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## Environmental, human rights issues have much in common

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***These remarks are excerpted from U.S. Rep. John Lewis' speech to the Wilderness Society **KEEPING IT WILD** Dinner at Clark Atlanta University on Oct. 1.***

As many of you know, the beauty of the Earth is one of my greatest inspirations. And I try, as often as I can, to get back to the fields and streams of rural Alabama where I grew up. As I was walking through the fields, smelling the wildflowers, touching the ancient oaks, the poplars and pines, I learned wonder. As I was drinking the clear fresh water from an Alabama spring, I learned purity. When I was fishing with a simple cane pole deep in the quiet of a warm, lazy afternoon, I learned the value of prayer and patience. As I was feeling the dirt and the pine straw between my toes, I discovered that the wilderness is a part of you and it is a part of me. I discovered that we should never, ever break our connection to the Earth, from its beauty, its joy, and its peace.

We used to say in the Civil Rights Movement that the struggle in America is inseparable from the struggle in Africa or the Caribbean. That the struggle in Eastern Europe and South America is inseparable from the struggle in the United States. But I say to you tonight that also the struggle to save America's fields and streams, the struggle to save endangered species is inseparable from the struggle for human rights around the globe.

As Dr. King would say, "We must learn to live together as brothers and sisters or together we will perish as fools." As Gandhi would say, we must learn to choose between nonviolence or nonexistence. These ideas were the foundation of the Civil Rights Movement, and they also are the foundation of the environmental justice movement. I truly believe that as we move deeper into the 21st century, that the connection between healthcare, the environment, and the civil rights movement will become more and more clear.

We all need to breathe fresh air, drink clean water, and eat clean food. These things are all necessary for us to live, and I believe that access to these vital components of human life is a sacred right that should not be violated.

Those of us who are friends of the environment have a lot of work to do in Congress today. People have not yet understood the practical relationship

between job creation and environmental protection. Most people do not understand the relationship between preserving our land and the ideals of justice and peace.

But that should not stop us. We know that the energy bills we just passed in the Congress are harmful to the environment. We know that there are efforts to privatize as much public land as possible, and we know that some wilderness is already lost. We know that finding alternative sources of energy is one of the most important environmental and economic goals of this new century, but it sometimes seems like our cries are falling on deaf ears.

I am here tonight to say, don't give up. Don't give in. Don't give out. Don't get lost in a sea of despair. Stay in the struggle, continue to get out there and push and pull to move this society forward. There is a force of good, a power, what I like to call the spirit of history, and it is on your side.

When I was growing up in rural Alabama, I saw those signs that said "white men," "colored men," "white women," "colored women," "white waiting," and "colored waiting." I tasted the bitter fruits of racism, and I didn't like it.

I used to ask my mother, my father, my grandparents, my great grandparents, "Why segregation? Why racial discrimination," and they used to tell me, "That's the way it is. Don't get in trouble. Don't get in the way." But I was fortunate to become involved in the modern day Civil Rights Movement, and I got in trouble. I got in the way. It was good trouble, it was necessary trouble.

You must find a way to dramatize your issue. And then you have to get in the way. You just have to get in the way and make your voices heard.

Through your leadership, you must help build an all-inclusive world community based on simple justice, an all-encompassing community that values the dignity of every individual and of wild lands and wildlife.

You cannot wait for someone else to create change. Through your own efforts, through your own action, through your own creativity and vision, you have to do it. As leaders of the environmental justice movement, you can move our society forward by standing up for what you deeply believe. I often wonder why Americans today are so quiet. I don't think the people of my generation would stand for what you accept today. What ever it is that you care about – whether it is the injustice of the war in Iraq, preserving human rights or the environment – you must find your passion and make your contribution. You must help to build a new, more green, more clean America and a better world in the 21st century.

