community when you made a commitment to another person. This can create conflicts. Things like this, which I thought were no brainers, are really not obvious for a lot of people.

It shows that community based research is a method. It’s something to learn, that you can make mistakes doing. Some people think it must be easy and they can just step in. If you’re trained in the hard sciences, the kinds of skills you need for community based research are really not what you are trained to do. You can really hurt the community and damage the trust that you’ve built over time at that community with one mistake. Some community members are tired of being researched, so if you make one mistake, that’s it. You’re out. You will never gain that trust back again.

It’s so important to follow community protocol. You’re not going to get any data if you don’t have trust with the community. So the first step has to be respecting the community, regardless of everything else you’re doing. You’ve got to respect the community, and if you don’t, they will sense it

very well, and you will never be invited back.

HT: *Can you tell me more about the **ENRICH** project?*

IW: It started as a project but now it's a nonprofit organization. We've done many different things—throughout the years I realized that I needed to do several things in order to address environmental racism.

There's policy: in Nova Scotia, there was Bill 111, the environmental racism private members bill. I did knowledge sharing too. I held tons of events—I held workshops, symposiums, and went to conferences to talk about environmental racism. I had a health geography student do a map for me tracking different waste sites across Nova Scotia, in Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotian communities. This really gave legitimacy to the work. A Dalhousie professor began using my maps in their classes. It was published in **Canadian Geographic** and **CBC**. In the beginning, people were skeptical about what I was doing—the term environmental racism was not familiar to a lot of people in Nova Scotia—but after the map, people told me they could see what I was talking about.

ENRICH also did community capacity building projects—water testing projects for communities who had wanted their water tested for a long time, but didn't trust the government to do it because they thought the government would say everything was fine. I was an independent researcher, not working for the government, doing this at no cost for low income communities. I got a hydrogeologist and an environmental science professor to help run projects in Lincolnville, a Black community, and Shelburne, a Black community. For the first time, these communities could learn about the pollutants in their water, which is what they wanted, and how to manage their drinking water supply.

The three of us turned that kind of work into an NGO called **Rural Water Watch**. I don't talk about

Rural Water Watch much, but I'm so proud of it. They continue to do water testing projects, not just in Black or Indigenous communities, but any rural, marginalized Nova Scotian community. A lot of rural communities are on well water, which tends to be more contaminated. So I'm very proud of that because it is tangible work that we did to give to communities.

Then there was the documentary that streamed on Netflix with Elliott Paige, ***There's Something in the Water***. God am I proud of that! That's not something I ever thought would happen. That Elliot Page would be following me on Twitter, and that a documentary based on my first book would go to the Toronto International Film Festival and then it would go into Netflix—it's crazy!

I was really throwing things at the wall. I remember doing a talk with **Montreal en Action's Balarama Holness** in 2020 and he said all my work provided a model for others and I should write it down. When he told me that, I started to look at my work in a different way. All those things I did before, when I was just throwing everything at the wall—it all made sense. It's almost serendipity; when you're doing it, you don't know what you're doing, but when you look back you can see that there was a plan all along. All the community based stuff I was doing—community capacity stuff, knowledge sharing—that was its own theme. The water testing became the model I would use for my later climate change work. It gave me a model for the ways I can get work done and to understand how an issue needs to be addressed in multiple ways. Everything makes sense now.

And of course, now there's the federal bill, the **federal environmental racism bill** [Bill C-266], which this week is being reviewed. I will be giving witness testimony on March 21st. This is the third reading. We went through Parliament, it was successful. We did the Nova Scotia bills, which didn't really go anywhere. One of them, **Bill 111**, did go to a second reading. In the legislature it

went nowhere. **Lenore Zann** and I turned that into a federal bill in 2020. And we put it forward, it went through Parliament, and now it's sitting in the Senate and it's on its third reading. If it is approved, it will be the first environmental racism law in Canada.

In terms of what I've done, there's policy, there's advocacy, there's publications, there's documentary film, there's mapping, there's water testing. They're all very different, but there's not one way to address environmental racism. Legislation is one of the most important ways, but there are multiple ways. I think anybody who's doing work on any topic needs to understand that you shouldn't focus on one approach or one way.

When I give workshops and I do symposiums on environmental racism, many people in the audience say to me, "I've never heard of this. I didn't know this was happening in my hometown of Halifax. Can I help you? Can I volunteer on your project?" The fact that now they have been educated is, for me, a pathway to addressing environmental racism. Maybe that person will get involved. All this seems minute and unimportant, but it's all very important.

I do think things like awareness raising help the cause. I don't think we would be sitting in the Senate, at third reading, if Senators and MPs didn't know about environmental racism. We got almost unanimous votes of yes from Liberals, NDP, and the Green Party. Seven years ago, that wouldn't have happened: because of awareness raising, people have heard of this term environmental racism, they understand it's systemic. It takes a long time, but I think people need to know it's not a sprint, it's a marathon.

HT: At the beginning, you said you felt hesitant about working on environmental racism because environmental science was not something you had experience or expertise in. Knowing what you know now, what might you tell someone today who thinks they don't have the technical expertise

to engage in environmental issues?

IW: I would tell them, don't wait to do something until you know everything. I gave a **TEDx talk** in Halifax back in 2019 and this was the theme of my talk. I think it's a perfect message to send to people because that's exactly what I was experiencing. I was saying to myself, "OK, I don't know about the environment. I don't know about pollutants, I don't know about contaminants, I don't know about this field." And I was stopping myself from doing something because I felt I needed to know everything.

I'm never going to know everything about that field— not even my own field, sociology— you're never going to know everything! And that's what paralyzes people, it stops them in their tracks. Don't let anything stop you in your tracks. Partnerships are so important because they're about filling in the gaps you have in your knowledge. I brought on a hydrogeologist because there's a gap in my knowledge and he fills it. He does what he does well. That's what partnerships are about.

When we first met, the hydrogeologist said to me that we should do some water testing. I told him, "I'm a sociologist. Why would you think I could do water testing?" He said, "No, but I can." The water testing project is one of my favourite projects because we really had something tangible to give to the communities. Community members might have read my book, but does that address their water contamination issues? No. I'm so glad that I met that hydrogeologist because it led to one of the best projects that we did.

I would also tell young people not to let your fears and anxieties, your lack of confidence about not knowing something, stop you. I was fearful someone would call me out, that an environmental scientist would say, "What's Ingrid Waldron doing here? She doesn't know anything about the environment." I was able to bring something else to these projects. I see now that my sociology background helped me talk about intersectionality, racism, colonialism,

and capitalism. This is what sociologists do really well. This sociological understanding helped me come to different decisions about how to address environmental racism.

Environmental racism doesn't manifest in a vacuum. It isn't independent from other socio-cultural factors happening in communities. Even an environmental scientist needs to know when he goes into a community—in theory, to just focus on pollution—they need to know: what is the historical background of this Indigenous community? What are they dealing with, in terms of food security and housing security? What about unemployment, underemployment, labor issues and public infrastructure issues? For me, if you are an environmental scientist who is just focused on pollution and you don't have an interest or an understanding of the sociopolitical, historical factors within which climate change emergencies and environmental racism emerge, then you don't have the full picture.

HT: Yeah. You definitely can't do it alone. Can you tell me about the *Canadian Coalition for Environmental Justice*, which you co-founded with Naolo Charles? What kind of work do you do there?

IW: We co-founded the Coalition in 2020. For a long time I felt like a lone wolf. I'm pretty sure I was the only Black-led environmental organization in Halifax. I was on Twitter one day and I found Naolo's organization, the Black Environmental Initiative. I got excited about another Black-led environmental organization and we met on Zoom in July 2020. Naolo suggested I expand beyond Nova Scotia. I wanted to, but I didn't have the capacity, so we started talking about a coalition. We thought that if we did it together, we could expand across all of Canada. So we mapped out our goals, our missions, we documented it, and then we decided to connect with *MakeWay*. Both of us have now become nonprofits.

We decided we wanted to form committees, people

who were interested in water testing, maybe, or Indigenous water issues, or young people and climate. I'm really proud of the bill committee. A big part of the reason the environmental racism bill is in the Senate today is because of all the campaigns the Coalition and the ENRICH project have done since 2021. We had online social media campaigns and petitions online. I met with an MLA on Zoom to talk about the need to pass this. We did a lot of work, so I'm proud of that.

But what I'm really proud of is our youth project, where we send youth to *COP* every year. Now I know there are issues with *COP*! It's a lot of talk and nothing happens. But I do believe that as a networking opportunity, it's a great opportunity for youth. I'm proud of this program because the environmental sector is very, very white and it's hard to get your foot in, particularly if you're BIPOC youth. We wanted to provide them with an opportunity to connect with people, to network with leaders around the world, because we know they don't really have access to this sector.

The first year we did this, in 2021, we sent three young Black girls who were interns for us. When we first interviewed them, they all knew they wanted to work in the environment sector but not much more. When they came back from *COP*, every single one of them said, "I now know exactly what I want to do for my career. I want to be involved in environmental policy." They had a clear, defined understanding of their career path. That's what *COP* did for them: while there are complex issues with *COP*, the fact that they came back with such clarity makes me feel like our youth program is on the right track. They got jobs pretty quickly after that, ones connected to environmental policy.

HT: For those reading this interview who might be involved in environmental or policy spaces, what can they do to support your work?

IW: Naolo and I are very excited because we were selected as consultants for Environment and Climate Change Canada to be consultants on the

new national environmental justice strategy, which is mentioned in the bill. The strategy includes a study on the link between socioeconomic status, race, waste and health; an awareness raising campaign in communities impacted; and consultations, which is what Naolo and I are being hired to do— consultations across Canada with impacted communities. I'm very excited. There's also the environmental racism symposium in Ottawa, May 30th to 31st at the Library Archives that we're helping organize.

The bill says the Minister must create or develop a national environmental justice strategy for Canada—the first ever. That's what's so great about this bill. For the first time, the government is actually going to be consulting with communities. This is the first time they're really going to be going across Canada to consult with impacted communities.

There's something about reparations in the bill—perhaps not individual financial compensation, but toward fixing systemic issues. If you can fix the systemic issues, then we can also be on our way to fixing environmental racism. Because as I said earlier, environmental racism manifests out of low education and all the other systemic problems that these communities have. These impacted communities have also never had a seat at the table in the decision making.

This bill says that impacted communities should be involved in environmental policy making. To me this says a lot, because I think one of the reasons why environmental racism manifests over time is because they never have an opportunity to talk about what they feel, how they experience it, and what they think the solutions are. Why should the solutions only come from me and policymakers and the government? They're the ones living it, right? Through the bill, we're giving them a seat at the table. People will now have an opportunity to be involved in environmental decision making.

The study that's being done, for the very first time, on the link between race, socioeconomic

status, waste and health, is a key component of this bill. Once you have knowledge about what's happening, then you can address it. I think a map is being made that's going to show cases of environmental racism across Canada. The awareness raising campaign is important because there are communities dealing with environmental racism, but they don't know it. They never heard the term. There are people who have never heard of this term, but they're experiencing it and they don't have a name for it. The plan is to go to the cases across Canada where communities are dealing with environmental racism, speak with them, and give them an opportunity to share with us what they think the national environmental strategy should look like. In other words, we want them to help build it with us. They're going to co-create it with us. This has never been done by the Department of Environment.

But now, I've got to go— I have a meeting about my new climate project I'm doing in Nova Scotia. It's very exciting, we're just beginning: it's an ambassadors program about handing down climate knowledge to other people in the African Nova Scotian Community.