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Urban Environmentalism from the Cleanup of Lake Washington

Five boys stand expectantly in front of Lake Washington dressed in swim trunks while one of them points towards the waterfront, however one thing prevents them from going out and swimming, a sign stating “WARNING: polluted water unsafe for bathing”. This was the sorry state that was Lake Washington back in 1958 as the lake was severely polluted after years of neglect and could not be swum in. This idea of the neglect of nature in favor of urban development is clear throughout the world and Lake Washington takes a special place among them as it represents one of many ways of fixing this issue and creating a sustainable ecosystem in cities. One way to solve ongoing urban environmental issues is by local politics and community support, this is demonstrated through the story of Lake Washington’s cleanup by the creation of the Metro Council to fix this issue.

Now just how did Lake Washington become so polluted? This issue began to stem even in the beginning of development of the cities surrounding the lake in the 1860’s as steel mills and sawmills began to spring up in the Kirkland and Seattle. These factory wastes flowing into Lake Washington combining with Human waste sources demonstrated by “…waterfront commercial structures clearly [depicting] attached outhouses—from which waste dropped straight into the

lake" (McCauley). Over time as these pollution sources continually dumped pollutants into Lake Washington, "One chemist analyzing the water in Yarrow Bay in 1942 for the government reportedly declared: 'My God, this is almost pure urine!'" (McCauley). This devastating accumulation of waste made Lake Washington a nigh cesspool of human and commercial refuse. This rubbish led to the declining of Lake Washington both in its pollution but its ecosystem as well as this waste led to a buildup of a large amount of phosphorous which started to kill of a species of water flea known as *Daphnia,* this led to an accumulation of algae as *Daphnia* mainly feeds on algae, this large number of algae lead to Lake Washington getting its murky waters as well as its smell (Ruckelshaus). All these issues combined to create the polluted mess that lead to the creation of the Metro Council.

To solve this issue the Metro Council was created in 1958 to combat the environmental issues plaguing Lake Washington. The Metro council "… was governed by a 15-member council that included County Commissioners, council members, and mayors from King County cities, and other appointees" (Wilma). This council was made up of officials from multiple counties allowing a unified effort to fix Lake Washington as the pollution effected all the towns surrounding it. This would also ensure that the people would have a say in this council as a vast majority were elected officials and could be voted in/out depending on how elections went in their counties. Additionally, this would allow this council to be a very efficient in their solutions of fixing pollution as they would be able to not only use more resources from counties but also allow them to not have to go through the yellow tape of different systems of government and simply focus on their goals. This council was only made possible by a "…new state law allowing the formation of metropolitan municipal corporations to address water quality, transit, and planning issues that were beyond the capacity of counties and incorporated cities" (Wilma). This

is the perfect example of politics coming together to create a solution to a widespread problem through traditional government, as the creation of this council was not made illegally, privately, or through emergency means. Through this we can start to get an idea that going through our political systems is one very effective way of fixing widespread environmental issues within local areas, as this allows the public to use their resources through voting and taxes to positively affect the environment around them. This knowledgeable allocation of resources became abundantly clear to be effective in the expensive creation of the WestPoint treatment plan.

The main way the cleanup was handled was by the creation of the WestPoint Treatment plant which was a major undertaking both financially and organizationally. This plant cleaned nearly 20 million gallons of polluted water per day but was no frugal means of cleanup as "The $140 million project, considered the costliest pollution control program in the country at that time, was completely locally financed" (Ruckelshaus). This was a huge financial undertaking done by the Metro council as raising this much money in the 1960's was a monumental feat, especially when done completely locally. This speaks volumes to the effectiveness of this council as through their united efforts was this plant made possible and the cleanup of Lake Washington able to be completed so efficiently. The large sum of money to build the plant also reflects the true cost of pollution as through preventative measures could this large project be avoided; however, this was not done and eventually the bill came due for the Washington people's laziness. In addition to the large amount of fundraising done to build the plant there was also a major organizational hurdle to prevent further pollutants from reaching Lake Washington as "Between 1963 and 1968, over 100 miles of sewer trunk lines and interceptors were laid to carry sewage to treatment plants, and effluent entering the lake was reduced to zero in February 1968" (Ruckelshaus). Only by the council's ability to successfully unite all the

counties were these lines able to cross between county lines and effectively move waste. Yet again this proves the efficacy of this council as they were able to properly delegate responsibility to create miles of lines in only 5 years and effectively stop all effluent from entering Lake Washington. Additionally, these sewer lines revealed a new mindset by the government in reducing pollution, preventative measures, as by creating these lines to the WestPoint treatment plant not only improved their investment but allowed the plant to work unopposed by new pollutants entering the lake from other sources.

The improvement of Lake Washington finally fulfilled the community's need for environmental justice and improvement. As the issue of Lake Washington continued to exacerbate, people became more and more aware of this issue and the "knowledge of the destruction of nature and natural systems in their local communities [functioned] to mobilize them to act on these negative experiences" (Di Chiro 314). However instead of creating non-profits or protesting, Washingtonians chose to use their power of voting and taxes to fix this issue and eventually create the Metro Council. This council was able to fulfil one aspect of environmental justice as explained by Giovanna Di Chrio, "Environmental justice mandates the right to ethical, balanced, and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interests of a sustainable plant for humans and other living things" (Di Chiro 307). The cleanup of Lake Washington clearly fulfils this idea of environmental justice as its cleanup was ethical in cleaning up the water with limited damage to the wildlife and ecosystem within. Additionally, it was a balanced system that was carefully monitored to ensure it had only a positive effect on the ecosystem and the people living around Lake Washington. Finally, through the creation of sewer pipes and long-term investments in its cleanup the Metro council ensured that this project would be sustainable for the years to come, and the cleanup efforts would not be in vain. By fulfilling

these ideas this supports the idea that the Metro Council was not only effective in their cleanup but also enacted environmental justice for its people through the cleanup. The idea so using local government to fix issues in local environment is proven quite effective as the Washingtonians were able to properly use voting and their local government to create environmental justice for Lake Washington and the people surrounding it. However, one aspect of Environmental Justice the Metro Council failed to fulfill, "Environmental Justice demands that public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination or bias" (Di Chiro 307).

Despite how effective this cleanup was there was a major downside to this project, the effect on the Duwamish River and the Native Americans that subsisted on it. The issues of the Duwamish River began when "…the planners of [the sewer system] found the easiest way to remove the sewage was to follow the old original watershed: Lake Washington used to drain into the Duwamish…" (Dornfield). This lazy allocation of excess waste detracts from the otherwise great success of the Lake Washington cleanup and shows a major downside of using government to solve environmental issues as politicians and officials are eager to use shortcuts to meet deadlines and appease voters and may not take time to properly investigate downsides of their actions. As the sewers began to be dumped into the Duwamish River to aid the cleanup of Lake Washington the native people that subsisted on that river began to suffer. Additionally, the drainage of waste into the river could also be interpreted as a sign of racism as "Anyone who looks closely enough can see that the ways in which the United States organizes its political system and economy- from de facto segregation and toxic waste sites to food production and trade policies are far from neutral and even farther from 'post-racial'" (Savoy & Deming 5). Even though there was never an investigation into the motives of the drainage of sewage into the

Duwamish River it is not unlikely that this act could have been racially motivated to hurt the livelihoods of the natives that survived off the river. As our political system is endemically racist it is a risk when using this system to enact environmental justice that the resources may be misused to assist the agendas of racist officials.

However, there was still a way for the mistake to dump sewage into the Duwamish as our government has checks and balances in place to fix issues that may arise from policy. The Duwamish people had "…their rights as enumerated in the treaties of the 1850s to fish in the usual and accustomed places: To be entitled to one-half of the catch, as the original treaty said" (Dornfield). This meant that the action to dump sewage into the Duwamish went against their rights as the government was reducing their one-half catch established in the treaty. From this the Duwamish people now could take legal action against the government for impeding on their rights and "with rising Native concern over sovereignty and self-determination, [went] to exercise their treaty rights and… fight for the right to capture those fish" (Dornfield). Despite the mishap with the Duwamish people this system of using government to fix environmental is still proven effective as checks and balances were put in place to fight against improper actions taken by officials. From this the Duwamish people were able to secure their rights and ensure that the cleaning of Lake Washington had only positive effects on all peoples.

Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end but the Metro Councils ending is an example of how old-fashioned systems can be destroyed when they become corrupt or sluggish and can make way for newer systems to be put in place. In 1990 the legality of the Metro Council was put into question as the system of having officials from multiple governments made certain populations underrepresented by the council and therefore impeded their rights of equal

representation. This ultimately led to the disbandment of the Metro council when, “On September 6, 1990, Judge Dwyer rejected Metro's arguments, declaring, ‘that the buses run on time cannot justify a dilution of any citizen's right to vote’” (Crowley). Despite years of effective governing the Metro Council could not ignore that it was breaking its own laws and new systems must be put in place to ensure that the government maintains a non-biased policy on transportation. However, this should not be viewed as sad as the creation of these new systems allowed greater change to be created in improving citizens lives, as both these new systems could not rest on their laurels nor be impeded by old fashioned ideas or policies, breeding innovation and efficiently that Metro Council could not dream of in the modern day. Even as these new systems came into play the memory and great effect of the Metro Council lives on as “In 1950, an eight-inch disk was visible from the surface of Lake Washington at a depth of 12 feet. By 1966, the lake had become so polluted that the disk could not be seen more than two feet below the surface. Two years later, after Metro closed the last plant discharging into the lake, the disk was visible at a depth of nine feet, and by 1993 it could often be seen at nearly 25 feet” (Wilma). This herculean task of cleaning up a lake so polluted you could not see two feet into it was not easy but by having effective government policy lead to this decidedly good outcome. Clear change is not only told but literally seen in the life of the Metro Council and its effectiveness to its community should be renowned as even to today the lake is continually cleaned and improves thanks to their work.

The cleanup of lake Washington took more than 30 years and hundreds of millions of dollars to complete, its outcome however is invaluable to both the Puget sound ecosystem and the millions of people living around the lake. There are dozens of ways this issue could have been fixed however the path of using local government to fund and allocate resources for this

project proved ultimately effective in this process and can be a beacon to other communities of how to fix their own environmental issues. Additionally, this system has flaws from laziness to racism but the checks and balances setup in each government can counteract and minimize these downsides if the community stays attentive to the issues surrounding them as all persons vote matters in effecting the community, and nature in their area. As we reflect on this topic, we can think of those five boys dressed in their bathing suits, now probably retired and in different cities enjoying their established lives and compare them to five boys of our current generation. No longer will they have to wait disappointingly as they look out over the lake, or risk disease from drinking lake water, they can swim and enjoy the lake to their hearts desire. Splashing in the cold water, feeling the seaweed underneath their feet, running from the scorching pebbles of the beach. Only through the Metro Council would these irreplaceable moments have ever been possible.

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