

Everybody's Movement:

Environmental Justice
and Climate Change

WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY ANGELA PARK
DECEMBER 2009

Dedication

Everybody's Movement is dedicated to the memory of Pamela Dashiell, who died on December 1, 2009, as this report went to press. "With the support of good people, and the resilience of brave people, it seems like anything can be accomplished," she said. Her spirit will live on in the work we do, together.



About the Publisher

The Environmental Support Center promotes the quality of the natural environment, human health and community sustainability by increasing the organizational effectiveness of local, state, and regional organizations working on environmental issues and for environmental justice.

Since 1990, the Environmental Support Center's programs have helped thousands of organizations become better managed, funded, and equipped, by:

- Providing small grants and loans to pay for capacity-building activities, such as training, consultation and facilitation through a variety of capacity building programs
- Providing technology assessments, hardware and software to environmental justice groups through the Technology Resources program
- Maintaining a listing of consultants, management support organizations and other people who help groups with skills and tools

About the Author

Angela Park brings government, nonprofit, and private sector experience to her expertise on equity, diversity and inclusion, organization development, sustainable development policy, and leadership. She is founder and executive director of Diversity Matters: changing the culture of change and an independent consultant to foundations, social and environmental policy organizations, companies, and educational institutions. Previously, Angela directed communications, constituency development, and sustainable communities policy at the President's Council on Sustainable Development; coordinated state-level sustainable development initiatives at the Center for Policy Alternatives; and co-founded and served as deputy director of the Environmental Leadership Program. Much of her work focuses on the intersection of progressive movements and the integration of equity, diversity, and inclusion into all facets of environmental and social change.

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Foreword

Since 1990, the Environmental Support Center has provided hundreds of grassroots organizations with small grants, technology, and technical assistance, to help build a stronger base for the environmental movement in the United States. Over the years we have become more intentional about prioritizing environmental groups in low-income and people of color communities and supporting others in developing alliances with environmental justice groups.

Everybody's Movement was inspired by several conversations in late 2006 and early 2007:

- In a phone conversation, I asked the leader of a small grassroots group what prompted her to consider adding a “climate change organizer” to her staff. I was taken aback by her blunt response: “Because I think the funders are looking for it.”
- After seeing the ground-breaking documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, I began to notice that some people working in communities of color, or in financially struggling communities, expressed complicated, and at times, angry reactions to the movie and, more broadly, to the growing interest in climate change.
- In a meeting with a program officer with a long history of supporting environmental activism, she was clear that “the only issue that matters” is global warming—and that work is done on the national and international policy levels, to which most grassroots activism on environmental issues is irrelevant.
- When talking to the staff of predominantly white organizations about their efforts to include marginalized constituents in their work, people shared lot of emotions—defensiveness, guilt, anger, puzzlement, hopelessness—but most were generally hesitant to examine why they felt that way or what to do beyond more “outreach.”

While there seems to be general agreement that everyone can and must have a role in sharply reducing our collective carbon emissions, the disconnects—between neighboring grassroots organizations, between local and national environmentalists, and between environmental justice activists and potential funders—are slowing down our progress toward developing a truly broad-based movement for equitable and effective solutions to climate change.

The Alki Fund of the Tides Foundation, particularly interested in the intersection of social justice issues, made the initial grant to *Everybody's Movement*. The Town Creek Foundation offered additional support to help fund this report and follow up activities. Angela Park conducted nearly two-dozen interviews and crafted this written report. Additionally,

we are grateful to each and every person who carved time from their schedules to share their insights with us.

I want to emphasize that *Everybody's Movement* does not claim to represent every group, leader or sector of the large and diverse environmental justice movement. Our wish list of people to interview was very long. We knew that we wouldn't be able to schedule a block of time with every busy person who was contacted. Had time and resources allowed, we could have asked twice as many leaders to be interviewed and still would not claim to represent every demographic or perspective.

In a few cases, the people Angela interviewed asked to speak off the record. Many others were willing to be quoted. Interviewees openly shared their insights and experience working to integrate climate change and environmental justice. Among our findings was explicit testimony of the ways race, class, access, and privilege are barriers to building relationships based on trust and a shared commitment to equity. Given the context of the report, of course there are echoes of pain and frustration in some of the comments. Ultimately, I found myself inspired by the visions, the thoughtful analyses, and the many solutions proposed by these leaders.

The Environmental Support Center aims to incorporate some of the proactive strategies that are proposed here. Our focus will be on providing tools to help grassroots groups bring missing voices and an equity lens to the movement to halt climate change and other environmental problems. We'll continue our internal explorations of the ways that race and class impact our lives and our work.

In New Orleans, veteran community organizer Pamela Dashiell said, "There was a learning curve for all of us, learning how to work together." I hope you'll join us in the learning process, by using *Everybody's Movement* as a catalyst for listening, conversations, brainstorming, and action.

Judy Hatcher
Executive Director
Environmental Support Center

Executive Summary

Climate change is one of the highest-stakes, transformative issues of our lifetime.

Everybody's Movement: Environmental Justice and Climate Change features the perspectives and wisdom of twenty-three activists and funders who are engaged in or supporting work to connect environmental justice and climate change. In this report, these leaders from across the United States share their perspectives about how their movement can contribute to climate organizing, policy, and solutions. They also speak about how their movement can be strengthened by better integrating climate issues into the content of environmental justice.

While climate change has name recognition amidst the white noise of modern life, the success of the movement for implementing climate solutions and decreasing the concentration of carbon dioxide to 350 parts per million is far from assured. For climate change to become a priority for U.S. voters and households, for it to become everybody's movement, a stronger connection must be made between global warming and people's daily lives. The broad and vibrant response necessary to address climate change and serve as a counterweight to special interests in oil and coal industries requires the engagement of more people, from a wider array of society.

In addition, while many people of color and low-income communities regard climate change and the environment as priorities, the climate change movement still remains highly homogenous by race and class and significantly by gender in its leadership. Even in 2009, climate briefings held across the country consistently feature mostly male and all-white casts. Like other pockets of environmental and conservation movements, climate change still suffers from the perception, and arguably the reality, that it is a movement led by and designed for the interests of the white, upper-middle class. Many people erroneously believe that interest in environmental issues is dependent on race, education, and class. To the contrary, growing numbers of people of color working in the environmental field and public polling demonstrate that reality often differs from conventional assumptions.

The demographic ground is fundamentally shifting and changing the U.S. population and culture in unprecedented ways. People of color and indigenous peoples now comprise one third of the U.S. population. By 2042, demographers project they will be the majority and by 2050, they will constitute 54 percent of the nation's population.

These trends are not just numbers. They signal inevitable, transformative shifts in values, culture, and political power in American life. Fundamental changes are already being felt in American cultural and political discourse. To ignore these historic trends and their impact on the climate change movement, seems disconnected, at best. A mono-cultural climate

change movement is counter-intuitive to long-term growth and effectiveness. Strength in diversity could defuse the perception that environmentalists are a narrow, easily marginalized, out-of-touch elite. It would support their work to make policy solutions not only equitable but also transformative, creating positive economic and environmental ripple effects throughout society.

Framing climate change

When many Americans think of climate change, they think most often of the framing that has dominated mainstream environmental discourse: polar bears; melting ice caps; scientific studies; parts per million; Washington, DC, lobbyists; and United Nations convenings. Reductions in carbon emissions are the goal, and economic and technological fixes are the solution.

The environmental justice movement approaches climate change differently. Environmental justice activists focus on the way climate change affects communities, is embedded in social justice, impacts public health, and is intertwined with transportation and industrial facilities. They analyze the connections between the abuse of the environment and the oppression of people with the least power, including the poor, immigrants, women, and people of color. They focus not only on the degradation of nature but also on the degradation of communities and the loss of traditional means of economic support as the environment is changed. They perceive and analyze global warming through people's memories and experiences rather than solely through data gathered by scientific experts and portrayed by national policy advocates.

While climate change is typically framed as a universal, global problem, a message that focuses solely on the universality of global warming and its impacts can push many people away, instead of motivating them to join the cause. In addition, universal approaches to addressing climate change may exacerbate existing environmental, economic, and social inequities.

Many polls show that people of color are more likely to support strong environmental and climate policies than whites. Many environmental justice activists see the lack of immediate interest in climate change as an issue of messaging and content, more than one of inherent disdain. Many, if not most, people feel they have little time and energy to spare. One need not live in a community suffering dire social, economic, or environmental circumstances to feel somewhat removed from the urgency of climate change. The extra effort of engagement and outreach is a matter of degrees.

To many activists, the climate change movement has given up too easily on reaching new constituencies, especially those who don't currently mirror the demographics of the environmental field. The self-fulfilling prophecy is one that says: "Those people don't care about the environment or about climate change. So we shouldn't use our precious time and resources trying to engage them."

And yet, significant data tell us those untapped constituencies are more likely to support strong climate policies than those already engaged. And those suffering the most from current energy and environmental policies have the most to gain. There is a compelling argument for rethinking who is worthy of engagement.

Barriers to fruitful collaboration

There are immense challenges to collaboration between environmental justice activists and the environmentalists who lead the climate change movement. They come from different worlds, have different agendas, set different priorities, and use different processes. Race, class, and power dynamics are significant barriers to productive collaboration.

These barriers—embedded in the culture and histories of the environmental justice movement and the environmental field—will remain, elephants in an empty room, until it is clear that partnership is critical to the viability and success of each movement. If both movements are thriving, easily achieving their goals independently, there is no need for change. While few indicators point to such success, resistance to change currently prevails.

Strategies for building a movement for everyone

Environmental justice is evolving as a framework for social change in the early 21st century. Within that evolution lie significant opportunities for integrating climate change. Environmental justice activists and funders identified six areas for building the capacity and leadership of the environmental justice movement on climate:

- Strategy 1:** Increase community groups' capacity and access to scientific data, communications expertise, and economic analysis
- Strategy 2:** Deepen climate policy expertise and implement political strategies based on environmental justice values
- Strategy 3:** Expand creation and distribution of climate justice materials
- Strategy 4:** Support networking and information sharing through adoption of new technologies
- Strategy 5:** Acknowledge issues of scale while building expertise at multiple levels
- Strategy 6:** Build development capacity and better integrate environmental justice into existing funding streams

Currently, climate change is not everybody's movement in the United States. New thinking and action will be necessary for these two movements to work together. Everyone will have to take risks or suffer a shared fate of failure.

If we fail to take risks, to overcome fears of engaging across difference, to acknowledge the history and address the barriers that have stood in the way of more effective collaboration across movements, history will hold us accountable for the legacy we leave behind in the climate our children and future generations will inherit.

With relatively few resources, the environmental justice movement has built a foundation of local and neighborhood credibility and community empowerment. It has created sophisticated political education and leadership development programs that speak to and engage the people who have the most to gain from a truly just and sustainable future and the most to lose from the existing fossil fuel economy. This political force and these authentic voices have yet to be fully tapped.

Introduction

What will it take to create a climate change movement that engages everyone?

This report aims to provide one set of answers to that question. In doing so, the Environmental Support Center hopes to contribute to creating a more participatory, inclusive climate change movement in the United States with the full engagement of poor communities and communities of color.

The Earth's climate is changing in dramatic fashion, according to a nearly universal consensus among scientists, and concentrations of carbon in the atmosphere have already reached dangerous levels.¹ This month representatives from over 192 countries will attend the United Nations Climate Change conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, to attempt to forge an international response to this challenge. As this report is written, the U.S. Congress is deliberating global warming legislation. Households across the globe are making changes to decrease their carbon footprint. Millions of philanthropic dollars have been targeted for climate work. Increasingly, governments, at all levels, are implementing policies to decrease energy use within their operations and are funding programs within their jurisdictions. Numerous nonprofit organizations and corporate initiatives focused on climate have sprung up in the last decade. A new climate-focused project seems to appear every week.

When the Earth was anointed Time magazine's 1988 Planet of the Year, the choice was due, in part, to the attention that droughts and heat waves had brought to global warming.² Since then, the planet has had more than a dozen years of record-setting temperatures.³ The planet is, literally and figuratively, hot.

So why does a movement with growing political power, significant funding, and attention-grabbing headlines need to better integrate environmental justice?

Simply stated: Because we are not winning.

While climate change has name recognition amidst the white noise of modern life, the success of the movement for implementing climate solutions and decreasing the concentration of carbon dioxide to 350 parts per million is far from assured. In fact, in 2009 CO₂ levels stand at 385 parts per million and current trends show dramatic yearly increases.⁴ If current trends continue, scientists predict that the impact on human life and ecosystems will be catastrophic.⁵

Winning the battle to enact sound climate policy requires the support and participation of a wide majority of people. Yet pollsters regularly inform us of the lax state of public focus on climate change, which translates to tepid measures of political will. In a January 2009 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, global warming ranked last among twenty policy priorities.⁶ Even trade policy and the influence of lobbyists were considered more urgent. In

While climate change has name recognition amidst the white noise of modern life, the success of the movement for implementing climate solutions and decreasing the concentration of carbon dioxide to 350 parts per million is far from assured.

fact, since it was added to Pew's annual poll of domestic priorities in 2007, global warming has yet to make it out of the bottom three.⁷

As the American Clean Energy Security Act is being deliberated, one of its central components, cap-and-trade, easily the most visible policy solution being touted in this country, is losing ground. Fifty-two percent of respondents to a June 2009 ABC News/Washington Post Poll support cap-and-trade, compared to 59 percent a year ago.⁸ While cap-and-trade may be adopted in federal legislation, climate science and politics are clearly not aligned.

For climate change to become a priority for U.S. voters and households, we need to make a stronger connection between global warming and people's daily lives. The broad and vibrant response necessary to address climate change and serve as a counterweight to special interests in oil and coal industries requires the engagement of more people, from a wider array of society. We must create new partnerships and a new framework, connecting seemingly disparate issues and addressing the systemic inequities and chronic dilemmas facing communities, people, and ecosystems across the planet. Those who are most impacted should have a powerful voice in choosing how these issues are addressed. They should be involved at the household and individual level, for without that on-the-ground engagement, broad political power cannot be built and sustainable progress cannot be made.

The work of making climate change everybody's movement is in large part about integrating the very people who are not fully engaged at the current moment but who share many of the values and the rationale for not only joining but also leading a movement on climate. Poor people and people of color, who already live in the most polluted communities, are also first in line for the negative impacts of climate change.⁹ They stand to benefit substantially from a more sustainable energy future.¹⁰

Many people erroneously believe that interest in environmental issues is dependent on race, education, and class. While many environmental movements are, indeed, populated by white, upper-middle class, college-educated individuals, growing numbers of people of color working in the environmental field and public polling demonstrate that reality often differs from conventional assumptions. Recently, Democratic and Republican polling firms partnered to assess attitudes toward conservation and support for public funding for land, water and wildlife. Their summary stated:

In almost every case, voters of color express concern about the condition of land, water and wildlife—and support for investments in conservation—that are equal to or greater than those expressed by white voters. These data continue trends we have observed regularly in state and local opinion research over the past decade, which show that communities of color in America are some of the most dedicated supporters of conservation.

- Voters of color are significantly more concerned than white voters about a wide range of conservation issues.
- American voters—and particularly voters of color—continue to offer strong support for public investments in conservation—and that support has held steady despite the economic downturn.
- American voters are also willing to commit their own money in support of conservation, with voters of color particularly supportive . . . *At every cost level, African-Americans and Latinos express a substantially higher willingness to pay than do white voters.*¹¹ [Emphasis in original.]

We must create new partnerships and a new framework, connecting seemingly disparate issues and addressing the systemic inequities and chronic dilemmas facing communities, people, and ecosystems across the planet.

Furthermore, polls have shown that:

- Eighty-two percent of Asian Americans respondents described themselves as “environmentalists” in comparison to 52 percent of all California voters.¹²
- Eighty-seven percent of African Americans compared to of 77 percent of whites supported an amendment to the Constitution of Alabama to acquire and protect wild lands.¹³
- Seventy-seven percent of African Americans, 74 percent of Latinos, and 60 percent of Asian Americans voted to support a California state referendum on water quality and open space, in comparison to 52 percent of Whites.¹⁴
- Eighty-three percent of voters without a college degree supported the Alabama measure, mentioned above, compared to 75 percent of voters with a college degree.¹⁵
- Specifically with regard to climate change: Sixty-one percent of African American voters, 55 percent of Latino voters, and 57 percent of all voters of color considered global warming to be “extremely serious” or “very serious” compared to 39 percent of whites and 43 percent of all voters.¹⁶

In this report, environmental justice leaders across the United States share their perspectives on the unique ways in which their movement can contribute to climate organizing, policy, and solutions. They also speak about how their movement can be strengthened by better integrating climate issues into the content of environmental justice.

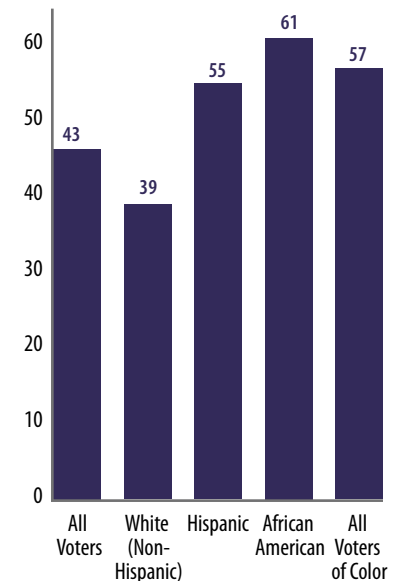
Currently, climate change is *not* everybody’s movement in the United States. While many people of color and low-income communities regard climate change and the environment as priorities, the climate change movement still remains highly homogenous by race and class and significantly by gender in its leadership. Potential allies have not become actively involved in the broader climate change movement, themselves. Some of this is a reaction to the perception that the climate change movement—and the environmental and conservation organizations that play significant roles within it—is narrow in its priorities, constituencies, and strategies. Even in 2009, climate briefings held across the country consistently feature mostly male and all-white casts. Like other pockets of environmental and conservation movements, climate change still suffers from the perception, and arguably the reality, that it is a movement led by and designed for the interests of the white, upper-middle class.

Most climate campaigns still focus on abstractions like parts per million rather than on the opportunities to improve people’s lives by creating a more equitable green economy. The climate change movement must be grounded in justice and equity if it is to expand its political power and address authentically the critique that climate solutions may harm poor people and people of color.

The monoculture of the climate change movement is counter-intuitive to long-term growth and effectiveness. With aging memberships, donors, and leadership, the future of the environmental organizations leading on climate change, as partners or as single robust agents of change, is at serious risk. The demographic ground is fundamentally shifting and changing the U.S. population and culture in unprecedented ways. Business as usual simply will not work in the future. New operating models are imperative.

The year 2050 is a benchmark, one referenced frequently by the climate change movement and on a parallel track by demographers. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recommends that policy makers aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions globally to 50 percent of 1990 levels by 2050 in order to avoid the most dangerous consequences of climate change.¹⁷ And, by 2050, the demographics of the United States will be vastly different from today.

Figure 1: Evaluation of the Seriousness of Global Warming, by Race and Hispanic Origin



Source: David Metz and Lori Weigel, (Public Opinion Strategies), “Key Findings from National Voter Survey on Conservation Among Voters of Color,” memorandum, 2009. Note: Percentage rating issue “extremely” or “very serious” —split sampled.

Principles of environmental justice

WE, THE PEOPLE OF COLOR, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to insure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice:

1. Environmental Justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.
2. Environmental Justice demands that public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination or bias.
3. Environmental Justice mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for humans and other living things.
4. Environmental Justice calls for universal protection from nuclear testing, extraction, production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes and poisons and nuclear testing that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water, and food.
5. Environmental Justice affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples.
6. Environmental Justice demands the cessation of the production of all toxins, hazardous wastes, and radioactive materials, and that all past and current producers be held strictly accountable to the people for detoxification and the containment at the point of production.
7. Environmental Justice demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation.
8. Environmental Justice affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards.
9. Environmental Justice protects the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality health care.
10. Environmental Justice considers governmental acts of environmental injustice a violation of international law, the Universal Declaration On Human Rights, and the United Nations Convention on Genocide.
11. Environmental Justice must recognize a special legal and natural relationship of Native Peoples to the U.S. government through treaties, agreements, compacts, and covenants affirming sovereignty and self-determination.
12. Environmental Justice affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honoring the cultural integrity of all our communities, and provided fair access for all to the full range of resources.
13. Environmental Justice calls for the strict enforcement of principles of informed consent, and a halt to the testing of experimental reproductive and medical procedures and vaccinations on people of color.
14. Environmental Justice opposes the destructive operations of multi-national corporations.
15. Environmental Justice opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, peoples and cultures, and other life forms.
16. Environmental Justice calls for the education of present and future generations which emphasizes social and environmental issues, based on our experience and an appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives.
17. Environmental Justice requires that we, as individuals, make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth's resources and to produce as little waste as possible; and make the conscious decision to challenge and reprioritize our lifestyles to insure the health of the natural world for present and future generations.

Delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held on October 24-27, 1991, in Washington, DC, drafted and adopted 17 principles of Environmental Justice. Since then, The Principles have served as a defining document for the growing grassroots movement for environmental justice.

People of color and indigenous peoples now comprise one third of the U.S. population.¹⁸ By 2042, demographers project they will be the majority, and by 2050, they will constitute 54 percent of the nation's population.¹⁹ And because the impact of climate change on women and children is meaningful context to these issues, it is more than relevant that by 2050, 62 percent of the nation's children will be people of color.²⁰

These trends are not just numbers: They signal inevitable, transformative shifts in values, culture, and political power in American life. Fundamental changes are already being felt in American cultural and political discourse. To ignore these historic trends and their impact on the climate change movement, while simultaneously stressing the importance of cutting the world's emissions by 2050, seems disconnected, at best.

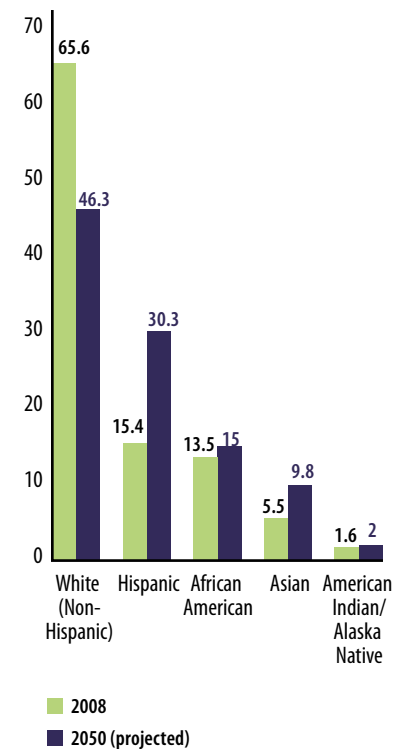
This report shares the perspectives, wisdom, and ideas of twenty-three individuals across the United States who are engaging in or supporting work that connects environmental justice and climate change. In these pages, activists and funders make the case that the monumental task in the next decade of stemming the tide of climate change requires the constituencies, conceptual frameworks, and strategies of environmental justice in order to succeed. This report is intended to complement climate change policy analyses and scientific data by focusing on the personal perspectives and experience of environmental justice activists, including their hopes and visions, frustrations and challenges, ideas and strategies for the road ahead.

For this report, a range of individuals in their 20s to 60s, across race and class, were interviewed, with an intentional focus on the voices of people of color who are on the front lines of environmental justice. At the outset, it is important to state the recognition that neither the environmental justice movement nor the climate change movement—or low-income people and people of color, for that matter—are monolithic. Furthermore, this report does not purport to portray all perspectives of environmental justice activists on climate change. Rather, we aim to share the crucial insights and cumulative experience of a subset of individuals who have thought about and engaged in the intersection of climate and environmental justice.

Additionally, while environmental justice and climate change are borderless, global issues, the focus of this report is limited to the context of the United States. Of course, many activists contribute to networks that span the globe and an international context infuses all that they do.

Climate change is one of the highest-stakes, transformative issues of our lifetime. The insights shared in this report are intended to spur new conversations, revitalized partnerships, and broader approaches for our collective response.

Figure 2: Percentage of the Population by Race and Hispanic Origin, United States, 2008 and 2050 (Projected)



Source: Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau.
Note: The original race data are modified to eliminate the "some other race" category. This modification is used for all Census Bureau projections as explained in "Modified Race Data Summary File Technical Documentation and ASCII Layout," at <http://www.census.gov/popest/archives/files/MRSF-01-US1.html>

Weaving Together Environmental Justice and Climate Change

1

Different approaches to framing and branding the issue

The frame we bring to climate change discussions determines how we define the problem, what solutions we support, and which people we see as leaders and stakeholders. In interviews for this report, key differences emerged between the conventional framing of climate change and the way the issue is perceived by environmental justice activists.

A brand is comprised, in part, on the perceptions of an issue, a company, or even an individual, based on the images people conjure in their minds. A brand becomes an identifiable entity. When many Americans think of climate change, they think most often of the framing that has dominated mainstream environmental discourse: polar bears; melting ice caps; scientific studies; parts per million; Washington, DC, lobbyists; and United Nations convenings. Reductions in carbon emissions are the goal, and economic and technological fixes are the solution.

This branding of climate change determines who considers the issue to be relevant and worthy of their limited time amidst the constraints of daily life. The associations people make with climate change are also grounded in how prominently people, technology, and nature factor into the frame.

To many environmental justice activists, most climate activists are primarily concerned with addressing the technological challenges of climate change. They frame climate change in terms of a scientific problem. They have a top-down view of the issue, in which experts gather data, define the problem, determine solutions, and inform the public. They tend to overlook the ways in which climate change is linked to historical exploitation and injustice, and they are not aware always of the ways in which their own attitudes and approaches keep potential partners at bay.

One interviewee framed the differing views. Traditional climate activists espouse “our economy works, except for the carbon thing. How do we simply make our economy less carbon-intensive? But EJ [environmental justice] folks see climate as a symptom of a whole system, so we need to rethink our economics. It’s not just solar-powered buses.”

Angela Johnson Mezaros, of the California Environmental Rights Alliance, said, “The study of climate change began among meteorologists, became firmly entrenched in the physical sciences, and has only gradually—if inevitably—reached into the social sciences.” Furthermore, she believes that the way that most mainstream environmentalists equate the environment with wilderness distances potential partners and constituencies. Said Johnson Mezaros, “The environment is someplace over there. You get in your car and drive to it. It’s

When many Americans think of climate change, they think most often of the framing that has dominated mainstream environmental discourse: polar bears; melting ice caps; scientific studies; parts per million; Washington, D.C., lobbyists; and United Nations convenings.

not something you're a part of. There is little space in that definition to incorporate concerns in ways that resonate with others who define the environment differently.”

Because many of the largest, best-funded environmental nonprofits are also leading players in the field of climate change, the impressions of their larger definitions of sustainability influence how climate issues are perceived. According to Communities for a Better Environment's Yuki Kidokoro, “Sustainability is frequently defined in ways that resonate primarily with white, upper-middle class constituencies. But the fight for livable communities is not built solely on driving a Prius, living a ‘green lifestyle,’ and buying organic, local foods.”

“With this big green wave, a lot of the messaging seems to be very corporate. It's saying the solution is to buy more ‘green’ products. This caters to people with wealth,” said Kidokoro. The other problem with this angle is that it suggests that only the elite can participate in the solution. People who are fighting the negative manifestations of the fossil fuel economy in their communities are rarely featured as being part of the climate change movement, much less portrayed as leaders.

Environmental justice activists point out that these messages either fail to motivate their communities or miss the point. “The technological frame on climate change doesn't capture people's imagination, hopes, and dreams in a way that translates into real base-building,” said Penn Loh formerly of Alternatives for Community and Environment. “We can always organize around bad things, but I don't think that's the basis for the proactive vision we're trying to move toward.”

The environmental justice frame on climate change

The environmental justice movement approaches climate change differently. Environmental justice activists focus on the way climate change affects communities, is embedded in social justice, impacts public health, and is intertwined with transportation and industrial facilities. They analyze the connections between the abuse of the environment and the oppression of people with the least power, including the poor, immigrants, women, and people of color. They focus not only on the degradation of nature but also on the degradation of communities and the loss of traditional means of economic support as the environment is changed. They perceive and analyze global warming through people's memories and experiences rather than solely through data gathered by scientific experts and portrayed by national policy advocates.

The perception of the environment as a drive-to phenomenon is in stark contrast to the environmental justice definition of environment as “the places we live, work, play, and pray.”¹⁹ To many environmental justice activists, climate change is perceived as focusing primarily on concern for polar bears and wildlife, to the exclusion of people and communities that are currently bearing the brunt of the fossil fuel economy. These are the same communities that will also be the first to feel the impacts of climate change, with the least access to the infrastructure and services to mitigate them. One need not look any further than coastal communities devastated in the wake of Hurricane Katrina as a case in point.

Grounded in grassroots organizing, environmental justice activists frame climate change in terms that resonate with the basic needs and daily observations of the constituencies they serve. The global issues are tied to the fundamental necessities of public health, food, clean air and water, housing, and transportation. Roger Kim of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network said, “We connect to what people see, live, feel every day in their lives, the conditions in their community—presently and the changes people have seen in their lifetimes.”

“Sustainability is frequently defined in ways that resonate primarily with white, upper-middle class constituencies. But the fight for livable communities is not built solely on driving a Prius, living a ‘green lifestyle,’ and buying organic, local foods.”
— Yuki Kidokoro

Although people of color are perceived by many environmentalists as disconnected from nature and wilderness, many communities of color have deep connections to land and the environment that influence their views on climate change.

Shawna Larson-Carmen works with Native Alaskan communities in the Arctic. She said, “In Alaska, things are so different than they used to be. The knowledge that we traditionally passed on, things don’t happen the same way. Tree lines are changing. Birds don’t fly the same routes. Spring feast birds aren’t there. Fish are not coming back in numbers they used to. More people are falling through the ice, as hunters go further out, and people are not getting the food they used to be able to access. Access to food is really important in a place where milk costs \$13 a gallon in some villages.”

Jihan Gearon, of the Indigenous Environmental Network, agrees. “Indigenous communities understand changes in weather, the land, what people are seeing. That is very obvious and talking about climate in Alaska is not hard. The villages in the Arctic, the ice is melting, they’re moving villages, seeing animals in new places, like polar bears in Fort Yukon. People understand that. In rural areas, traditional farmers notice where plants are growing. They’ve struggled with drought for a very long time.”

Similarly, many immigrants see climate change in terms of its roots causes and visceral effects. Roger Kim said, “[Our members] have seen huge transformation, most of it negative and polluting and the degradation of their communities back home has been quite dramatic. We unpack the root causes of the changes and degradation, how capitalism works here in the U.S. How development works here and in the global economy. The lack of power and voice is the same, whether it’s here in Richmond [California] or in Laos or in southern China or Beijing. The root cause is powerlessness. When you talk in those terms in the context of the economic, global crises, our members actually feel and connect to these issues in a more visceral way than many folks who grew up in the United States.”

For many people, the relevance of climate change comes from their familial and cultural history. There is a clear link between having a reduced carbon footprint and returning to traditional ways. “These are the old ways, how your great-grandmother in the country lived, bedrock values of thrifts, resourcefulness, making what you have go as far as possible, respecting and acknowledging the force and power that is around us. Working to diminish our impact and negative impact on our environment. Those are things that are in us. That’s how we have to live in the new age, how we lived in the old age. Same values,” said Pamela Dashiell of the New Orleans Holy Cross Neighborhood Association and Lower Ninth Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development.

Many environmental justice activists link the discussion of climate change to long-standing concerns with poverty, public health, and pollution. They feel that more traditional climate change activists often miss this connection. Said Angela Johnson Mezaros, “The idea and language of climate change has had huge penetration. People get that it’s important. They know what climate change is; they can talk about greenhouse gases. They also don’t think it has direct relevance to them. When we talk about how climate and fossil fuels are related to transportation infrastructure and industrial facilities and their active campaigns, then they see it. They get it. They think it’s important when it’s linked that way.”

Said ron davis of the Center for Health, Environment & Justice, “Part of the analysis that moves us from EJ to climate change is green jobs. Converting some of these detrimental products that negatively impact low-income and communities of color from mean to becoming green.” The potential economic impact of conversion to a green economy brings hope to communities that suffer disproportionately high rates of unemployment, even during good economic times.

Environmental justice activists focus on the way climate change affects communities, is embedded in social justice, impacts public health, and is intertwined with transportation and industrial facilities.

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Public health impacts are a key focus for environmental justice activists, whether they're talking with truck drivers in port communities, nail salon workers, or residents living alongside chemical plants, petroleum refineries, or coal mines. According to Eveline Shen, "We are making the link with workers: The chemicals impacting your health are the same chemicals causing climate change." Adds Madeline Janis of the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, "We talk more specifically with drivers and residents about poverty and pollution and how they're linked. We can change this. It's not something we have to accept. We reference the broad global climate crisis and how the pollution caused by ports is a part of it."

While not all grassroots environmental justice organizations are making these explicit links to climate, in interviews for this report, activists nearly universally acknowledged the need to connect local campaigns to global climate change efforts. Antonio Diaz of People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights said, "It's incumbent on us to clearly articulate the ways our urban EJ agenda—for example, better public transit and less vehicular pollution—relates to climate."

At the same time, there is a strong perception among environmental justice activists that most environmental organizations ignore these connections, undermining potential partnerships. Cecil Corbin-Mark of West Harlem Environmental Action said, "Many climate folks talk about carbon as the new pollution on the block rather than linking it to the co-pollutants that are always found with carbon sources. We understand the impact of carbon, but we're clear that to clean up communities, we can't work on carbon alone." For urban groups that have been organizing neighborhoods to address high levels of asthma caused by diesel exhaust and polluting facilities, climate and health are closely tied.

Leslie Fields of the Sierra Club agreed that by not shining a spotlight on public health, climate change activists are "missing the boat." She added that wearing the mantle of professionalization narrows many environmentalists' view of relevant data. "They tend not to respect indigenous knowledge, what people remember, what they've written down over years of daily observation. Hydrologists and epidemiologists—and people with lots of capital letters behind their names—are the only types of experts many professional environmentalists respect." In contrast, to fellow community members, hands-on communal knowledge, passed down from generation to generation, is a source of credibility.

Is climate change a symptom or a root cause?

Environmental justice leaders interviewed for this report consistently identified climate change and environmental injustice as indicators of a larger, systemic problem: a fossil fuel economy that externalizes negative economic and environmental impacts, leading to decisions that do not fully account for the human and natural costs of modern industrial society.

Polluting facilities emit more than carbon. Environmental justice activists are fighting the full array of pollutants that are hazardous to human health. Strategies to reduce carbon emissions must be developed in the context of existing efforts to fight for public health and environmental safety, and at a minimum, should not undermine that work.

"The climate crisis is a symptom of a deeper systemic problem," said Mateo Nube of Movement Generation. "It is the symptom of an economic model that is based on intensive resource extraction. We could arguably end up in a scenario where we find a way to reduce carbon emissions but are still on this treadmill of intensive resource extraction and the exploitation of people. Our goal politically is that long-term we have to rethink how we live on this planet."

*By not shining a spotlight
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— Leslie Fields*

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Environmental justice activists also note that the economic and environmental crises the United States is facing in 2009 are rooted in the same causes and may be amenable to the joint solutions.

“We can’t look at environment separate from the economy and the same forces that create the incredible inequalities of wealth and lack of sustainability that EJ communities face, first and worst,” said Yuki Kidokoro.

“Indigenous economies are so dependent on fossil fuel development. Climate change gives us a way to combat the fossil fuel development, the mining expansion. The Plains have so much wind. Alaska has wind offshore. The southwest has so much sun. These solutions mean we don’t have to choose between our culture and traditional way of living and protecting climate,” said Jihan Gearon.

Climate change impacts will be universal and differential

The universality of the impact of climate change has been a logical talking point for climate activists. We are all at risk and we all must act. If our planet warms by two to seven degrees in the next 100 years, the changes triggered will significantly impact all living systems. Every corner of the globe will be affected.

And yet there is a paradox of this seemingly universal impact of climate change, for it will also affect us differently. A message that focuses solely on the universality of global warming and its impacts can push many people away, instead of motivating them to join the cause. In addition, universal approaches to addressing climate change may exacerbate existing environmental, economic, and social inequities.

Increasingly, research shows that the impact of global warming will be felt unequally. Worldwide, the poor and people of color will disproportionately suffer from mortality rates from extreme heat waves, dirty air, water scarcity, and the “heat island” affect of urban areas. They will also be disproportionately impacted by higher costs for food and electricity and by potential job losses and economic shifts.

Many of the communities that contribute the least to global warming will suffer the worst. For example, in their 2008 report, *A Climate of Change: African Americans, Global Warming, and a Just Climate Policy in the U.S.*, J. Andrew Hoerner and Nia Robinson wrote, “African Americans are thirteen percent of the U.S. population and on average emit nearly twenty percent less greenhouse gases than non-Hispanic whites per capita. Though far less responsible for climate change, African Americans are significantly more vulnerable to its effects than non-Hispanic whites.”²² The Congressional Black Caucus Foundation’s report, *African Americans and Climate Change: An Unequal Burden*, found that “Policies intended to mitigate climate change can generate large health and economic benefits or costs for African Americans, depending on how they are structured. Unless appropriate actions are taken to mitigate its effects or adapt to them, climate change will worsen existing equity issues within the United States.”²³

In the recently released report, *The Climate Gap: Inequalities in How Climate Change Hurts Americans & How to Close the Gap*, researchers found “Climate change will dramatically reduce job opportunities or cause major employment shifts in sectors that predominately employ low-income people of color.” For example, in California, agriculture and tourism, where the majority of people of color hold jobs, are two of the sectors that will be significantly impacted by climate change.²⁴

The differential impact of climate change on women is the focus of an emerging reproductive justice paradigm on gender and climate change. According to the report, *Looking Both*

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— A Climate of Change: African Americans, Global Warming, and a Just Climate Policy in the U.S.

Ways: Women's Lives at the Crossroads of Reproductive Justice and Climate Justice, “women, specifically women of color, are disproportionately impacted by disasters and environmental degradation caused by global warming. Women make up approximately 70 percent of those living in poverty, and low-income women, women of color, and immigrants will be most impacted by the severe weather events, heat waves, and increases in disease rates that will characterize Earth’s changing climate.”²⁵ Furthermore, this gender analysis addresses an issue rarely connected to climate change: the increase in physical and sexual attacks on women during natural disasters and afterwards as mass displacement causes chaos and instability.

According to Eveline Shen of Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, “the reproductive justice movement is looking at the intersection with climate change because chemicals with the most negative impact on reproductive health and women workers are also contributing to global warming. This is the opportunity to look both ways, to come up with solutions that not only decrease exposures to chemicals and toxins workers are exposed to but also address climate change.”

Without a clear gender analysis, climate change solutions may also exacerbate discrimination against women. Said Hashim Benford of the Miami Workers Center, “Everyone is talking about green jobs and infrastructure, but construction and manufacturing have a gendered history. If we recognize the need to rebuild America, with public investment, we have to be deliberate in how we don’t recreate the same industries. We need affirmative hiring of women, uplifting the role of women, paying them as much as men. The green economy doesn’t meet the goal if it’s still gender oppressive.”

People of color and the poor who suffer from most from the environmental pollution caused by the fossil fuel economy also have much to gain. “Indigenous groups have to live with every point of the life cycle of fossil fuel—extraction, transportation, refining, and waste,” noted Jihan Gearon. “Indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected by climate change itself, the impacts and the solutions. Some people see nuclear power as a climate change solution, but uranium mining and old nuclear waste storage sites are on our land. With clean coal, carbon capture, and sequestration, disadvantaged communities are targeted, as always.”

“Race has to be one of the things that is front and center when we are thinking about environmental or climate change initiatives. Because of the historical legacy of racism, not only in this country but around the world, we are going to see patterns repeated,” if we don’t track it intentionally, said Robby Rodriguez of the Southwest Organizing Project.

The rationale for assessing the appropriateness of particular climate solutions and actors originates in how climate is defined. While individual choices affect global warming, focusing on lifestyle choices obscures issues of disproportionate impact and the necessity of institutional change. “Sustainability often emphasizes individual behavior, not institutional behavior. Who is hurt by [the actions of] institutions? It’s low-income and people of color who are most impacted, so we need to challenge institutions, not just make ‘green’ consumer choices. What percentage of climate problems are individual versus institutional?” said Yuki Kidokoro.

Additionally, low-income communities and communities of color may very well be where investments will have the most payoff. Said Torri Estrada of Environmental Justice Solutions and the Marin Community Foundation, “Communities of color have not been the recipients of energy efficiency. There is a huge opportunity in our communities. The energy savings will be made by investing in these communities, by integrating communities of color in the new energy future.”

“Women, specifically women of color, are disproportionately impacted by disasters and environmental degradation caused by global warming.”

— Looking Both
Ways: Women’s Lives at the Crossroads of Reproductive Justice and Climate Justice

ron davis said, “The voices of those who have been at the short end of the stick” in the current fossil fuel economy “bring a strong witness to why justice is so important. EJ brings that insistence on justice, not just climate change policies that will help a subset of people and businesses.”

To view climate policy solely as an environmental issue with universal impact is to exclude social and economic issues and an analysis that integrates race, class, and gender. It is also misses a significant opportunity to create substantial shifts in society and ameliorate disparate impacts and current vulnerabilities among groups.

In addition to avoiding disproportionate negative impact, climate policies that benefit the most people should be a logical focus. The authors of *A Climate of Change* found that “climate policies that best serve African Americans also best serve a just and strong United States . . . *policies well-designed to benefit African Americans also provide the most benefit to all people in the U.S.*”²⁶ [Emphasis added.]

Your urgency may not be my urgency

Because of the cumulative, non-linear, exponential nature of carbon concentrations in the atmosphere, the earlier we act, the better. To wait is to accelerate the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere, and if concentrations reach a tipping point, our opportunity and ability as humans to reverse our course may be lost entirely. Polls show that most Americans believe climate change is a problem that will have a dramatic impact in their children’s lifetimes.²⁷ While sales of environmentally friendly products are growing, these consumer shifts have yet to translate into widespread advocacy for immediate, dramatic policy shifts commensurate with this acknowledgment.

The time orientation of U.S. culture

A barrier to timely action on climate may be that the dominant time perspective of our culture focuses on the present. In the book *The Time Paradox*, researchers describe multiple time perspectives and how they shape the mindsets of individuals. The italicized content below is relevant particularly to climate change:

A Present-Oriented Person . . . focuses on concrete factors in the immediate, sensory present . . . while ignoring or minimizing the abstract qualities relevant to the decision that exist only in an anticipated future context or a remembered past context. Of great importance is the evidence we are accumulating that they tend not to be influenced by educational or persuasive messages, either written or oral, in which the necessary action to take or refrain from taking is in some future context. Having the relevant knowledge does not translate into the appropriate action, as it does for the future-oriented, and often the past-oriented person.

Future-Oriented Person: This person’s decisions tend to be based less on concrete, empirical aspects of the current behavioral setting and relatively more on his or her anticipated, abstract imaginings of future consequences of alternative courses of action There is a clear concern for the consequences of one’s actions, attention to responsibility, liability, optimizing outcomes. This person accepts delays of immediate gratification to achieve longer-term better goals. She or he is also willing to invest effort and resources in current activities that only have a distant payoff, and to endure

To view climate policy solely as an environmental issue with universal impact is to exclude social and economic issues and an analysis that integrates race, class, and gender.

unpleasant current situations that have the potential for positive future outcomes.²⁸
[Emphasis added.]

Because climate change is a problem whose most visceral impacts may not be felt for decades, in the context of social action, the mindset of future orientation likely supports more active engagement. Meanwhile, a present orientation may lead to putting off the immediate work, change, and sacrifice. The science of climate change makes it clear that immediate action is necessary to ameliorate the future negative impacts of climate change. This is in stark contrast to the reactionary nature of much of U.S. public policy where a disaster has been necessary to create the attention and political will to enact policy. Even in the face of Hurricane Katrina, as a country, we seem stuck in a present orientation on climate.

Urgency is contextual

The context of people's lives factors into how they perceive the immediacy of climate change. From the lens of socioeconomic privilege, it is easier to view the long-term impacts of climate change with alarm. As an illustration of psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, when people's basic needs are met, they have the time and energy—the luxury, in some people's minds—to think about the seemingly distant global phenomenon of climate change. People who are struggling to meet their basic needs may not see climate change as the greatest challenge facing them.

Ironically, great opportunity lies in engaging the constituencies who may feel less engaged. While it may feel easy to give up on engaging the groups that appear unmoved by our appeals, polls show that people of color, for example, are more likely to support strong environmental and climate policies than whites. Many environmental justice activists see the lack of immediate interest in climate change as an issue of messaging and content, more than one of inherent disdain.

Penn Loh said that the perspective articulated by upper-middle class environmentalists is perceived as “the world is going end, so we need to mobilize all of the resources that we have. But when you are living in a community with chronic crises, there is a different context for defining what qualifies as a crisis.”

Similarly, Yuki Kidokoro observed, “Folks in the community have so many immediate needs and urgencies, especially in the current economy. ‘Come join the movement for climate change’ is not going to resonate with them unless you make direct connections to their struggles and make the link to the fossil fuel economy.”

Patrick Sweeney, of the Western Organization of Resource Councils, works with community groups in seven states that are impacted by ongoing fossil fuel development. In a dramatic example of urgency, he said, “We have constituents whose bathtub water can be set on fire because of the methane content.”

“Environmental justice activists are quite literally trying to save the lives of people who are being bombarded by their toxic environments,” explained Robby Rodriguez, of the Southwest Organizing Project. He added that since environmental justice continues to be under-resourced, it is logical for activists to focus on the immediate dangers facing their communities.

While the present challenges facing these communities are not insurmountable barriers to engaging them on climate change, to ignore the context of people's lives makes it less likely that a message of the urgency will resonate.

Mateo Nube said, “Our sector of racial justice and social justice organizations—who don't see the world through an environmental lens—don't see the immediacy based on how

*“We have constituents whose bathtub water can be set on fire because of the methane content.”
— Patrick Sweeney*

climate change is typically framed.” To address this disconnect, his organization conducts political education that aims to connect the immediate community issues with the global climate crisis.

Garnering people’s time and attention is a challenge for any advocacy movement. Many, if not most, people feel they have little time and energy to spare. One need not live in a community suffering dire social, economic, or environmental circumstances to feel somewhat removed from the urgency of climate change. The extra effort of engagement and outreach is a matter of degrees. To many activists, the climate change movement has given up too easily on reaching new constituencies, especially those who don’t currently mirror the demographics of the environmental field. The self-fulfilling prophecy is one that says: “Those people don’t care about the environment or about climate change. So we shouldn’t use our precious time and resources trying to engage them.”

And yet, significant data tell us those untapped constituencies are more likely to support strong climate policies than those already engaged. And those suffering the most from current energy and environmental policies have the most to gain. There is a compelling argument for rethinking who is worthy of engagement.

Urgency can be a set-up for exacerbating privilege

The time pressure of climate change can exacerbate the power dynamics within progressive movements. Environmental justice organizations often lack the staffing and access to information and networks that larger nonprofits take for granted. Urgency also privileges an action orientation that can come at the expense of building longer-term, sustainable partnerships, particularly among groups who are not familiar with each other and who bring different perspectives to potential collaborations.

“One of the issues that make this climate work really different than some of the other issues I’ve worked on, is this frame of immediacy,” said Angela Johnson Mezaros. “It’s really dynamic, fast-moving, high-paced policy-making which makes it another level of challenge for organizations that are small, underfunded, and otherwise under-resourced, without access to decision-makers and information that is useful and relevant.”

Torri Estrada agreed: “Climate change is moving very quickly. The scale of the problem is immense so it’s not geared to local actions but to national and global power. It’s hard for folks working at the grassroots to scale up. At best, we’re only scaled up to the state level, in some cases. It’s a difficult proposition to build infrastructure and capacity to work at the state level, not to mention the national or international levels.”

“The barriers are two-fold,” Estrada explained. “The big issue is how much time it takes for folks on the ground to articulate their own analysis and to carry some influence and weight in the public arena.”

ron davis believes that large, powerful organizations can use immediacy as an excuse to avoid building strong links with grassroots movements. He points out the dangers of such an approach: “We have to take the time to do it right or we will hurry up and do it wrong.”

Jihan Gearon added, “All we hear is that we need a climate change bill now. Now, now, now. But building true support at the grassroots takes time.”

Hashim Benford of the Miami Workers Center said, “The mainstream conception is that we can build [a climate change movement] together on equal footing. If we moved forward together, we’d all have equal access. But before we can do that, there needs to be some deliberateness about the leadership of women and communities of color. The idea of a green economy has to be deeply based in a philosophy of social justice and we have to acknowledge the injustice of the past and the current imbalances of power, access, and funding.”

“The idea of a green economy has to be deeply based in a philosophy of social justice and we have to acknowledge the injustice of the past and the current imbalances of power, access, and funding.”

— Hashim Benford

National climate coalitions rarely have more than symbolic representation of partners working on environmental and social justice, isolating those who participate. “We need a different table, a different room, not just adding one person to the table,” said Penn Loh.

Madeline Janis concurred, “Big tables are a waste of time. Getting a seat at the table is not the most productive exercise.”

Sustaining a stronger integration of climate change and environmental justice will require the acknowledgment and resolution of two distinct movement cultures, their norms, practices, and traditions. Among the issues flagged by interviewees, the difference in how tasks and relationships are addressed and prioritized is perceived to be a significant barrier.

One interviewee said, “There are two different styles and cultures. For example, if you have a general discussion, the mainstream folks won’t show up. A specific policy does bring mainstream folks but it doesn’t bring the EJ folks who need process, to discuss structure and power.”

Decision-making itself is very different. Said Yuki Kidokoro, “Grassroots groups are much more process-oriented and democratic.” Many environmental justice organizations are membership-based groups that actively engage their members in organizational decision-making. With a direct constituency to whom they may answer to daily, ideas need to be vetted, decisions often include an array of members and staff, and differences of opinion have been considered. Conversely, relatively few national environmental organizations have members who are as actively engaged and who need to be included in as many facets of their work.

Richard Moore of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice said, “A lot of the mainstream groups don’t want to deal with process, but process is part of the work to build a true partnership. EJ and mainstream are at different extremes. Most [environmental groups] are not accountable” to members to whom they have to answer on a daily basis.

The paradox of scale

One facet of the dominant frame on climate change is the emphasis on its global scale. Environmental justice activists recognize the global frame by working to bring community impact into the picture. They see local connections to the global phenomena as central to engagement strategies and policy-making solutions.

To view climate change, solely, as a global issue “erases communities,” said Angela Johnson Mezaros. “If everything is global, there are no local impacts to worry about. Carbon trading doesn’t change who is going to get impacted and who’s not. That doesn’t work for us. Since carbon is a global pollutant, we don’t have to worry about building a power plant in someone’s community? Ten power plants are better than fifteen? We say that we should stop building fossil fuel plants and choosing which communities can suffer.”

In this regard, environmental justice activists disagree with the perspective on scale that often confronts them. “I was on a phone with a national organization and I said, ‘Climate has impacts on low-income communities of color,’” said Johnson Mezaros. “I was told, ‘How can you say that? Carbon is a global emission. There are no local impacts of climate change. It’s a weird abstract.’”

“Their policies don’t touch the ground,” she said, referring to the approach of traditional climate activists. “And we are here on the ground.”

“Our work is shifting and we want to make new connections,” said Eveline Shen. “Climate has to be on our radar as a reproductive justice organization because women will be deeply impacted by climate change. When people say, ‘Oh, this is just about reducing emissions’ that makes communities invisible, and there is a lack of gender, race and class analysis that further puts climate change into a silo, as an issue.”

“There are two different styles and cultures. For example, if you have a general discussion, the mainstream folks won’t show up. A specific policy does bring mainstream folks but it doesn’t bring the EJ folks who need process, to discuss structure and power.”

— Interviewee

The strategy of most environmental justice organizations is to address global issues through the power of local policy and organizing. Cleaning up global trade is one example. “When you think about local, you think small,” said Madeline Janis of the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy. “But when you think about global trade and logistics, you think big. But [local and global] are the same. In the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports, all of that trade goes through surrounding communities. Global trade is significantly about local decision-making.”

International and national climate policy eventually boils down to local impact and implementation. The intent of a policy can be undermined based on its local implementation. Environmental justice activists can be an invaluable resource in making the connection with policy makers and the public. They can relay information in both directions. Pointing to the current recession, caused in large part by the financial sector, Cecil Corbin-Mark said, “In an era where we have so little financial literacy, why would you rest the most challenging issue of the 21st century on an economic strategy—cap-and-trade—that so few people understand and whose design in legislation fails to cap carbon fast enough?”

Said Pamela Dashiell, “I understand that the language used in crafting policy and bills is different than language to connect to people, but I see groups like ours being able to bridge that gap. We can bring home to policymakers what justice means on climate and bring to the people the knowledge that will generate support” for climate policies.

*“I understand that the language used in crafting policy and bills is different than language to connect to people, but I see groups like ours being able to bridge that gap. We can bring home to policymakers what justice means on climate and bring to the people the knowledge that will generate support” for climate policies.
— Pamela Dashiell*

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At a minimum, these challenges embedded in current approaches of the environmental justice and climate change movements must be acknowledged and fully understood in order for fruitful collaborations to become a reality in the future. Although the lion’s share of the power and resources in progressive climate advocacy and policy-making is held by large environmental organizations, many believe these organizations will not win the dramatic changes necessary to achieve climate stabilization without a broader coalition, including the support of people of color and low-income communities. Importantly, if one facet of sound policy making is the direct engagement of those most likely to be affected, an exclusionary process is inefficient and bankrupt.

For example, Congress may enact cap-and-trade, despite significant concerns that it will exacerbate pollution in already burdened communities. This would likely be perceived as a victory for climate change. But regardless of whether cap-and-trade becomes law, a host of additional measures will need to be enacted across society and a mono-cultural climate change movement is likely to accomplish a more narrow set of goals that serves the perspectives of the people who are engaged.

True credibility requires authentic engagement. It is incumbent on the organizations with the resources and perceived authority on climate to step out of their comfort zones and engage environmental justice activists and constituencies who can bring different knowledge and assets to shift the trajectory of climate change.

The industries that benefit from the existing fossil fuel economy will always have more money to fight political and regulatory battles. Equity is not only congruent with progressive values, it may be the issue that tilts the balance of political power. “The [climate change] movement needs to do more solid opposition research on themselves. They’d find out that if you don’t figure out equity, the other side will. The other side will go after you. We are already seeing people of color chambers of commerce being asked to say climate change legislation is bad for small business. They’re saying ‘hold off on all of this peripheral climate

stuff,” said one interviewee. If climate policies are formulated without equity in mind, the backlash from implementation that harms the people and communities most at risk could set back environmental and climate advocacy for years.

The climate change movement’s biggest counterforce could be the energetic engagement of constituencies from across the spectrum of U.S. society. This strength in diversity could defuse the perception that environmentalists are a narrow, easily marginalized, out-of-touch elite. It would support their work to make policy solutions not only equitable but also transformative, creating positive economic and environmental ripple effects throughout society.

Madeline Janis said, “EJ groups have tremendous assets. Real people with huge passion. That is the most important resource of all, in any campaign: passionate people who are directly impacted who are bringing their wisdom to the table. It’s enormously significant, not to be scoffed at.”

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— Madeline Janis*

Barriers of Culture and History

2

An authentic partnership between the environmental justice and climate change movements must be grounded in a shared belief that neither movement alone can maximize its impact, achieve its political goals, and connect to issues outside its traditional realms of expertise without the other. A successful partnership between these two movements also requires negotiating different world views and addressing a history of stressful interactions. Add the urgency for addressing crises facing communities and the necessity of responding quickly to lower carbon emissions, and the current state of dissonance between the two movements is not surprising.

Successful partnerships require a clear and shared agreement that the investment of the time and energy is worth it. Both partners must believe that they have something substantial to gain so that they are willing to endure the inevitable conflicts, miscommunication, and challenges that arise.

Forging successful collaborations is challenging, at any time. Whether it's two people in life-long partnership or two organizations attempting to collaborate on a specific project, successful relationships require significant investment and sustenance. The parties need to be clear about their expectations of each other. They need to communicate, regularly. Engagement skills, not least of all the ability to give and take feedback, need to be honed. Over time, adjustments need to be made as new agreements and norms are negotiated.

There are immense challenges to collaboration between environmental justice activists and the environmentalists who lead the climate change movement. They come from different worlds, have different agendas, set different priorities, and use different processes. Obstacles to collaboration include a lack of familiarity, trust, and comfort with each other, both as individuals and organizations; the perception that environmentalists are condescending to community activists; and the existence of significant disparities in access to powerful players and funding.

The history of the environmental justice and environmental movements includes joint campaigns that have faltered and the legacy of unacknowledged and unresolved conflicts. Importantly, the movements have yet to have a frank, shared, sustained dialogue about the roles of race and racism in preventing fruitful collaboration between them. These barriers must be acknowledged and understood before they can be overcome.

Collaboration in the progressive context

Many progressive movements operate in silos. Organizations, leaders, and activists may know each other very well within each silo, but they venture out onto the farm less frequently. The

specificity of movements and issues can create fiefdoms where depth is sacrificed for breadth, reducing the opportunity for cross-fertilization of ideas and networks.

In 2007, the Tides Foundation conducted a scoping study as part of planning for ECO (Environmental Equity Community Opportunity), an initiative aimed at supporting work at the intersection of environmental protection, economic opportunity, social justice and democracy. The study found that “collaboration in progressive movements is the exception, not the rule.”²⁹

For environmental justice activists and climate change advocates, the balkanization within progressive movements is exacerbated by race and class segregation in the United States. The racial demographics of staff and board members of environmental and conservation movements do not mirror the demographics of the United States generally, or the civilian workforce specifically.³⁰ In progressive movements where many nonprofit organizations offer unpaid internships to individuals with master’s degrees as a “foot in the door,” there is an additional socioeconomic barrier that feeds this status quo. Conversely, the environmental justice movement is comprised primarily of people of color and low-income individuals. The grassroots authenticity of the movement is grounded in the leadership’s place within the communities they serve, rather than in external credentials.

While there are certainly environmental justice activists with Ivy League degrees, the social and professional networks between the two movements rarely overlap. “We just don’t know each other. That is a big part of it,” said Robby Rodriguez, describing the lack of networks and trust that could connect environmental justice and climate change. Cecil Corbin-Mark concurred, “We haven’t had a common circle of communication.”

The “R” word

In their ECO planning study, the Tides Foundation determined that “race is a massive challenge and a significant, if not the most significant, barrier to collaboration. Race is a major conundrum and area of confusion to many otherwise-savvy white activists and practitioners.”

The report went on to state:

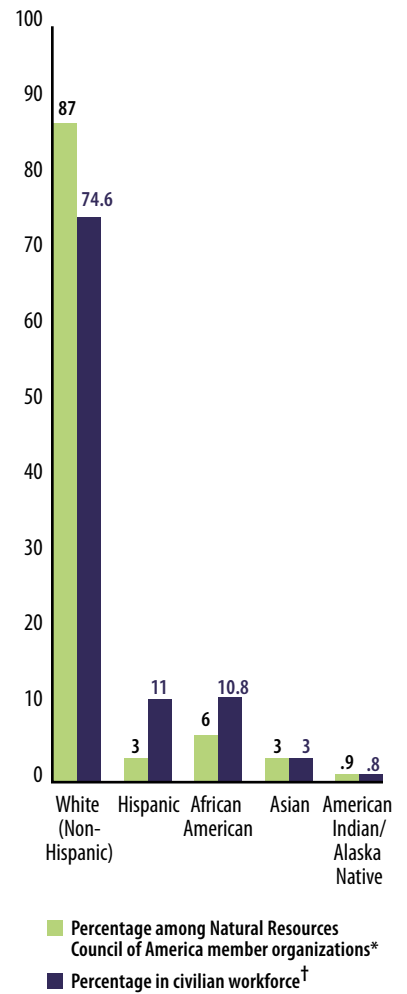
The environmental field was named, specifically, as an example of a progressive area with low levels of collaboration and diversity.

[ECO interviewees said:] “Environmentalists too often ask for support from other movements without being willing to give support. They have alienated everyone from farmers to civil rights organizations . . . they are more comfortable going to ‘do good’ on behalf of people affected by environmental problems rather than checking in with them first, or working in concert with them.”

Many interviewees—from both outside and within the environmental movement—criticized the environmental field for its lack of collaboration skills and diversity; for its “inability to make new friends and keep them.” According to our participants, environmentalists have created mistrust among other progressive constituencies, and are viewed as extremely siloed, particularly in the most traditional arenas of environmental work.³¹

In the United States, we live in a culture where diversity is part of our public dialogue. But our discussions and analysis of power and the dynamics of difference rarely do more

Figure 3: Employment by Race and Hispanic Origin in General Population versus Environmental Organizations



Sources: *Robert G. Stanton, “Environmental Stewardship for the 21st Century: Opportunities and Actions for Improving Cultural Diversity in Conservation Organizations and Programs,” report for the Natural Resources Council of America, 2002.
†2000 U.S. Census.

than skim the surface. To many, diversity is a phenomenon between individuals: Are two people nice to each other, even though they are different?

We don't readily discuss the innumerable and complex ways in which race plays out at every level of society. While the mainstream media eagerly espoused a "post-racial" era ushered in by the election of Barack Obama, to many people of color, race is still a factor not only in interpersonal encounters but also in the continued existence of systemic barriers and significant racial disparities.

Racism in the 21st century is often opaque, subtle, and passive. While there are certainly racists who are blatantly offensive and intentionally discriminatory, people of color frequently experience acts they perceive to be racist by the hands of well-intentioned people. Discrimination and bias can creep into interactions despite the espoused progressive values of organizations, and individuals within them, who believe they are part of a larger political constituency that supports social justice or at least doesn't thwart it.

Many white activists make an implicit assumption that good intentions and progressive values should immunize them, to some degree, to critiques of racism. When they engage with people of color, many of them believe that race can and should be ignored, that "color blindness" is the goal, not realizing that they themselves are being perceived both as individuals and as representatives of a privileged group. At the same time, some of their behaviors belie their espoused values. They may be dismissive or condescending. They may make assumptions about the credibility, education, and temperament of people of color. And, they choose to remain ignorant to how they benefit from white privilege in innumerable daily interactions, workplace situations, and in the structures of institutions.

In the end, the issue of intent is almost moot. If the cumulative impact of actions is negative or the end result is inequity, even the best of intentions become less relevant. Racial inequity remains embedded in institutions in the United States, from housing to health care to environmental protection to criminal justice.

The need for equal partnership

Environmental justice activists often have difficulty establishing credibility. They often feel segregated into domains where they are more easily marginalized from "real" climate work. Many interviewees spoke of times when their expertise had been labeled as the "diversity issue," strictly limited to bringing perspectives on environmental justice or on behalf of their group of people of color. At conferences, they are asked to speak on panels on environmental justice and indigenous issues, for example, but not on legislative initiatives or policy options. They often have to fight for opportunities to speak about the meat of climate change content. "It's the assumption that we are separate, dealing with our own little thing, and don't have value to add to the general policy discussion," Jihan Gearon said.

Environmental justice activists do not feel that they're treated as equal partners on climate change. "Sometimes, it's a tone and the patronizing attitudes, not just the words," said Pamela Dashiell. "And it really doesn't help to pat somebody on the head."

"You may get a 20-minute lecture on the basics of [climate change] and the long-term implications of it with the assumption that (1) you know nothing, and (2) that the longer and louder they talk, that's going to change someone's mind. That's annoying and off-putting," Dashiell added.

According to Dashiell, at times, environmentalists' reaction to different opinions or questions about new approaches can be: "That's impossible or that's the incorrect way to think." Another interviewee said that some environmentalists are guilty of "not listening in

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a meeting to other ideas. Not taking the legitimacy of the expertise that other people have. Thinking they know everything because they know an environmental issue.”

“There is a feeling or assumption that Native people or people of color who live in impoverished communities aren’t smart enough to come up with real solutions to our energy and climate problems,” said Jihan Gearon.

Despite their significantly greater resources in staff, funding, and certain areas of expertise, environmentalists are often perceived as being unwilling to share resources with environmental justice organizations. Interviewees stated that outsiders often ask environmental justice groups to take on various tasks without providing any additional resources. This behavior is perceived as not only unfair but also arrogant, as if environmental justice organizations should feel lucky to be working with these national organizations, happily taking on additional burdens.

Antonio Diaz said, “We had this experience a few years ago. A group approached us about doing some community education for folks to switch their light bulbs. It’s not what we do, but it could have been incorporated. They wanted to target the Mission [neighborhood in San Francisco] and reach the Latino community. We said, ‘We’d consider partnering and we know you got a grant so we could figure out what it would cost for us to do this, together.’ As soon as we said that, it went nowhere. They thought, as a local group, we’d just take it on for free. But it’s not as if we can just designate our staff to work on a project for nothing.”

Another problem cited in interviews is the fact that local activists often feel overwhelmed by outsiders who form a temporary partnership to work on a specific initiative and then leave the local community to deal with the residual effects. These larger, often national, organizations typically draw significant attention from the media and elected officials and wield their power and visibility in ways that aren’t always consistent with the aims of local groups.

Yuki Kidokoro said, “Large environmental groups are in the position to use their power, but they are not the ones left in the community. They were willing to negotiate a polluting power plant because they don’t live here. ‘You might not get anything you want,’ they said if we didn’t negotiate. But we were willing to risk it. We fought for a long time. They have a lot more clout. The nature of their work is that they play. They negotiate and compromise, without being accountable to those impacted. And, at the end of the day, who breathes that air? It’s us.” Despite criticism and pressure to compromise from environmental groups, in the end, Kidokoro’s group succeeded in blocking the power plant and is close to preventing another one.

Lack of integration of community-based approaches

According to interviewees, some climate change groups seem to disparage community-based work rather than considering how different approaches could be complementary. “We frame climate change in terms of impacted communities—what the facilities look like, health impacts, access to health or water or jobs. Reflected back to us, we are told that all we care about is local impacts and since carbon is global, our focus is misplaced, at best, or irrelevant, at worst,” said Angela Johnson Mezaros.

The disrespect of community-based approaches does more than offend local groups; it wastes local resources by ignoring the connections and expertise of environmental justice organizations. “A [climate] group hired 200 people to do grassroots outreach in states. Why not partner with groups already on the ground, people who come from these communities, who know organizing? It’s just stupid to parachute in,” said Patrick Sweeney.

“This is a huge mistake for building long-term, sustainable change. We may end up with pyrrhic victories that are reversed tomorrow. Not being able to build the long-term capacity of the movement is such a waste. You’d think [progressive movements] would learn.”

Angela Johnson Mezaros points out a related dilemma. Initiatives that may be seen as having a generally positive environmental impact may have harmful results for the communities where they are located. An example is recycling. “Why are our communities at the butt end of the good things that have to happen? Like recycling facilities that make residents’ noses bleed from glass shards? This not what it means to have equal access to the benefits.”

The “bubble” described by many activists is the everyday environment of many environmental advocates. It is comprised of comfortable salaries and offices, and colleagues who “look a lot like you” and who are oftentimes working on issues “at 30,000 feet.” This daily context is in stark contrast to organizing on the streets of communities where diesel trucks rumble day and night, pollution is something you see and taste, and the homeless and unemployed are neighbors as familiar as coworkers. The emotional energy necessary to sustain community work is fed by a passion for change, but it can be exhausting.

Environmental justice activists recognize that the scope of environmental injustice and the challenges facing struggling communities can be overwhelming to people accustomed to working on a national scale. True engagement with a community means taking on a wide spectrum of issues, up close. “EJ is transformative work, but it’s really hard. It’s not nine-to-five. It’s involvement at a deep level, dealing with internalized oppression, all that converges in this movement. It is tough stuff,” said Leslie Fields.

Tokenism rather than true inclusion

In the name of diversity and constituency expansion, mostly white organizations have sponsored climate advocacy events for people of color. Conspicuously absent are environmental justice activists who could bring to these events long-standing networks and expertise on climate and differential impact. Bringing in seemingly random people of color “who knew nothing about climate change and just giving them the organization’s talking points” smacks of tokenism. After a last-minute, half-hearted invitation to one of those meetings, one interviewee said, “It was the biggest slap in the face I’ve felt in all of my interactions” with environmental groups.

“We get a lot of folks calling to ask, ‘Can you find us a rural Alaskan native person?’” said Shawna Larson Carmen. “But getting a person to speak on behalf of your project or campaign is one thing, really supporting the leadership of those folks is another.”

Environmental justice activists have discovered, at the last minute, that major climate change events were happening in their own backyard without their engagement. “There is a lack of intersection between local EJ work and local climate work,” said Richard Moore. If there are only two people of color participating in a meeting of 50 people that is being held across the street from a major environmental justice organization, someone should take notice and ask, “What’s wrong with this picture?” he added.

In the perception of some activists of color, racism shows up in potential allies’ reactions to them. “I’m black. Apparently, all I have to do is string together a set of coherent sentences and I hear, ‘Wow, that Angela is really smart!’” said Johnson Mezaros. Regardless of the intentions behind these seemingly neutral comments, the cumulative experience of many people of color leads them to question the racial assumptions and stereotypes potential partners bring to these kinds of encounters. “What did you think was going to happen? I’d be really stupid and mean? Someone you couldn’t talk to?” she asked.

The “bubble” described by many activists is the everyday environment of many environmental advocates. It is comprised of comfortable salaries and offices, and colleagues who “look a lot like you” and who are oftentimes working on issues “at 30,000 feet.”

Leslie Fields said, “A lot of the race and class barriers come from people just not being comfortable outside their bubbles. There is real fear, outright fear of the other. No one wants to make a mistake.”

Robby Rodriguez said, “In terms of race, we all have triggers and a lot of that has to do with a lack of trust. Building trust is important, especially when the stakes are so high, and we don’t have it.”

Because these episodes have taken place, repeatedly, over many years, some environmental justice leaders have grown weary. “It’s not our job to educate white folks about race and we’re not going to exhaust our limited resources” taking on that burden or reminding them that a meeting is shaped by who is in the room, said Richard Moore.

To many in the environmental justice movement, bringing up issues of race, class, and power is like the burden of Sisyphus, the protagonist of the Greek myth who was forced to roll a boulder up a steep hill, only to have it roll down so he could roll it up again. There is immense frustration in raising the same issues and naming the same dynamics, over and over. At the same time, they are often maligned for being overly sensitive or stuck on this “race issue” in a dynamic similar to what other subordinated groups experience when they flag discrimination or disparate impact, intentional or not.

Change is possible

Refusal to engage in self-reflection and dialogue about issues of race and class inhibits productive relationships in progressive movements. Mainstream environmental activists need to acknowledge that many environmental justice activists may perceive them to be remote, self-protective, and unwilling to engage in the analysis of race and class. They need to address this perception head-on by examining their own motives and behaviors, and by truly listening to concerns of people of color. White people need to accept that what may seem, to them, to be isolated or insignificant incidents are to people of color part of larger pattern of behavior and discrimination.

One interviewee stated her belief that environmental justice activists can help climate change activists who inadvertently alienate poor communities and people of color. She said, “Without meaning to, people just end up consulting each other, folks they already know. From the outside, that can look like you’re excluding people. So you have to make the effort to reach outside of your networks.”

According to ron davis, until environmentalists and environmental justice activists engage in an open discussion about race, class, and power, historical tensions will keep these movements from working together. Cecil Corbin-Mark said, “To create the common agendas that we are working towards requires a lot of confronting and acknowledging of the past. We have to navigate away from that and not drown, by figuring out how to work together.”

“We need to have some shared level of understanding about the role of race, class and oppression in the context of the various progressive movements in the United States. If we had a framework, we could have conversations using the same paradigm. I’m not talking about apples while you’re talking about oranges,” said ron davis.

Robby Rodriguez added, “I would hope that it would be easy to agree that none of us want the outcomes of our work to further promote racial discrimination. That whatever we end up doing or deciding, it will not make racial discrimination worse. We should all want to use climate change policy as an avenue to alleviate racial discrimination, but in order to do that, we need to spend time understanding what happens when race is not considered

“In terms of race, we all have triggers and a lot of that has to do with a lack of trust. Building trust is important, especially when the stakes are so high, and we don’t have it.”
— Robby Rodriguez

in the design and implementation of policies, how the unintended consequence of racial discrimination is a very real likelihood.”

Given their power, the oldest, most established environmental groups bear a responsibility for confronting racism and classism. Yuki Kidokoro said, “Because they have a lot of power, they have to give up something to work with grassroots groups who are working toward different but connected goals. That’s the way toward better relationships, moving beyond the best of intentions.” Robby Rodriguez agreed, “They need to be intentional about addressing issues of diversity within their organizations. They need to not be defensive when they get called on stuff.”

* * *

The barriers embedded in the culture and histories of the environmental justice movement and the environmental field will remain, elephants in an empty room, until it is clear that partnership is critical to the viability and success of each movement.

“The problem is, the mainstream believes it has enough power to ignore all of these concerns,” said one interviewee.

By giving the concerns of others respect and credibility, by actively demonstrating that they want to engage in full partnership, rather than insisting on sole control of the agenda, the climate change movement can gain far more than the goodwill of environmental justice activists. They can gain insight into, and a wealth of resources from, a world that is often closed to them.

Despite these entrenched barriers, divisions can be overcome. When organizations truly commit to partnership and engagement, progress can be made.

Richard Moore spoke of an ongoing, long-term partnership between the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice and the Environmental Law Institute. “They actually called us and said, ‘We’d like to sit down and talk about what we could do together,’” he said. “Seventeen years later, we’ve produced publications, done trainings on alternative dispute resolution for EPA regions and representatives from grassroots groups. Jointly, we created the curriculum, decided on the faculty together, and decide how resources are going to be spent.”

Nia Robinson of the Environmental Justice Climate Change Initiative gave an example of a colleague, someone “extremely brilliant on climate change” who partners by sharing expertise and using her influence and connections to provide a platform for environmental justice activists to speak for themselves on critical issues. “She will say, ‘You should do it rather than choosing to take the lead and all of the credit,’” said Robinson. “I wish more people functioned that way.”

Pamela Dashiell described the significant partnerships her organization has forged with national groups on the green rebuilding of the Ninth Ward in New Orleans. “There was a learning curve for us, learning how to work together. It depends on the people and we have worked with some wonderful people. Occasionally, you have to work through the attitudes of some people or even haranguing, but you keep your eye on creating the best outcome for the community. Environmental groups have been our staunchest, most immediate, most supportive allies and we would be nowhere near where we are without them.”

To many in the environmental justice movement, bringing up issues of race, class, and power is like the burden of Sisyphus, the protagonist of the Greek myth who was forced to roll a boulder up a steep hill, only to have it roll down so he could roll it up again.

Building a Movement for Everyone

Strategies for Moving Forward

3

Environmental justice is evolving as a framework for social change in the early 21st century. Within that evolution lie significant opportunities for integrating climate change. Many of the largest environmental justice organizations in the United States are clarifying and expanding their vision and programs. They are expanding their issue areas and skill sets and forming new networks with growing sophistication. At the same time, climate change activists are increasingly diversifying their strategies for movement building and beginning to integrate new people, communities, and constituencies under the climate banner.

These converging forces and the timing of the climate crisis could be an extraordinary opportunity. Taking full advantage of this opportunity will require a long-term investment strategy, including new sources of funding. Significant capacity needs to be built for grassroots, community-based organizations to expand their roles and areas of expertise beyond their traditional focus. While organizing will always be a core strategy of environmental justice, activists and funders alike identified the need to magnify the movement's impact and pointed to examples of organizations and coalitions that are taking on new roles. New skills need to be developed to help climate activists build authentic and effective partnerships with the environmental justice movement.

In interviews, environmental justice activists and funders identified six areas for building the capacity and leadership of the environmental justice movement on climate:

Strategy 1: Increase community groups' capacity and access to scientific data, communications expertise, and economic analysis

Credibility is a cornerstone of influence. To translate the on-the-ground experience of communities working on an array of climate-related campaigns, environmental justice groups need rigorous research and scientific data to test new approaches and bring them to scale. They need a deeper economic analysis. And they need the ability to communicate their work to specific constituencies and in larger policy arenas.

Many activists and funders see the need for supplementing the logical organizing focus of the environmental justice movement. "The balance is a little off when there are 20 organizers and no scientists involved in a campaign," said one interviewee. "People say, 'We can't afford someone from a technical background,' but two fewer organizers might make sense."

"For EJ groups to build internal research and communications capacity, they have to prioritize and plan for it," said Madeline Janis.

Credibility is a cornerstone of influence. To translate the on-the-ground experience of communities working on an array of climate-related campaigns, environmental justice groups need rigorous research and scientific data to test new approaches and bring them to scale.

Scientific data

While many universities and nonprofits have partnered with community groups in the last twenty years, significant gaps still exist. On climate, an area where many environmental justice groups see the need to build credibility, scientific and technical support is crucial. Pat Sweeney said, “To make an impact on climate change, we need university and research connections supporting our campaigns. For our work, it is important to link a local issue such as water quality degradation from mining and translate that into a policy, with scientific credibility.”

“We recognize that we could use more research and data from the scientific community to document the impacts on vulnerable communities and validate the anecdotal information that we have. We need research aligned with our organizing to take our campaigns to the next level, if we are going to be effective in shaping the parameters of the climate change debate,” said Cecil Corbin-Mark.

Complicating the need for technical expertise is the context of growing corporate influence and funding of environmental research in multiple arenas. For example, activists report that they are finding it increasingly difficult to find researchers at land grant/agricultural institutions who are not agribusiness funded.

“Academic freedom is a joke when people are on the payroll of big business. They’re no longer out to help the public interest and common good,” said Patrick Sweeney. “When I first started organizing, we had access to rural sociologists who helped translate and frame our work and put it into a research report, with peer review. This made a credible case for organizing that lead to successes. Communities have lost access to our university systems and their resources.”

Communications expertise

“We need an old and new media literacy campaign for EJ. We need to counter the messages out there [on climate]. I’d love to spend significant resources on national ad campaigns to paint another picture of this story,” Cecil Corbin Mark said. A wider array of messages would appeal to many people who currently believe climate is not “their thing.”

“The folks who are best able to articulate the direct connection between climate and daily realities don’t have the resources, the communications strategy, or the relationships to make their voices heard,” said Torri Estrada.

Grassroots organizers, overwhelmed with their work, often feel they don’t have the luxury to tell the stories of their work and making explicit links to climate change. “We need documentation, someone listening to grassroots people and their issues, helping them tell their stories. There are many communities working on climate change, just not by that name,” Richard Moore said. “They need to be brought in.”

Leslie Fields believes the environmental justice community is poised to play the crucial role of making the case for climate change’s relevance to communities of color. “We need to serialize accessible climate change stories in local alternative and ethnic papers,” she said. “We need to get on Black, Latino, and Asian-American radio shows and write articles for *Ebony* and *Hispanic Business* and follow the lead of groups that have [language] translation” of all of their online content.

Yuki Kidokoro stressed that activists need to get information to the public about the justice component of climate and environmental initiatives. “If you don’t see the justice piece, you don’t see the whole picture,” she said. To many constituencies, the justice component is specifically what will pique their interest and spur their engagement on climate change.

“We recognize that we could use more research and data from the scientific community to document the impacts on vulnerable communities and validate the anecdotal information that we have. We need research aligned with our organizing to take our campaigns to the next level.”
— Cecil Corbin-Mark

Resources for sophisticated polling are core to the vision interviewees articulated for building communications capacity. “We need to invest in strategists and pollsters to add to our organizing. We need demonstrable polls that document what people in our communities are telling us” rather than ceding the framing of these issues to others, said Cecil Corbin-Mark.

For some environmental justice groups, communications expertise may not necessarily be structured as it is in many large nonprofits, where one or more staff members devote their time solely to communications. Interviewees mentioned the model of communications as a form of technical assistance. Communications experts can help organizations create a communications plan and provide training to staff and volunteers, or one staffer could work on behalf of multiple organizations. Eventually, multiple groups would build their capacity, but the choice need not be a separate communications team for each organization or nothing at all.

Economic analysis

Economic research on climate and other issues was flagged as a specific area of expertise that needs to be extended. “We need to commission economic research to have solid evidence about our approaches to climate change,” said Cecil Corbin-Mark.

If part of climate change organizing is understanding who wins and who loses, from the policy choices we make as a society, the opportunity to increase economic and financial literacy directly connects to political opportunities. “There is palpable rage in this country around issues of class. It’s simmering, and occasionally comes forward, like the reaction to bonuses to executives,” said Corbin-Mark.

“Within the EJ movement, we haven’t moved far enough on the scale of having an economic analysis and critique on the root economic causes of environmental injustice and racism. We don’t have clear framing on the economic piece. It’s time to get that clear articulation,” said Penn Loh. “All we do has to be rooted in an analysis of our environmental and economic systems that have created these crises.”

“We haven’t had a viable economic alternative for the last two decades. Other countries are far more advanced. The EJ movement can contribute a piece but this is much broader than EJ,” he said.

Strategy 2: Deepen climate policy expertise and implement political strategies based on environmental justice values

Environmental justice leaders have ideas for a sophisticated policy strategy that consists of political mapping; policy development capacity, including model legislation; and educational tools specifically for policy makers, particularly at the local, regional, and state levels where they see great opportunity to impact decisions.

“If ultimately, we’re trying to change policy and impact the way the new green economy and climate change is going to unfold in our communities, our real target is policymakers,” said Roger Kim.

According to Nia Robinson, a multi-layered national environmental justice strategy on climate needs investment. “Climate is not a conversation that we can only have on a state or municipal level. The EJ movement needs a strong federal legislative strategy, one that engages in DC and district offices,” she said. This includes dedicated resources for travel to create a stronger presence for community groups in Washington, DC, and brings constituents in to educate their representatives.

“Climate is not a conversation that we can only have on a state or municipal level. The EJ movement needs a strong federal legislative strategy, one that engages in DC and district offices.”
—Nia Robinson

Robby Rodriguez suggested a tool for optimizing work at the national level. He described the concept of a policy map, designed along the lines of a traditional electoral map, but with a focus on climate change. “Where are the big decision makers on the state and national levels? Who are the key committee members? Where are the new battleground states on climate change? We need to map this information so that we can better target our resources and better connect people across states,” he said. Nia Robinson added, “We need to provide training, proactively, so people are focusing where they need to be. It boils down to district lobby days and district education days.”

“We need the resources to buy voter lists. Get them digitized into e-mail and ready for mailouts to apply pressure within our districts on how our representatives vote,” said Cecil Corbin-Mark.

“[The EJ community] needs to start where we can, city by city, state by state, building a beachhead to stand on nationally. Climate change is not that different from any other power-building strategy,” said Penn Loh. “But we have to stick to the strategy and make a long-term investment and look at a ten-year timeframe.”

The SouthWest Organizing Project is building local political power by training and developing leaders. “Over the last ten years, eight of our members won local elected office. We have inspired a growing tide of grassroots leaders who are seeking and winning seats on school boards, the county commission, the city council, and the state House of Representatives, literally changing the face of politics in New Mexico,” said Robby Rodriguez.

“We’re approaching our work differently these days. We’ve learned that we have to spend some time shifting the power to make progress on the big issues, including climate change,” he added.

To leverage the influence and decision making of their political allies, environmental justice activists need model legislation and educational materials designed for busy policy makers. To Roger Kim, the current policy vacuum in the environmental justice community points out the need to create a policy shop based on environmental justice values. “One of our top priorities [of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN)], right now, is to create a platform for creating principled policies for just, healthy communities. We need a tool, grounded in our principles, for policies that promote healthy land uses and green economic development. Not justice as an add-on. Not ‘figure out the justice part later,’ but justice at the center.” Kim plans to use APEN’s tool to train and develop new leaders and members in the Bay area, and eventually to share the lesson across California.

Penn Loh concurs. “It’s going to be very easy to get trapped into fighting within that old framework, the debates we’ve seen before, trying to add equity to something that didn’t have it in the first place. Something is going to happen, so what crumbs can we pick up? ‘Yes, the power plant is going in your community, but we’ll build you a school.’”

“Instead, we need to encourage and promote the discussion of the broader frame. What are some real elements of an alternative economic vision that we can subscribe to with other social justice partners? This is the biggest challenge ahead for the so-called progressive movement, including on climate change,” he said.

These approaches mesh with the needs flagged by Rodriguez. “We need a policy kit. Some policy resources exist but they’re not written for our audience, based on our values,” he said.

The environmental justice community is building its expertise on policy. Cecil Corbin-Mark referred to the national Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change coordinated by WE ACT for Environmental Justice: “The purpose is to bring the environmental justice community together to examine all of the policies out there and how they impact the EJ community. We created a space to learn about climate change and the evolving body

of knowledge on who is impacted.” Initiatives similar to the Forum need to be developed to serve a broad array of organizations, of differing sizes, across the environmental justice movement in order to bring more groups into climate work.

Pamela Dashiell stressed the importance of increasing activists’ access to policy-making entities. “In Louisiana, our reps are not really available to us and often champion things—economic development initiatives like an industrial canal project—at odds with the good of the community and people,” she said. She feels that activists need to be more involved in writing public policy. She points out that to be effective at this level, activists need to “learn another language” and cited the example of working for wetlands restoration and engaging “groups from four different states and of varying levels of expertise—everyone from contractors to professors of advanced hydrology. Even being able to ask for what you need in a way that is understood is sometimes difficult.”

As part of their increased focus on climate-related advocacy, many environmental justice groups are forging new strategic partnerships. “We are connecting beyond the same-old, broadening the climate movement from Black and Latino groups to religious organizations,” said Nia Robinson.

“We have to continue to expand education into the places where our communities turn for support. In churches, we can make the linkage between spiritual texts and our responsibilities on climate change. The precepts are already embedded,” said Cecil Corbin-Mark.

“It’s the new and unusual partnerships that will enable us to grow into this work on climate,” said Roger Kim.

Strategy 3: *Expand creation and distribution of climate justice materials*

In recent years, new educational materials on climate justice have been created, but grassroots groups still struggle to find information and materials that suit their needs. Antonio Diaz said, “We need something to demystify climate change.”

To Heeten Kalan of the New World Foundation, materials are where the rubber hits the road. “Every organization has to ask itself, ‘Are you really making a connection to climate change, explicitly, with your constituency? How are you doing it? Do you have a two-pager? Are your organizers on the buses and subways talking about it? Are you educating your staff?’” he said.

Simplicity would go a long way, according to Angela Johnson Mezaros. “Glossaries are fine. People try to make this so complex. The dominant climate policy discourse requires that we talk about things in the most opaque way. We are drowning in opaque. This is about burning fossil fuels and who suffers. Who is going to make money and who isn’t,” she said. Leslie Fields agreed, “We need climate jargon translated into normal language.”

Activists yearn for climate change fact sheets and materials on climate change from a progressive lens with social justice values embedded in them. “Right now, the city councils, county commissions, they’re getting their advice from somebody else. And in New Mexico, we have a 60-day session in the state legislature and some people will admit that they’re undereducated on issues they’re making decisions on,” said Richard Moore.

Even when materials exist, lack of funding often limits dissemination. Materials created in one community are not yet easily accessible across the movement. Notably, the Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative (EJCCI) curricula explain climate science and covers domestic and international policy. “It’s all popular education and includes breakout groups, activities, games. We have used it with everyone from high school and middle school

students to senior citizens,” said EJCC director Nia Robinson. “We’d love to completely update our curriculum and do a nation-wide train-the-trainer series. There is a long list of communities that it needs to get to.”

A Climate of Change: African Americans, Global Warming, and a Just Climate Policy in the U.S. is a groundbreaking, rigorously researched EJCC report on the impact of climate change on African Americans. The report evaluated policies that “would most harm or benefit African Americans—and the nation as a whole” and makes the case for the active engagement of communities of color in the fight for climate justice. The organization would like to issue similar reports on all people of color groups and translate the reports into a series of fact sheets and trainings.

Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice is developing materials to make the case that climate change is relevant to activists working on reproductive justice, women’s health, and the rights of women workers. “As a reproductive justice organization, we already play a bridging role connecting race, class, and gender in the broader social justice movement. There is a similar role we want to play in climate justice,” said Eveline Shen.

These kinds of educational materials are sorely needed as the underpinning for engaging broader constituencies on climate change. With additional resources, climate justice materials could reach and engage more people, particularly in communities who are most impacted by but least represented on climate change.

Strategy 4: Support networking and information sharing through adoption of new technologies

Environmental justice organizations are facing nearly identical challenges as they work to integrate climate change into their local programs and their broader work. The difficulty organizations face in easily exchanging information is a major hindrance to building momentum and making full use of the assets of the movement.

“Technology and connectivity are a big piece of what needs to happen. Right now, there is no place for a grassroots group to post their issue, problem, or concern to query other people in the movement. This is a major infrastructure piece that is missing,” said one interviewee. “We need a more sophisticated network model for our outreach,” added Nia Robinson.

Roger Kim said, “We need tighter, more efficient networks of groups doing this work so we can be at multiple tables at multiple scales—local, state, national levels. We have to be at all of these places at the same time to take full advantage of these opportunities. Given all of our capacity constraints, it will take stronger networks.”

“The more we can group under ‘climate justice,’ the more we can get organized. I always believe in organizing and negotiating from a position of power. That takes more coordination, not acting in lock step, but I do think we’ve hurt ourselves because we’re not as coordinated as we should be,” said Patrick Sweeney.

In addition to the remaining long-standing regional networks that have traditionally comprised the national environmental justice infrastructure, new networks are emerging to support connectivity. The Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change connects more than 35 organizations that are working at the national and regional levels on just climate policies. The Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative is a “consensus-based coalition” focusing on education of policymakers and communities on climate justice. The Right to the City is a national network supporting information-sharing via a peer-to-peer network. While fighting gentrification and the displacement of low-income people, the

“We need tighter, more efficient networks of groups doing this work so we can be at multiple tables at multiple scales—local, state, national levels.”
— Roger Kim

network links over 40 member organizations on an array of issues from housing and public health and safety to community decision-making.

Certainly, there are limits to technology, and grassroots organizing requires hands-on engagement beyond listservs, blogs, and message boards. But while the world is a-Twitter and millions are Skypeing for free, every day, the digital divide remains an obstacle and the cost efficiencies of many forms of technology are unrealized in many environmental justice organizations. While they need not abandon in-person and telephone interactions, the movement needs to utilize new technologies that would increase their ability to engage and support colleagues across distance.

Strategy 5: Acknowledge issues of scale while building expertise at multiple levels

Within the environmental justice community, there is tension between those who think the most effective approach is to focus locally and those who want to expand work at the state, national, and international levels. These tensions are based on differing strategies, philosophies, and values and grounded in limited time and resources.

The question of scale is particularly relevant now, in light of the opportunities presented by the election of Barack Obama. “There was a period, during the Clinton years, when EJ groups were playing a vocal role with the executive order [on environmental justice] and the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council. During the [George W.] Bush years, we focused on rebuilding local organizing and local and state opportunities. Now we’re seeing opportunities at multiple levels,” said Roger Kim.

Torri Estrada pointed out that some community groups do not feel comfortable working even at the state level. “They think it is disconnected from the local level where they have had so much success and where they feel a responsibility to focus. To be willing to scale up, EJ groups first need to be convinced that it is in their best interest to work on policy. Then they need time—which they don’t have—to build the capacity to do that new work. In California, EJ groups have already begun to engage more at the state level because there are a lot more legislators of color,” he said.

“There is both a necessity and a real danger of getting super-engaged in national policy,” said Mateo Nube. On one hand, he sees the opportunity to move climate change beyond just reducing carbon and on to something bigger. On the other hand, he worries that by trying to change the national discussion, EJ activists may expend precious energy that could be better spent another way.

Many interviewees advocated for moving beyond local work. “Policy is not being set at the local level. Impacts are felt locally but it’s environmental and economic state and federal policy that sets the parameters,” said Torri Estrada. To one interviewee, the relevance of climate work is in the answer to the activist’s question of “What is on the horizon that threatens our local work and how are we going to deal with it?”

“Focusing on the grassroots keeps you connected to a constituency and a base, but this is not an either/or question. No one is saying grassroots groups should do national policy at the expense of local work. But if you don’t get involved in these larger issues, you’re going to be left out and it’s going to impact your locale,” said Heeten Kalan of the New World Foundation. “There has to be a movement-wide strategy for how to play at each of the regional, state, national, and global levels.”

In the Northeast, environmental justice activists have invested significant energy on the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. “We serve on advisory committees focusing on the

resources generated from auctions and permits to ensure that communities of color receive some of those resources. We galvanize EJ partners, regionally, and keep them aware of what is happening as well as letting the decision makers, the agency folks, understand that we are here to weigh in,” said Cecil Corbin-Mark.

Penn Loh articulated the rationale for moving into the national frame while not losing sight of the local. “We should dedicate one-third or one-quarter of our time constructing green alternatives, developing a new vision based on the idea that justice and sustainability can only be achieved together. If we can do that, we can create a coherent left pole that people can really start to weave into their community organizing and advocacy,” he said. “What we really need is, unfortunately, not an answer that helps. We just need to do more. We need more people in our movement who want to connect all of the dots, from our base- building work to affecting national and international policy.”

Still, Loh cautions that environmental justice groups must be strategic about using their resources to focus on reachable goals. “If you only have 100 troops, it’s just stupid to launch a frontal assault. What are we trying to win when we engage in specific battles? We may not be able to defeat cap-and-trade and win a more fair carbon regime, but in the battle, we have to sow the seeds of our vision for sustainability and justice.”

To Madeline Janis, a winning strategy includes expanding local victories to multiple areas, building scale horizontally, not solely working from level to level. “We created a small table around a very specific idea” in two cities and developed the specific capacities needed to run a comprehensive campaign that led to a win. “Now we’re talking about master plans for ports in the rest of the country, including waste and recycling as a whole other industry relating to the environment, community, jobs, labor, transportation.”

In the end, it is unnecessary for all organizations in the environmental justice movement to work at all levels on climate change or any other issue. The key may lie in the ability of multiple organizations to establish the capacity and credibility to work at each level while connecting to partners through strong networks that are sustained across the movement.

Strategy 6: Build development capacity and better integrate environmental justice into existing funding streams

“The environmental justice movement is perhaps the most underfunded social movement in the United States.”³² Although these words were written in 2001, in *Green of Another Color*, the environmental justice movement continues to be more constrained than most nonprofits by its lack of resources. A few of the largest organizations in the movement have seen their budgets grow in recent years, but the vast majority of community-based groups have fewer than five paid staff and many still function primarily as volunteer organizations.

Overcoming the barriers of the past and identifying strategies for how the environmental justice movement can engage fully in the climate change movement are not enough. Major new funding must enable the integration of environmental justice and climate change.

“The biggest barrier is resources. Climate change resources and funding are being dumped at the top, not the bottom. This never seems to change with progressive work, and on climate change, it’s magnified. It’s mostly top-down,” said Patrick Sweeney.

“EJ funding is already miniscule,” said Angela Johnson Mezaros.

Furthermore, many environmental justice activists are concerned that foundations and philanthropists have not learned from the failure to fund grassroots mobilizing to support the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol in the U.S. Senate. “Many of us feel that is critical

“The environmental justice movement is perhaps the most underfunded social movement in the United States.”

— Green of Another Color

for broader engagement on climate change, but funders are very invested in a particular set of players,” said Cecil Corbin-Mark. For the most part, environmental justice organizations are not integrated into that mix.

When engaging with foundations, environmental justice leaders often experience similar dynamics as they do with large environmental organizations. Given the similarities in race, education, and class demographics and life experience among most program officers, philanthropic leaders, and large environmental organizations, this is not surprising. “There is a geographic, racial, cultural gap between environmental funders and EJ community,” said one interviewee.

“Funders mimic the larger public perception of issues, and justice is not central as a domestic or international climate issue. It’s always a side issue,” said Torri Estrada. “Most funders haven’t had the capacity to understand the nuances of the race and income lens. They know a lot about vehicle-miles-traveled, but don’t know a lot about environmental justice communities.”

“I was at a meeting, last year, where funders talked about climate change policy. Listening to the analysis around the table, it was clear that EJ folks and people of color needed to be there. Funders are reaping the results of a bad investment strategy. The investment must be made earlier, if they want people of color at the table for the big policy discussions,” he said. “We can’t invest for one year and expect policy outcomes. To get greenhouse gas reductions in 2020, we have to make the investment in the EJ community, now. You can’t turn on a faucet and expect instant hot water.”

At times, environmental justice leaders feel patronized by comments that they believe illustrate the bias of program officers. “We’re told, if you want funding, partner with [a national environmental group] and then we can give them money. They say they can’t give us the money directly because we wouldn’t know how to handle a large amount of money,” said one interviewee.

One significant difference between large environmental organizations and funders is the degree to which many environmental justice activists feel free to criticize them. Critical feedback is far less likely to be shared with funders who are the financial lifeline of an organization. Because they wield such power, more personal information about the impact of hurtful comments that display racial insensitivity, at the least, is virtually off-limits.

The broad scope of environmental justice becomes a barrier within the context of most foundations’ program areas. There are relatively few foundation portfolios dedicated to environmental justice, and many groups have difficulty positioning themselves into program areas. Even funders who support environmental justice often have to shoehorn a grant into their foundation’s infrastructure.

“The foundation world is siloed. We have enough problems talking about environment and health, trying to bring those two issues together. Foundations often don’t fund like that, but to us reproductive justice is a part of EJ. Chemicals impact reproductive health. But then you add climate change?” said Shawna Larson Carmen.

Despite these inherent challenges, activists have ideas for creating new funding streams for environmental justice and turning their well-honed organizing skills to the task of philanthropy.

“Most work is funded by individuals. Foundations are just one piece of funding public interest work. It would be great to build infrastructure for doing EJ work by expanding access to individual donors—large and small. People could give five to ten dollars in an Obama-like model,” said Angela Johnson Mezaros.

“We can’t invest for one year and expect policy outcomes.

To get greenhouse gas reductions in 2020, we have to make the investment in the EJ community, now. You can’t turn on a faucet and expect instant hot water.”

— Torri Estrada

Foundations that are new to climate change are an opportunity for environmental justice organizations. The environmental justice community “needs to reach new foundations with a thoughtful analysis of why justice needs to be a part of climate change,” said Torri Estrada.

If an element of social capital is who you know, bridges need to be built between the environmental justice and philanthropic communities. Existing networks need to be leveraged toward that goal. One way larger environmental organizations have supported environmental justice groups is by using their relationships with funders to influence foundations. For those who have easy access to foundations, strong relationships, and a history of funding, introducing the work of complementary organizations is a do-able step. This kind of collaboration depends on a strong value proposition for what the environmental justice movement brings.

Furthermore, the intricacies of foundation processes need to be demystified and capacity deepened for fundraising and development in the environmental justice community, if their full contributions are to be realized. In its recent *Environmental Needs Assessment Report*, the Environmental Support Center found that fundraising was the number one management priority of the 52 environmental justice groups they interviewed across the country.³³

“The foundation world is siloed. We have enough problems talking about environment and health, trying to bring those two issues together.”

— *Shawna Larson Carmen*

Conclusion

Inertia is a powerful force and human beings are creatures of habit. It will take an even more powerful force to stir a critical mass of individuals and institutions into changing our trajectory on climate change to prevent the nearly incomprehensible events currently projected.

A parallel to the shift necessary in society is a shift in progressive organizing. The comfortable, well-worn patterns within the climate change and environmental justice movements need to be shaken up. If both movements are thriving, easily achieving their goals independently, there is no need for change. While few indicators point to such success, resistance to change currently prevails. New thinking and action will be necessary for these movements to work together. Everyone will have to take risks or suffer a shared fate of failure.

“Climate change is the tree that is going to fall and kill the village. Unless you don’t like the village, you have to act,” said Heeten Kalan. “Everyone matters, unless you see yourself as an isolated piece, but that is not the case. Climate can’t be partitioned off.”

“Climate justice folks matter. Mainstream climate folks matter. Unless they are connected, that tree is coming down,” he added.

“I would love to see people talk about not just a climate crisis or climate justice crisis but a crisis of inequality and unsustainability in the same breath,” said Penn Loh.

Antonio Diaz said, “We have to recognize that we’re battling the same enemy, have the same players that are opposing our efforts. It behooves us to have a joint message and voice instead of pushing at opposite ends.”

In this new space, the environmental movement needs to respect the role of environmental justice, the concepts and the people who have fought for over twenty years, often alone or abandoned by more powerful potential allies. With relatively few resources, the environmental justice movement has built a foundation of local and neighborhood credibility and community empowerment. It has created sophisticated political education and leadership development programs that speak to and engage the people who have the most to gain from a truly just and sustainable future and the most to lose from the existing fossil fuel economy. This political force and these authentic voices have yet to be fully tapped on climate change.

“The vision behind EJ has everything to do with dealing with the climate change crisis, but EJ doesn’t get credit for that. To address the challenge of climate, you have to address racial justice, democracy, as well as environmental [issues],” said Robby Rodriguez.

“If the climate change movement is better than ever then what isn’t working? We have to acknowledge that our current base is not strong enough because a growing part of our potential base is not connected,” said one interviewee. “There are huge forces against us.

“Climate change is the tree that is going to fall and kill the village. Unless you don’t like the village, you have to act.”
— Heeten Kalan

Sustained progress—not an isolated win here or there—will mean explicitly dealing with equity issues. People have to stop running away.”

“It’s not just about trying to stop climate change. It’s about trying to use this moment, use the attention to the environmental and economic crisis to put forward bold policies about how our neighborhoods need to be different. It’s bigger than climate justice,” said Roger Kim.

In a recent speech, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson said:

Environmentalism touches every part of our lives. I want our conversations on the issues of concern to reflect that truth. Because when our conversations reflect that truth, our environmental movement can reflect our country.³⁴

Environmental justice constituencies and strategies are underutilized assets in the work to build a movement where everyone sees the relevance of climate, sees the truth that our climate impacts nearly every facet of our lives.

The theory of change conveyed by interviewees in this report is grounded in the belief that energizing a broader base of supporters and leaders is the key to creating the power shift that will make significant climate action a reality. When a wider array of people across U.S. society can articulate why they care about climate, what they are doing individually to make a difference, and start demanding how they want institutions big and small to act, more substantive change will happen. By engaging the people who are most impacted by climate, the theory is that we will address climate in a way that is not only equitable—avoiding the most harm to those already vulnerable—but also leverages climate action to meet broader economic and social goals, to finally connect the three Es of sustainability: environment, economy, and equity.

This theory may be wrong. Perhaps a technical, scientific, high-level policy strategy—one that focuses on engaging those who currently have the most power in Washington, DC— is the most effective approach. But with the stakes so high, at a minimum, shouldn’t the climate change movement diversify its tactics and commit effort to testing the feasibility of broader strategies?

“Everyone needs to take a deep breath and look at the committed, well-funded, organized opposition. We have to figure out how we do something a little bit differently than how we’ve done it,” said one interviewee.

If we fail to take risks, to overcome fears of engaging across difference, to acknowledge the history and address the barriers that have stood in the way of more effective collaboration across movements, history will hold us accountable for the legacy we leave behind. The children of today will judge us for the world they inherit, tomorrow.

“We won’t meet the moment with the ways of the past,” said Roger Kim.

The future requires a new course.

“Everyone needs to take a deep breath and look at the committed, well-funded, organized opposition. We have to figure out how we do something a little bit differently than how we’ve done it.”
— Interviewee

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www.ienearth.org

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www.laane.org

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www.newwf.org

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www.cbecal.org

Roger Kim is executive director of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network. Since 1993, APEN has worked to create a world where all people—regardless of race, class, or immigration status—have a right to a clean and healthy environment in which their communities can live, work, learn, play and thrive.

www.apen4ej.org

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www.akaction.org

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www.ace-ej.org

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www.movementgeneration.org

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www.swop.net

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www.envirorights.org

Richard Moore is executive director of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice in Albuquerque, New Mexico. SNEEJ develops and broadens collective regional strategies and perspectives on environmental degradation and other social, racial, generational, economic, and gender injustices by bringing together activists and grassroots organizations from across the Southwest, West, and border states of Mexico.

www.sneej.org

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www.ejcc.org

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www.reproductivejustice.org

Patrick Sweeney is director of the Western Organization of Resource Councils in Billings, Montana. WORC is a community organizing network of seven state organizations that includes 10,000 members and 43 local chapters that seek to achieve a democratic, sustainable and just society through community action.

www.worc.org

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