

Agency, Equity, and Environmental Justice: An Interview with James Hoyte

Interview conducted by Timothy J. Cunningham

James Hoyte is Assistant to the President and Lecturer on Environmental Science and Public Policy at Harvard University. From 1983 to 1988, Hoyte served as Massachusetts Secretary of Environmental Affairs with responsibility for the planning and management of all environmental and natural resource conservation policies and programs for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. He has published articles in the fields of environmental policy and management and serves on the boards of directors of numerous environmental and civic organizations.

Timothy J. Cunningham of the Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy interviewed James Hoyte on 12 December 2005.

HJAAP

What led you to public service as a career?

HOYTE

I suppose it is fair to say since high school I have been interested in working on issues that affect people's lives, particularly people with social welfare issues at their heart. I grew up in very modest circumstances. My father had a big affect on me; he was very engaged in issues of race and social action. Even though he was a janitor, he was extraordinarily well read. He spoke about ideas, particularly ideas that related to socioeconomic status. From those times I have always known that I wanted to work in areas that engage those issues. I have gone between working in public service and teaching. I've been fortunate enough to combine those interests in many ways as I look over the sweep of my career. I have had opportunities to teach. I've had opportunities to serve as a public manager. And I've had opportunities to affect issues of race and social justice as an activist in my professional life at Harvard. It really started with my upbringing. It was the focus of my family.

HJAAP

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, dialogue about the "two Americas" has reemerged, suggesting the poor and mostly African American residents of New Orleans suffered disproportionately. What are your thoughts?

Timothy J. Cunningham is a master in society, human development, and health candidate at the Harvard School of Public Health. Cunningham completed a bachelor of science degree in biology at Morehouse College in 2004.

HOYTE

I think that is quite real. We would have had to have our heads in the sand not to observe the impact of Hurricane Katrina on the African American community in the Gulf Coast, and New Orleans in particular. We like to say there has been a wake-up call in our country to recognize that a portion of the population, our citizenry that clearly is underserved and underprivileged, clearly bore the blunt of the hurricane, namely urban dwellers in New Orleans. It remains to be seen what we do with that awakening. The devastation and impact on people, families, and property was so overwhelming. It is hard to conceive that there will not be a strategy to address the devastation. There are a variety of responses that have occurred, albeit delayed; the issue is going to be whether those responses prove to be evenhanded—whether in the final analysis those who were really affected most are made, and if not whole are at least a good way towards being made, whole. Depending on where you sit, there is a feeling of hope or weariness. There are significant issues of justice in error.

HJAAP

Let me ask you directly, do you believe the response was slow and/or inadequate because the overwhelming majority of those people inside New Orleans following the disaster were poor and African American?

HOYTE

I do. Certainly, I do not believe that anyone at any level was sitting around saying, “those are Black folks; we [are] not going to respond.” I don’t think that people this day and age very often think that way; there may be some of that on the fringes. It is the institutional relationships that exist. These institutional relationships disempower Black people across the board throughout our country at each level of our government, including New Orleans. There is a certain amount of success at the local level that Black politicians have had in New Orleans and other urban areas. But what really makes a difference is the economic infrastructure that exists and who controls the levers that relate to it. In large part that is not Black people. Governmental systems respond to those folks that they think they have to respond [to]. That is not to say that those in government do not have an interest in serving the people. Institutions that are in place go along with the routine. When something like this happens, you have to break out of the routine. You break out [of] the routine when there is enough energy and activism to make you break out of that routine. The fact that Black people happen to be the people that are most disenfranchised and less well off was a major factor. It resulted in Black people not being responded to as quickly.

HJAAP

What kind of response should there have been to the hurricane?

HOYTE

First of all, there should have been an immediate emergency response that did not occur. There needed to be a response that started from a feeling of respect for those people that were impacted. However, we saw that media images dictated the response. Many of those media images were mixed at best as they related to Black people. So many of us were offended by the way in which the citizens were referred to in the media—as refugees. It is not necessary to be animist with regard to affecting people, but it did show some lack of respect. And that translates in some degree to how those who have the power to deliver services respond.

HJAAP

Following Katrina, New Orleans was described as a “toxic gumbo.” It was filled with sewage. It was filled with chemicals. What can be done to contain these threats?

HOYTE

In the most immediate form, one wants to be sure that only appropriate and well-maintained facilities are in place in communities like New Orleans. While the devastating hurricane that occurred is not anything that one can control, there was an impact on facilities. It is not clear to me that those facilities were cited, built, and maintained with the consideration of the potential impact of Hurricane Katrina. In the cleanup process, what is most important is the health and welfare of the affected population. One should start with an aggressive cleanup strategy that addresses the “toxic gumbo” as the major emergency need, even while we have to be concerned about the economic impact.

HJAAP

What are the long-term implications for the Gulf region?

HOYTE

Again, I would go back to the need to take into account environmental justice principles with respect to facility citing, facility maintenance, and facility operations. That means that the populations that might be affected by the operation of a facility have to be consulted with respect to operations and any new citing needs. I don't have the impression that facilities were wiped out and that there is a need to build a lot of new ones. We have to repair what has been damaged. We are stuck with the citing decisions that were made in the past. However, we can be more sensible about citing decisions and take into account the potential impact on communities, especially low-income and communities of color. With the devastation that occurred in various parts of the Gulf region there is an opportunity to almost start from scratch. Certain principles should be taken into account in the decision-making process. One, concerns about environmental impacts and environmental justice related impacts, there is a need for real involvement of affected communities in the deci-

sion-making process. Second, there is a tension in wanting to get things done as quickly as possible and the desire to have people return to New Orleans. It is certainly important, both psychologically and presumably for the economic vitality of the community. But we must be tough-minded about that. We don't want to make building decisions that put us right back in a vulnerable position.

HJAAP

What lessons can be learned from Hurricane Katrina in terms of environmental policy and environmental justice?

HOYTE

In terms of environmental policy, the lesson concerning the application of environmental justice principles is key. There is the need to involve affected communities in the decision-making process. The fundamental requirements of flood control in rebuilding these levies must be followed to protect against this type of disaster more significantly than they have in the past. I can't drill down to the level of knowing about specific facilities—where they are cited and where they are built. But it is necessary that they involve affected communities and apply the most sophisticated technology to make it most likely that people will be protected against environmental contamination. I understand there is a tremendous economic recovery that has to occur. In terms of the economic concerns, we need to get the city up and running. New Orleans was an important part of the industrial equation with respect to oil and the movement of cargo. A working port is a messy enterprise under the best of circumstances. I don't think we can be too cavalier about the need to reenergize the Port of New Orleans. It is important to the country as a whole and especially important to the region.

HJAAP

It seems that we've covered a lot of ground. Is there anything you would like to add?

HOYTE

In the rebuilding of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, it is extremely important that the economic activity generated in the rebuilding process is shared by populations of colors. This is a region with a significant proportion of citizens of color. After suffering this devastation, it is only fair that they should have some priority in sharing in the economic benefits of the rebuilding process. In the effort to rebuild, there are a lot of entrepreneurial folk who want to make some money in the process. We need to be careful that the desire to make money does not result in poor quality work, but also does not result in squeezing out those people who should have as a matter of justice first crack at the benefits of the economic activity.