

## **Reflection Essay: Melissa Reyes**

The project titled “Social Justice Through Sustainability: Acknowledging students of environmentally discriminated areas through sustainable efforts on campus,” is an environmental justice and diversity related project which makes an effort to analyze the need for inclusive sustainability and environmental justice awareness on college campuses, in this case CSUSM. It discusses the importance of acknowledging environmental justice at CSUSM and analyzes how students with environmental injustice backgrounds can be better represented in conversations related to sustainability. This research was done working with the Office of Inclusive Excellence and the Sustainability program through their Environmental Justice Internship, working closely with Juliana Goodlaw-Morris and Ariel Stevenson. This project was also originally created to serve as my senior capstone project for ENVS 490 in the Fall of 2020, a course led by professor Gabriel Valle.

The main library resources that were used to gather information for this project were the University Library Database, more specifically their search engines such as Google Scholar CSUSM, ProQuest, and Academic Search Premier. These search engines allowed me to look at different articles, both scholarly and non peer reviewed articles, that discussed environmental justice and the impact of environmental issues in communities of color and marginalized communities. We gathered information that explained the history of environmental justice as well as some of the issues in the environmental movement that relate to lack of representation and diversity within it, which made connections to our initial questions for this research and gave us a better understanding of where we wanted this project to go. Another important information database also used for this project was ArcGIS online, which services are provided by the university and our library. The usage of ArcGIS online was significant because it allowed us to create a visual representation of the environmental injustices happening in these communities and whether CSUSM was receiving students from these affected locations. With the help of GIS Specialist on campus, Allen Risley, we were able to get access to an environmental justice data layer provided by the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) called CalEnviroScreen 3.0. Along with this data layer from ArcGIS, we also used student application data from the Fall of 2020 provided by Cheryl Landin, Decision Support Analyst on campus for our department of Institutional Planning and Analysis, in order to get an idea of where students were coming from and determine if these data points overlapped with our environmental justice data layer; which it did. This data also provided demographic percentages and showed us that areas most impacted with environmental burden and injustices were those made up of

communities of color. Lastly, we obtained a COVID-19 layer from ArcGIS database and found that the same areas being impacted most by environmental injustices are the ones impacted at larger percentages to COVID-19 exposure; making a connection between environmental justice, social justice, and the current pandemic disproportionately impacting marginalised communities. With this information we were able to find that of applicants in the Fall of 2020, about 21% of them were coming from environmentally impacted areas and have experienced environmental injustices in their past. This information was significant because it confirmed our beliefs that students at CSUSM were experiencing environmental injustices, and with that information we wanted to have these students recognized and be better represented in conversations of environmental justice and sustainability on our campus through the efforts of programs; like the Sustainability Program and the Office of Inclusive Excellence's Environmental Justice Internship for example.

This project was inspired not only after taking several environmental justice courses on campus, but also from personal experience, being a student of color who came to CSUSM and has experienced environmental injustices in my past. I recognize throughout my experience at CSUSM that when it comes to conversations of environmental issues, the voices of BIPOC individuals are not always highlighted and their experiences are not always acknowledged. The voices of individuals like myself are important to recognize in order for the environmental field and the environmental movement to progress; it's important for conversations like these to become more inclusive and to discuss how intersectionality connects to both social and environmental justice issues. The purpose for this project was to recognize these issues but also to make this an ongoing research project for future students to continue gathering information about where students are coming from in order to better understand our students and support these resilient students in the fields of their choosing while recognizing their experiences and help with their student success.

The perspective of this project is different from what is typically seen in environment related research. Conversations of sustainability and sustainability research does not always include how environmental justice intersects with these topics, and through this internship and this project I was able to make those connections. As a scholar, I was able to see how many of my fellow peers are truly impacted by this factor in their lives and also see myself represented in this project; especially when it came to the visual GIS map. Studying this concept is very different than listening to the stories of those who have experienced it, and this is a perspective that needs to be better represented in my field; which is why I believe this project is important to get out there for others to see. I had the chance this past semester to present my research live

as a guest speaker at a sustainability conference held by Chico State called "This Way To Sustainability." However I believe I shouldn't stop there and that I should continue to get my research out there; both to raise awareness of environmental justice and how this field can be more inclusive, but also to show students who have experienced environmental injustices that they are being recognized and that work is being done to uplift their voices.