Speaking Plainly:
The Language of Environmental Protection

By Michael Washburn

For years, KWA has worked in Eastern Kentucky, implementing watershed plans in some of the Commonwealth's most beautiful, most economically challenged communities. In these areas, similar to many other underserved communities in Kentucky and nationwide, "watershed plan implementation" means something very specific: installing, repairing, or replacing failing septic systems. In places where raw sewage still discharges straight into creeks and streams, our watershed coordinators—Maggie Kaelin and Lois Smith—work in their home counties to connect families with septic solutions.

We do this work because it protects aquatic life and improves Kentucky's rivers. But we also do it because these communities which are overlooked, underfunded, and environmentally overburdened need and deserve the attention. It's a public health issue. It's a water quality issue. It's an issue of basic dignity.

There's another way to describe this kind of work: *environmental justice.*

Language shapes what we notice, what we care about, and what we are willing to defend. And when terms like environmental justice are erased or dismissed, we don't just lose vocabulary, we lose urgency, attention, and the people and places those words were meant to protect.

The strategy is simple: remove the language, and you begin to remove the problem, or at least the public's perception of it. In a time when environmental protections are being dismantled with alarming speed, we have to recognize that the first line of attack is often not on our waters or public lands, but on



the words we use to describe harm and those who bear it. If we lose the vocabulary of protection—if we stop naming harm, or let euphemism take its place—we lose the fight before it begins.

Over the past several years, a new lexicon has been carefully engineered to make harm sound like progress. Regulations aren't repealed; they are "streamlined." Polluters aren't protected; they are "unburdened." Environmental oversight isn't dismantled; it's "modernized." These words are not neutral. They are designed to lull, to distract, to diffuse outrage by preventing clarity.

In Kentucky, we have seen this language at work. When mountaintop removal was defended as "enhancing access to energy resources," it erased the communities below those mountains. When polluted waterways were exempted from federal protections to "unburden industry," it silenced the residents who rely on those waters. And now, as the rollback of environmental protections intensifies, the attack on language continues—often more subtle than the policy shifts, but no less dangerous.

At KWA part of our work is to help identify impairments and pollutants. To do this work, we must use the right words. Because if we don't, we participate in the cover-up. If we call a rollback "reform," or a delay "streamlining," we help disguise harm.

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Language is one of the last lines of resistance. If the laws are weakened, if the funding dries up, if the oversight disappears, we can still speak the truth. And we must. It matters that we call polluted water polluted. It matters that we call communities exploited and victimized, not just "underserved." It matters that we keep using the term "environmental justice," even when those in power refuse to say it or attempt to punish those who do.

Why? Because environmental justice is not just a policy category. It is a moral truth. It names the reality that many communities—especially Black, Indigenous, low-income, and rural communities—have borne a disproportionate burden of pollution, neglect, and environmental harm. It names the history of redlining, zoning, industrial siting, systemic exploitation, and strategic disinvestment that has made some watersheds and zip codes more toxic than others. And it demands that we recognize these patterns and act to correct them.

That is why "environmental justice" is such a dangerous term to some. It connects the dots. It refuses to treat pollution as accidental, unfortunate, or the cost of progress. It insists on accountability. And it is precisely this insistence that has made the term a target. To remove it from government priorities is to suggest that the harms it names do not exist. Or do not matter.

But we know better. In Kentucky, we see the need for environmental justice in the coalfields, where communities deal with the legacy of extraction. We see it in the west end of Louisville, where residents

At left:
The Mill Creek Generation Station in the Rubbertown neighborhood in southwest Jefferson County is LG&E's largest coal-fired power plant . Photo from the Kentucky Documentary Photographic Project. Courtesy of Bob Hower.

live in sight of toxic industries and suffer higher rates of asthma and cancer. We see it in rural areas where safe drinking water is not a guarantee, and where the language of "personal responsibility" is used to mask decades of neglect.

We also see acts of joyful resistance. We see communities organizing, testing their own water, telling their own stories, demanding to be heard. We see people refusing to be spoken for and refusing to be silenced. And in our work, we must strive to honor that resistance by speaking clearly, plainly, and honestly. Have we always been great at this? No, we haven't. Will we do better? Absolutely.

And part of what doing better means is rejecting euphemism. It means calling deregulation what it is: an open door to harm. It means refusing to describe coal ash ponds as "storage facilities" when they are toxic threats. It means using words like "contamination," "injustice," and "exploitation" even when those words make people uncomfortable.

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So in this moment, as environmental protections are rolled back and the language of harm is softened, let us remember: silence is not neutral. To go along with the rebranding of deregulation is to collude with it. To let "environmental justice" vanish from our public vocabulary is to abandon the communities who rely on its moral and legal weight.

We don't just protect rivers. We protect the right to describe them as threatened. We don't just advocate for clean water. We insist on naming who has been denied it, and why. And we don't just track pollution. We track power. Because the language of environmental protection, at its best, is also the language of democracy.

And democracy, like our waters, depends on vigilance.

So let us be vigilant. Let us say the words they want us to forget. Let us keep telling the truth, even when the laws won't. If we lose the language, we lose the story. And if we lose the story, we lose the will to fight.

