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# Ten Ways That Racial And Environmental Justice Are Inextricably Linked



**Nishan Degnarain** Contributor 

Manufacturing

*I cover innovation within the green/blue industrial revolution.*



The statue of former US President Theodore Roosevelt is to be removed from the American Museum of ... [\[+\]](#) CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

Cities across the [United States](#) and [Europe](#) have been reflecting on the unprecedented [protests](#) demanding greater [racial justice](#) following the death of [George Floyd](#) in Minneapolis on 25 May.

This has sparked a [deeper conversation](#) around the world among

companies, universities, religious institutions, museums who have historic links to racial injustice and slavery.

Given the significance of [19 June \(Juneteenth\)](#), many companies and organizations have also been quick to sign up to [pledges around racial justice](#).

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However, the response among the environmental community has been [more muted and nuanced](#), given the [complex relationship](#) between the modern environmental movement and race relations. National Geographic famously addressed [its own historic coverage of race](#) in a [special edition](#) two years ago.

The fight for [environmental justice and racial justice](#) are inextricably linked. Here are ten ways how:

## **1. Environmental issues disproportionately impact people of color**



Oil and chemical refinery plants sit next to African American communities along the Mississippi ...

[+] CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

As the coronavirus pandemic has revealed, people of color have been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19, especially in the [United States](#) and [UK](#) who track this data. There are [many reasons](#) for the racial disparities, such as poorer [environmental conditions](#) around homes, [weaker](#)

**public service provision** in areas of higher black and minority populations, as well as more **marginalized manufacturing employment** leading to greater front line exposure to the coronavirus and other health risks associated with heavy industries.

Across the United States, people of color are more likely to be exposed to **polluted air, water, soil** and **poorer industrial working conditions**.

Outside the United States, climate change and environmental degradation is disproportionately impacting people of color from poorer countries too, in particular **low lying coastal and island communities** impacted by rising sea levels, indigenous populations impacted by **deforestation in the Amazon** and **Indonesia**, **water pollution** throughout India and **growing desertification** across Africa.

So people of color are often on the front lines of environmental challenges, with **fewer resources** to protect themselves against the impact.

## **2. Lack of racial diversity among leadership of major environmental organizations**



Climate activists protest at the Exxon Mobil climate trial outside the New York State Supreme Court ... [+] AFP  
VIA GETTY IMAGES

Whilst many environmental organizations have made progress on **gender diversity**, they still lag significantly behind on **racial diversity**, and in several cases recently, have **even gone backwards**.

Through **annual surveys** conducted by American Sociologist, **Dorceta Taylor** and diversity NGO **Green 2.0**, **over 2000** of the largest environmental NGOs and Foundations in the United States were surveyed on racial

diversity in their organizations. Among these large organizations, it was shown that at both the Board of Directors level as well as in the C-suite (executives directly reporting to the CEO), **people of color only occupy 20% of these positions**, with **very little change** in the decade since **diversity issues started to be prominently surfaced** among the environmental community.

Even looking at the C-suite, many executives of color are in **support functions** rather than in budget-controlling leadership roles. This has implications for the strategy and sort of environmental work that is supported and funded.

Most environmental organizations **do not regularly report Diversity and Inclusion metrics**. Indeed, two of the biggest environmental organizations – **Pew**, with an annual budget of **\$350 million** and **Oceana**, with an annual budget of **over \$40 million** – have **not even submitted** diversity data to Green 2.0 for their racial diversity transparency surveys.



Images used by environmental organizations can inadvertently perpetuate historical racial ... [+]

GETTY

This is in stark contrast to how prominently people of color are featured in the Annual Reports of all the major environmental organizations. In a review of the Annual Reports of the 10 biggest environmental organizations over the past year, there are 245 images that prominently features people, 231 of these images are of people of color, 94% of the total.

So many environmental NGOs have executive teams and Boards that do not reflect much of the communities where these organizations are

present. This can also be seen among leadership of some of the [major UN environmental bodies](#) as well as international environmental organizations.

### 3. Insufficient diversity transparency among environmental funders



Bill Gates and Warren Buffett launched the Just Giving Pledge in 2010 with 40 of America's ... [+] 2017  
GETTY IMAGES

The lack of [Diversity and Inclusion reporting](#) is even worse for [Grant Giving Environmental Foundations](#). With the growth of environmental philanthropists who have signed up to Bill Gates and Warren Buffet's [Just Giving Pledge](#), the lack of Diversity and Inclusion reporting is concerning. With promises as part of

the Just Giving Pledge close to reaching [\\$600 billion](#) (compared to World Bank Annual Commitments of [\\$60 billion](#)), philanthropic grants are a major part of the [environmental landscape](#), yet operate without the [transparency and accountability](#) needed.

As the nature of financing for environmental causes also changes with the emergence of new forms of [for-profit impact investment funds](#) – often supported by large family offices - that seek to identify revenue-generating opportunities that also have positive environmental impact, there is opaqueness around Diversity and Inclusion metrics. Transparency on where grants go can help identify whether there are structural barriers to a level playing field for people of color to receive environmental funding to scale up their work, or whether [such funds](#) are truly being used to address [major environmental challenges](#).

Projects need be better tracked and have diversity and inclusion metrics reported upon, in order to identify and eliminate the structural barriers to a level playing field for all environmental activists and entrepreneurs.

#### 4. Lack of diversity among Corporate Chief Sustainability Officers



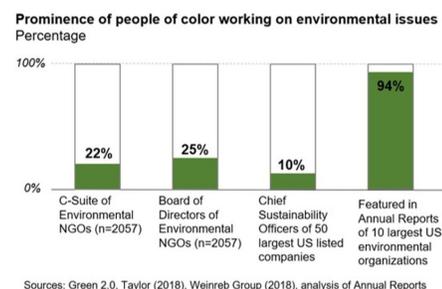
The Global Climate Action Summit in San Francisco, California on Sept. 12, 2018 that attracted ... [+] MEDIANEWS GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Over the past decade, a new position has been created in the corporate C-suite around the world, the [Office of the Chief Sustainability Officer](#).

Almost every major corporation now has a Chief Sustainability Officer to address environmental concerns and the footprint of their company. These roles carry a lot of influence in the environmental movement.

However, a look through the [50 largest companies](#) listed on the US stock market with Chief Sustainability Officers reveal that less than 10% are people of color (and even fewer are black or from indigenous backgrounds).

So just as the Boards and Executive Leadership among the Environmental Non-Profit sector are not representative of [society's racial diversity](#), this pattern is being repeated among Chief Sustainability Officers in companies around the world.



There is an under-representation of people of color at the highest levels of the environmental ... [+] AUTHOR

Given the environmental footprints of supply chains and consumption

are more likely to be felt by people of color, greater diversity is needed across both the non profit and for profit environmental movement.

## 5. Environmental policies that penalize people of color



Fishermen in Ghana on July 21, 2019. Fishermen of color have been disproportionately impacted by the ...

[+] AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Compounding the lack of diversity in senior ranks of environmental organizations, some of the policies adopted by environmental organizations have disproportionately **penalized those of color**.

Blunt environmental policies such as the creation of poorly planned **National Parks** or **Marine Protected Areas** have been used to **forcibly displace indigenous populations**.

In 2015, the **UN ruled that a marine protected area** once celebrated by environmental NGOs as the world's largest, was **illegal and prevented the return of the displaced indigenous population**. This was despite all the analysis and scrutiny undertaken by **major US environmental organizations** that continues to work on these issues.

Environmental organizations need to prepare more comprehensive racial impact assessments when setting environmental policies. Having **greater diversity** among environmental leadership could also lead to more **innovative solutions** that reduce the often binary tradeoffs between human welfare and environmental protection that are often proposed among traditional environmental NGOs and Foundations.

## 6. Addressing historic biases in areas of operation



Many environmental organizations are



Many large hotels in tropical regions have a complex relationship with their colonial history. GETTY

often not fully cognizant of the **historical racial or social implications**, in the areas where they are working.

For example, most environmental NGOs recommend **eco-tourism** as the only alternative for poorer communities to benefit from nature.

This has dis-proportionally benefited those who own tourism assets in many countries. Just as the racial and slavery legacy debates have taken place among prominent businesses in the **UK**, the **United States**, **France** and other former **colonial powers**, the **colonial legacies** continue to exist in many of the former colonies – particular in tropical islands once dominated by **plantation owners**.

A close examination of **hotel ownership** reveals many of the largest and prime hotel locations are owned by families once connected to the **plantation owning families**.

So environmental policies and leadership that do not understand and recognize the historic patterns and socio-economic mobility barriers that continue to exist around the world can end up reinforcing structural, cultural and racial divisions.

## 7. Taking credit for work from people of color



Female Seaweed farmers harvesting seaweed on the coast of Zanzibar, Tanzania. GETTY

In many environmental organizations, funding follows those with the most powerful ideas. The environment movement is notorious for **people of color being overlooked** or having **credit taken by others for their work**. This is both for people of color in Western

countries but also those from poorer communities around the world.

As a result, this means that those of color seldom receive the credit or funding they need for career progression or to scale up their projects.

This extends into science and academic publishing. There is now a [movement](#) to ensure indigenous and local researchers receive appropriate acknowledgement and credit in any environmental or scientific collaborations. There is a lot more that academic publications and universities can do to ensure such practices are widely adopted, monitored and enforced.

Several well intention-ed 'open idea' competitions have also [disproportionally impacted people of color](#), who submit ideas but do not have resources to scale up such ideas, leaving such competitions as pipelines of ideas to help those with privileged access to networks, scale up and receiving funding and credit for these ideas. Again, more work may need to be done for any 'open innovation' context to ensure ideas from people of color are equally recognized and rewarded, and that this is effectively tracked.

## 8. Cultural appropriation in the environment movement



Satere-Mawe indigenous leader Valdiney Satere, collects caferana, a native plant of the Amazon ... [+] AFP  
VIA GETTY IMAGES

Many indigenous communities have recognized particular species as having special properties. In several [high profile cases](#), the [scientific and environmental movement](#) have learned from this traditional knowledge to then lay claim to having '[discovered](#)' a [particular species](#) or idea. There is a growing movement to ensure

[appropriate recognition and safeguarding](#) in order to strengthen trust between the environment movement and indigenous populations around the world.

This can also be seen with several funds being raised to act on behalf of [indigenous populations](#), native Americans and other communities of color, but not having leaders from these communities running such funds. These were issues that the [international development community](#) faced in the 1990s and 2000s, and from where [many lessons](#) can be drawn upon.

## 9. The parallels between Slavery and Climate reparations



Hurricane Irma striking Miami, Florida with over 100mph winds and destructive storm surge in 2017 ...

[+] GETTY

In the last few weeks, calls have emerged once more for reparations for slavery, including BET Founder [Robert Johnson's](#) call for a [\\$14 trillion slavery reparation fund](#).

The arguments are based around the [structural inequalities](#) that have been created as a result of slavery. Climate and environmental change will create similar structural inequalities among the communities who will be most impacted - primarily the next generation and people of color.

Companies, investors and shareholders who are not taking sufficient action on climate - relative to mainstream science pointing to the [irreversible changes](#) the planet will be face from 2030 - could face [similar calls for climate reparations](#) in years to come.

Holding companies and their shareholders accountable for knowingly continuing to permit polluting activities, could start to bring about the

change that is needed.

## 10. Creating new career paths for people of color



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson (L) sits with British broadcaster and conservationist David ... [+] POOL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

For many communities of color, there are relatively fewer [role models](#) and [clear career paths](#) into the environment movement. In addition to role models, it is important for the environment movement to recognize some of the structural barriers to many communities of color.

These could be poorer access to [STEM education](#) or lack of a [privileged network](#) into the environmental community. Similarly, for environmental leaders in many countries, [passport and visa restrictions](#) significantly impacts local scientists' ability to travel that is critical to much of the environment movement.

[New solutions](#) need to be created by the environment movement to address these structural barriers.

## The need for a renewed, more diverse environmental movement



Swedish climate activists Greta Thunberg and Ell Ottosson Jarl sit in front of a screen displaying ... [+] TT NEWS AGENCY/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

At the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting in Davos in January, [photographers were criticized for cropping photos](#) to exclude Ugandan Climate Activist [Vanessa Nakate](#), from photos with Swedish campaigner Greta Thunberg and other white climate campaigners.

This highlights just how widespread the subtle and overt challenges are to environmental activists, policymakers, scientists and entrepreneurs of color.

If the environmental organizations and funders are unable to reform themselves, this pressure will unleash itself in new ways. This can already be seen with the rising prominence of new groups like [Rebellion Extinction](#), [350.org](#), [Afroz Shah](#) and [Greta Thunberg](#) becoming the new faces of the climate and environmental movement.

These are leaders and movements that emerged through the cracks of the current environmental movement rather than being incubated by it. Coming out of the coronavirus crisis, it is important to show [courageous leadership](#) and take on the big racial justice questions of our time too.

The lack of racial diversity in senior leadership positions of the modern environmental movement cannot be due to lack of talent. A quick skim through any of the [top talent lists](#) of the environmental movement as well as social media traction, reveals a depth of new, innovative and diverse [racial talent](#) in the environmental movement.

If the [traditional environmental movement](#) does not move rapidly with the times, it may be disrupted sooner than it expects.

The climate and planetary challenges that the world faces – regardless of racial background – are too great to address with such a [narrow leadership bench](#).

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**Nishan Degnarain**

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