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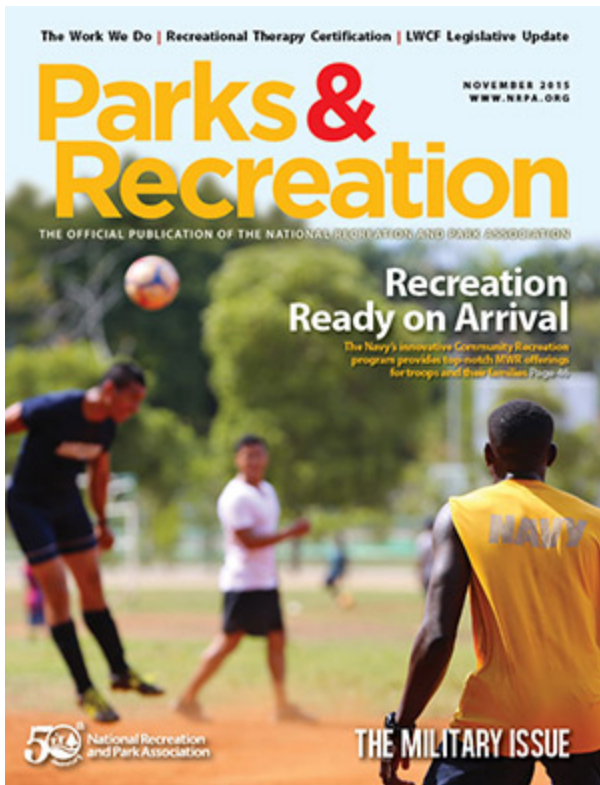


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Social Equity

Diversifying Mainstream Environmental Groups Is Not Enough

2015-07-01, Department, by Robert D. Bullard and Robert García

Transformational change is necessary to attain the world we seek and to modernize the environmental, climate and health movement. People of color and low-income people support environmental protection at a higher rate than non-Hispanic



whites, but they are disproportionately harmed by environmental, climate and health impacts. Mainstream environmental nonprofits, foundations and government officials are not adequately engaging these communities and the groups that represent them. The most important thing grant makers can do is to provide unrestricted, long-term support to grassroots organizing groups that are pushing for racial and ethnic justice. The most important thing mainstream nonprofits can do is to comply with civil rights and environmental justice laws. We agree with Green 2.0, an initiative dedicated to increasing racial diversity across mainstream environmental NGOs, foundations and government agencies, on the need to diversify the boards and staffs of mainstream organizations. However, diversifying the mainstream groups is not enough.



According to Green 2.0, people of color make up 36 percent of the U.S. population, but they have not broken the 16 percent “green ceiling” in mainstream environmental organizations. The numbers are much lower on boards and in leadership positions, despite decades of calls for diversity.

Strategic foundation support has enabled the success of the environmental justice movement. Yet, the movement is still underfunded after three decades of proven victories. Constrained funding has made it difficult to build organizational infrastructure, community organizing, leadership development and effective participation in the policy and legal arena. Reliable, predictable and flexible multiyear core support for environmental justice, health and racial equity organizations is necessary for them to carry out their mission, respond to new challenges and opportunities, and serve the community.

There are structural obstacles to funding environmental justice and civil rights compliance. Studies show that the more committed a foundation is to the environment, the less likely it is to fund social justice. Foundations should invest at least 25 percent of their funds with communities of color and low-income communities, building on the civil rights movement to advance social justice through advocacy and organizing for structural change.

Recent articles conclude that mainstream organizations exacerbate, rather than alleviate, disparities in green access and funding in Southern California. Public and nonprofit expenditures are most strongly associated with race and ethnicity after controlling for population size. This reproduces disparities in health and park access, and makes it harder for organizations that work with underserved communities to get the job done.

Some mainstream environmental nonprofits commonly receive federal funding. Those that do must comply with civil rights and environmental justice laws and principles that prohibit intentional discrimination and unjustified discriminatory impacts, regardless of intent. Funding agencies should ensure compliance plans are developed, implemented and monitored to distribute equitably the benefits and burdens of environmental, climate and health policies and programs, and to guard against intentional discrimination and unjustified discriminatory impacts. Avenues for compliance include planning, data collection and analyses, review of funding applications, contractual assurances of compliance by recipients, self-evaluations and reviews, and termination or deferral of funding. Civil rights laws include Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Affordable Care Act section 1557, the President’s Executive Order 12898 on environmental justice and health, and parallel state laws.

Environmental justice groups have been vital to the greening of Southern California during the past 15 years, for example. But, mainstream environmentalists receive vastly more funding, and many more are in a gold rush to open offices here to get funding from greening the Los Angeles River, the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument and other projects. The risk is they will snatch up money and staff, take the credit, and drive out grassroots groups that make change possible. This is like the South after desegregation beginning in the late 1960s. When people were free to shop at white-owned or black-owned businesses, they generally shopped at white-owned stores and drove black-owned establishments out of business because of years of “internalized oppression” and the idea that “the white man’s ice is colder.” We do not want to repeat this sorry history with a diversity strategy focused solely on “integrating” people of color into white groups.

The civil rights revolution is based on multiple strategies to promote human dignity, equal access to public resources and just democracy, and to overcome discrimination. The civil rights revolution includes advocates in and out of court, decisions by courageous courts, grassroots organizing, legislation, action by the president, implementation by administrative agencies and people providing a mandate for civil rights through the right to vote.

We look forward to working with Green 2.0 to diversify mainstream organizations, diversify funding and ensure compliance with civil rights laws and principles. Working together, we can ensure that all shades of green are included in our environmental movement going forward.

[Robert D. Bullard](#) is the Dean of the Barbara Jordan-Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs at Texas Southern University in Houston. [Robert García](#) is the Founding Director and Counsel of The City Project, a nonprofit environmental justice and civil rights organization based in Los Angeles.

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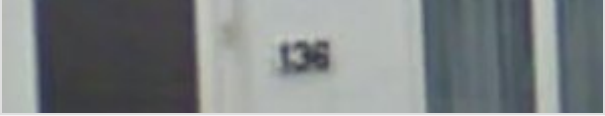
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