

POLICY/SOCIAL CONTEXT

The Disturbing Lack of Diversity and Will in Environmental Nonprofits

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A study released yesterday takes a look at gender, racial, and class diversity in three types of environmental groups—government agencies, grantmaking foundations, and nonprofits (in particular, conservation and preservation groups that could be designated “mainstream”)—and finds the landscape disturbing. The principal investigator of the study is Dorceta E. Taylor, PhD, from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Readers will note that the survey section of the report does not necessarily cover the environmental justice field, where more grassroots action by and on behalf of poor communities and communities of color is rooted. This report does have an excellent review of the history of the issue within environmental groups, tracing back more than a half a century. The report notes throughout a persistent lack of structured diversity initiatives, at least in the nonprofit/philanthropic sector groups, adding more impact to the findings.

We have largely used the language in the report’s summary because the numbers tell the story, but in reporting these numbers, we also have to be clear that, despite the fact that a lack of diversity is a longstanding issue in the field, many nonprofit organizations could not produce numbers at all when it came to ethnic diversity in areas like membership and volunteers. In fact, only seven of 103 of the nonprofit organizations surveyed reported having minority members or volunteers, but that may have been due to a lack of demographic data.

The Findings

Progress in gender diversity was possibly the most encouraging, but even there, where the percentage of women in leadership positions and on the staff of environmental organizations has increased over time, white women have made the preponderance of the gains, and men remain more likely to occupy the most powerful positions in environmental organizations. A full 70 percent of the presidents and chairs of the board of conservation/preservation organizations are male and, [as is the case in museums](#), the larger the organization, the bigger the discrepancies. Ninety percent of the presidents of the largest conservation and preservation organizations were male. Men also occupy the majority of the top leadership positions in environmental grantmaking organizations, with 76.2 percent of the presidencies being filled by men.

The state of racial diversity in environmental organizations looks even worse, with the proportion of ethnic minorities on the board or general staff not exceeding 16 percent in any of the three types of institutions studied. For the conservation/preservation nonprofits, the percentage of ethnic minorities on boards was 4.6 percent and the percentage of ethnic minorities of staff was 12 percent. Additionally, ethnic minorities tended to be concentrated in the lower ranks and occupy less than 12 percent of the leadership positions. Not one of the largest conservation and preservation organizations has a president who belongs to an ethnic minority, but the smaller conservation and preservation organizations were less racially diverse than the largest. Ethnic minorities and people of multi-racial backgrounds make up about 38 percent of the U.S. population. Ironically, in the government agencies, the greatest proportion of ethnic minority staff in any position (66 percent) was seen in the position of diversity manager.

Looking further, the study found that the members and volunteers of environmental organizations were predominantly white. Cumulatively, the organizations studied had a membership of about 3.2 million people, of which 59 percent are male, although volunteers are evenly split between males and females. But again, very few members or volunteers were from ethnic minorities. Even partnerships were found wanting, with few cross-race and cross-class collaborations showing up.

And here, class differences showed up more acutely than ethnic ones, since though few of the organizations collaborated with ethnic minority or low-income institutions or groups, even fewer collaborated with low-income organizations. Collaborations were reported to happen within the bounds of their own networks. Likewise, recruitment of new staff frequently occurred through word-of-mouth and informal networks.

But the biggest barriers to hiring minorities, the organizations said, were the few job openings and the lack of minority applicants. Of the 493 staff hired by conservation/preservation organizations in the last three years, only 63 (or 12.8 percent) were ethnic minorities, and of the 35 staff hired in environmental grantmaking foundations in the last three years, only six (17.1 percent) were ethnic minorities.

Could this look worse? Well, yes.

According to the report, the most popular diversity initiative being undertaken in environmental organizations is the promotion of women already working in an organization to leadership positions.

When the groups were polled to find out what kind of diversity activities should be undertaken in their region and whether they would support such activities if they were developed, they were “significantly more likely” to respond that they would like to see the diversity activities take place than to say that their organizations would somehow *support* such activities. For instance, more than 70 percent of all three types of organizations indicated that the pipeline for greater inclusion of minority and low-income participants in the environmental workforce and on the boards needed work, yet only 40 percent of government agencies and 50 percent of environmental NGOs and foundations indicated they would be likely or very likely to support the activity if it were developed. And more than two thirds of the organizations indicated that training programs for minority and low-income residents should be developed, but less than 45 percent of the organizations would support such training programs.

The conclusion of the professionals interviewed for the report?

The dominant culture of these organizations is alienating to ethnic minorities, the poor, the LGBTQ community, and others outside the mainstream.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion should be core values that are included in the mission statements of environmental organizations.

Ethnic minorities are grossly underrepresented in the leadership of environmental organizations. Increasing racial diversity in the organizations should be a high priority.

A significant number of talented ethnic minorities are willing and able to work in environmental organizations, but discriminatory hiring practices prevent them from obtaining jobs in such organizations.

The environmental discourse has to be broadened to include a wider range of people and the issues they are concerned with.

Greater effort should be made to facilitate the emergence of the next generation of leaders. This group should be more multicultural than the current cadre of senior environmental leaders.

Diversity data should be collected and tracked in environmental organizations. This is particularly true of nongovernmental organizations.

The report, "[The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations](#)," was prepared as part of the Diversity initiative of the [Green 2.0 Working Group](#). NPQ recommends reading this report, especially Chapter 1, where the history of the issue is laid out, complete with the language used to justify and block change. We also suggests that it is worth looking at your own field for these same kinds of dynamics, as was evidenced by the linked study regarding museums and in [this article by Rick Cohen](#) on diversity in foundation leadership.