



FACTSHEET

# Decarcerate PA

## The Environmental Costs of Mass Incarceration

We consider prisons to be a form of environmental injustice. They are normally built in economically depressed communities that eagerly anticipate financial prosperity based on false promises. Instead, like any toxic industry, prisons affect the quality of local schools, roads, water, air, land, and natural habitats. In our call for no new prisons, decarceration, and community reinvestment, we join forces with other groups working for environmental justice.

Some of the many devastating environmental consequences that often accompany new prisons or prison expansions are:

1. They suck up scarce local resources such as water.
2. They require the towns in which the prison is located to pay for roads, sewers, and utilities to service the massive, new infrastructure needs of the facility. At this moment, as construction begins on two new prisons in Montgomery County, access roads must first be built to bring in the huge supplies of materials and machinery required for the project etc.
3. They generate tens of thousands of miles of commuting pollution, often in the most polluted parts of the state. This reality is exacerbated by the fact that most prison employees don't come from the host town nor do they move there after being hired; instead, they commute dozens of miles each way, creating a whole string of associated environmental and social costs, including pollution.
4. They take irreplaceable land out of any productive use, wasting valuable public resources for nothing but holding people in cages.
5. The large land areas that prison complexes encompass, and which they frequently clearcut in the process of occupying, destroy wildlife habitats and animal breeding grounds alike. In this regard, the new construction taking place at Pennsylvania's Graterford prison provides a critical case in point, since the surrounding state land provides an important nesting area for bald eagles.
6. Prison contracts are nearly always arranged so that the materials and services that the prison requires on a daily basis come not from local business or suppliers, but rather from large corporate chains. Because neither the prison nor its employees spend much money in the town itself, local businesses don't benefit. In fact, they are often harmed by the prison's appearance. And while local businesses tend to make more conscientious

tious decisions in relation to local environmental practices (given their own intimate ties to the area), huge multinational corporations carry little investment in or concern for the “footprints” their industries and actions leave behind for future generations.

As you read this, construction is currently underway on a new Pennsylvania state prison in Benner Township slated to open in January of 2013. Already concerns regarding the environmental and social costs of this prison’s appearance are being made apparent and local officials are publicly voicing their distress at the state’s tendency to ignore or actively obfuscate these issues. The township itself has no way to determine if construction on the prison is meeting local code requirements and there has been an ongoing dispute over the prison’s stormwater discharge plan. The potential inadequacy of this stormwater plan could force the township to acquire additional liability insurance, placing yet another financial burden on the already cash-strapped region.<sup>1</sup>

And this is but one example.

While our public officials often portray prisons as “clean industries,” they are in reality anything but that - polluting the air, water and land alike. And this devastation certainly doesn’t occur solely in the rural townships that these prisons call home; prisons also take thousands of people out of urban neighborhoods and communities, further impoverishing already hard-hit urban areas. In the communities whose members make up the majority of the prison population, families are destroyed and local businesses lose customers and employees. Thus, prisons prove to be environmental and social disasters both for the communities from which prisoners come and for the towns in which prisons are built.

Decarcerate PA believes that when we talk about concepts like “environmental justice” or “environmental sustainability,” it is critical that we challenge ourselves to maintain a holistic picture of those terms and to question the role that prisons play within that equation. Whose lives (whether human or animal) are “sustained” by these projects and how? Are we not capable of imagining more fulfilling, restorative, long-term alternatives that truly take account of and value our land, our resources, our fellow species, and our own lives?

We believe we are.

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1 Cliff White, “Officials: Lack of prison input could cost Benner Twp,” Centre Daily Times, Dec 18, 2011



**Decarcerate PA** is a coalition of organizations and individuals seeking an immediate and lasting moratorium on all new prisons and prison expansions, county jails, and immigrant detention facilities, and also seeking positive policy changes that will reduce Pennsylvania’s prison population and reinvest money into our communities.

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