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On this MLK Day, why the fight for environmental justice is the fight that matters



The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Kenneth Hahn State Recreational Area. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

BY [ERIKA D. SMITH](#) COLUMNIST , JAN. 15, 2024 5 AM PT

Ben Jealous, the first Black executive director of the Sierra Club, couldn't make it to a recent news conference in South L.A., held in the shadow of the monument to Martin Luther King Jr. at Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area.

But if he had, I suspect he would've told the same story he told me.

"You know the great actor Louis Gossett Jr.?" he asked. "My last year at the NAACP, at the 2013 Image Awards, he said to me, 'You know, Ben, I've been in this racial justice movement my whole life, but you know, sometimes, brother, I feel like we're fighting over who's in first class.

What we should be doing is looking out the window, because the plane has fallen like 20,000 feet in the last two minutes.'"

Jealous recalled being confused.

"He said, 'The planet is dying. It doesn't matter who's in first class on a dead planet.' And that phrase, it's stuck with me for the last decade, and I just keep coming back to it."

This, Jealous explained, is why he decided that his venerable environmental organization would be among the first to support an upstart AM talk radio station in Los Angeles in its campaign to

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elevate climate change and environmental justice as priorities for people of color.

Other backers of the \$2-million campaign include the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, Metro, CalTrans, the California Endowment and the California Community Foundation.

But really, it's the vision of Tavis Smiley, [the longtime radio host and founder of KBLA 1580](#), that could help bring the voices of Black and Latino Americans, who are harmed most often by the climate crisis, more fully into policy discussions about how to solve it.

At that news conference Jealous couldn't attend, Smiley went so far as to connect the fight MLK waged for racial equality to the current fight for the future health of the planet.

"Climate is king," Smiley declared with a grin. "You see what I did there?"

While amusing, I can understand why some people might see this as a stretch. After all, Martin Luther King Jr. Day has always been a holiday dominated by discussions of fairness and freedom, and the barriers to both. Barriers of systemic racism that have left Black people on the worst rungs of the socioeconomic ladder and, as such, with little energy to deal with existential crises, because there are so many immediate ones, like housing discrimination and police brutality.

But like Gossett Jr., I'm starting to get the sinking feeling that just fighting all of these immediate racial justice fights is ultimately a little like — to extend a bad analogy even further — rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

Sure, it's important to fight the good fight against efforts to dismantle diversity, equity and inclusion programs, for example, and against banning books on Black history in public schools. But it's reasonable to wonder what good winning those fights will do if we fail to mitigate the upheaval of a rapidly changing climate that can deliver misery to all of humankind.

We've all seen the troubling surge of extreme weather and the way it has crippled or, in some cases, decimated entire communities. Just this month, climate scientists with the European Union announced that 2023 was officially Earth's hottest year on record, and, as [my Times colleague Hayley Smith reported](#), this year is likely to be even hotter.

"Our cities, our roads, our monuments, our farms — in practice, all human activities — never had to cope with a climate this warm," Carlo Buontempo, director of the EU's [Copernicus Climate Change Service](#), told reporters. "There were simply no cities, no books, agriculture or domesticated animals on this planet last time the temperature was so high."

On top of that, there are man-made environmental disasters, from the tainted drinking water in Flint, Mich., and right here in [Compton](#) to the [poorly maintained levees that allowed massive flooding](#) in the Monterey County town of Pajaro.

As Mayor Karen Bass put it at the news conference: "We know that low-income neighborhoods of color are disproportionately harmed by air and toxic pollution. A few years ago, the leading cause of death of Black babies was asthma that was directly related to freeways and air pollution. So when we say disproportionately impacted, that's not just rhetoric."

And yet, politicians rarely bring up climate change or environmental justice as a true priority when they are talking to people of color.

Take, for example, the speech President Biden gave earlier this month at Mother Emanuel AME Church, billed as an attempt to repair his relationship with Black voters amid flagging poll numbers. He spent 35 lackluster minutes at the pulpit of the historic church in Charleston, S.C.

Priority topics included Donald Trump, the Civil War, white supremacy, the Jan. 6 insurrection, high-speed internet access, prescription drug prices, housing and student loan debt. Finally,

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Biden got around to some vague and uninspiring statement about how his administration is “producing clean energy” so people can “finally breathe clean air without leaving home.”

He talked about spending a childhood surrounded by air-polluting oil refineries in Claymont, Del.

“I grew up with asthma, and most of us did, because of the prevailing winds,” Biden said. “We’d go — my mom would drive us to school in the morning ... there would be an oil slick on the wiper. Because, guess what? It’s all the fence-line communities who get hurt.”

Surely, the president can do better than this with his messaging.

Meanwhile, Gov. Gavin Newsom [wants to cut \\$2.9 billion from California’s climate programs](#) to help close a massive budget deficit. Notably on the chopping block are several zero-emission vehicle programs, including delayed

funding for the [Clean Cars 4 All](#) program that helps low-income residents.

Getting people of color to care about such things, and demand more from Biden or Newsom, is sure to be a challenge. Many people can’t afford to think about problems beyond next week, much less next year or in the next several decades.

But it’s not impossible. Because with every passing year, every extreme weather event that devastates an already vulnerable community of color and every generation that becomes more aware of the pollution that is ruining their quality of life, it becomes clearer that environmental justice is racial justice.

“Poll after poll shows upward of three-quarters of us consider ourselves to be environmentalists,” Jealous said of Black people. “What we’ve been doing wrong as a movement is failing to meet people where they are.”



[Erika D. Smith](#)

Erika D. Smith is a columnist for the Los Angeles Times writing about the people, politics and quest for a more equitable California. She joined The Times in 2018 as an assistant editor, expanding coverage of the state’s homelessness and affordable housing crises. She previously worked at the Sacramento Bee as a columnist and editorial board member. Before the Bee, Smith wrote for the Indianapolis Star and Akron Beacon Journal. She is a graduate of Ohio University and a native of Cleveland.