



Tech

## The Environmental Movement Needs to Reckon with Its Racist History

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*Because racism in environmentalism hasn't gone away, and it's holding the movement back.*



By Julian Brave NoiseCat, September 13, 2019, 8:31am

*Indigenous peoples and people of color are disproportionately affected by our global climate crisis. But in the mainstream green movement and in the media, they are often forgotten or excluded. This is Tipping Point, a new VICE series that covers environmental justice stories about and, where possible, written by people in the communities experiencing the stark reality of our changing planet.*

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/bjwvn8/the-environmental-movement-needs-to-reckon-with-its-racist-history>



When I was a student at Columbia in New York City there were two major divestment campaigns on campus: one for private prisons and another for fossil fuel corporations. Though they shared similar tactics and aims, their constituents looked very different from each other. The former was led by Black students. The latter was predominantly white.

One of the organizers of Columbia's prison divestment campaign is now a leader in Black Youth Project 100, an organization at the forefront of the Black Lives Matter movement. One of the leaders of fossil fuel divestment was an early supporter of the Sunrise Movement, an organization leading the charge for a Green New Deal. Racial divisions on campus, even among activists, mirror divisions in society.

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## The Climate Is at a Tipping Point. We Need Stories From the Front Lines

NATASHA GRZINCIC 09.20.19

These divisions are especially apparent among environmentalists, who inherit a troubling history of colonialism, racism, and exclusion. The institutions of environmental power—elected officials, government bureaucracies, nonprofits, laws, and the like—were, almost as a rule, created by white men and often remain dominated by white people. Since the Civil Rights era, activists of color have secured hard-fought victories for racial and environmental justice. But the legacy of racism continues to haunt the movement and undermine progress.

The founding fathers of environmentalism ranged from garden variety racists to eugenicists. Henry David Thoreau, the naturalist and abolitionist whose writings inspired Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., among others, held troubling but

typical views about the inevitable demise of Native Americans. In his influential 1862 *Atlantic* essay "Walking," he wrote: "I think that the farmer displaces the Indian even because he redeems the meadow, and so makes himself stronger and in some respects more natural."

**"The origins of environmentalism are closer in spirit to the safari or trophy hunt than the march or sit-in"**

John Muir, a co-founder of the Sierra Club and disciple of Thoreau, wrote about the indolence of Black "Sambos." He described the Miwok, the Indigenous people of Yosemite, as "dirty" and "altogether hideous." "They seem to have no right place in the landscape," he wrote.

Madison Grant, a prominent conservationist and Muir's contemporary, wrote the 1916 book *The Passing of the Great Race*. The text influenced the Immigration Act of 1924, which limited emigration from Southern and Eastern Europe and Africa, and banned migrants from Asia. Adolf Hitler called the book his "bible" in an admiring letter to the author. Today, echoes of Grant can be heard in the hate speech of white nationalists like Richard Spencer.

In light of this history, it is perhaps unsurprising that when Muir and Theodore Roosevelt went on perhaps the most consequential camping trip in American history in 1903, the president conserved 230 million acres of public land—an area larger than Texas—through the expulsion of Indigenous peoples and the rural poor. Dubbed "America's best idea" by documentary filmmaker Ken Burns, these parklands were first and foremost a sanctuary for Anglo-Saxon gentlemen. In truth, then, the origins of environmentalism are closer in



spirit to the safari or trophy hunt than the march or sit-in.

The Civil Rights movement—and trash—had a big hand in making environmentalism more diverse. In 1978, Linda McKeeen Bullard recruited her husband, Dr. Robert Bullard, then a junior sociologist at Texas Southern University, to serve as expert witness in the first case to claim environmental discrimination under civil rights law. The lawsuit, *Bean v. Southwestern Waste Management*, sought an injunction against the siting of a garbage dump in Northwood Manor, a middle-class Black suburb of Houston.



*DR. ROBERT BULLARD IS REGARDED AS THE FATHER OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE, BUT HE STILL DESCRIBES HIMSELF AS “ACCIDENTALLY ENVIRONMENTALIST.”*  
PHOTO BY MARVIN JOSEPH/THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

Bullard was tasked with producing maps and statistics to prove that race was the decisive factor driving placement. “I grew up in the South, I knew the segregation and the power of racism to deprive neighborhoods,” said Bullard. “The maps we generated showed, without a doubt, that race was a major player in where the city sited environmental hazards.”

In 1983, following the Bean case, the Congressional Black Caucus conducted a study of waste facilities in the South and found that 75 percent were in Black neighborhoods even though Black people made up less than a quarter of the population.

Bullard went on to study environmental injustice in the Alabama Black Belt, in predominantly Black “Cancer Alley” in Louisiana and in West Virginia, compiling research for his first book, *Dumping in Dixie*. In 1987, the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ took his thesis nationwide in its pathbreaking report on “Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States.” Though many regard Bullard as the father of environmental justice, he still describes himself as “accidentally environmentalist.”

Where data, maps, and litigation blazed a trail, a movement followed. In 1982, the predominantly Black, poor, and rural residents of Warren County, North Carolina took a stand against a PCB oil dump in their community. Schoolchildren were arrested for laying their bodies in front of trucks carrying oil. National organizations such as the NAACP, United Church, and Congressional Black Caucus stepped up. “If you look at some of those photographs and some of that footage, and if you look at what was happening in Standing Rock—that was a microcosm or smaller or earlier version of people saying no,” said Bullard. Similar protests challenging instances of environmental racism began coalescing across the country.

In 1991, Bullard helped convene the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C. In Minnesota, Winona LaDuke, the Ojibwe environmentalist and one-time Green Party vice presidential candidate, encouraged Tom Goldtooth, a Dakota and Diné organizer and



director of the Red Lake Nation's environmental protection program, to attend. (Women recruiting men to the cause appears to be a common thread in the history of environmental justice.)

At the conference, Goldtooth and other Indigenous attendees formed a caucus to help draft the 17 principles of environmental justice alongside more than 1,000 diverse grassroots leaders. In the preamble, the principles emphasized the need "to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities." Some of these organizers went on to found the Environmental Justice Leadership Forum and Climate Justice Alliance to actualize this vision.

Five years later, many of the same leaders, including Goldtooth and his new outfit the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN), convened a meeting in Jemez, New Mexico to create another set of principles outlining how grassroots organizations and better-funded historically white NGOs should work together.

Today, most "Big Greens" including the Sierra Club have at least nominally endorsed the Principles of Environmental Justice and Jemez Principles. "We've always been about building solidarity with white NGOs but also lifting ourselves up and being assertive," said Goldtooth. "There has to be some solidarity and equality in how they lift us up."



In 1994, this burgeoning movement won a landmark victory when then President Bill Clinton issued an executive order mandating every federal agency "make achieving environmental justice part of its mission" by addressing disproportionate health and environmental impacts in low-income communities and communities of color.

While pipelines, mines, and dumps remain disproportionately located in these communities, white lawyers, lobbyists, and lawmakers disproportionately represent the environmental movement on Capitol Hill. According to the 2014 Green 2.0 report, people of color comprise 36 percent of the U.S. population, but account for only 12 percent of the staff of environmental organizations. A 2019 update shows that diversity has actually declined in recent years.

Access, meanwhile, has done little to advance environmental good. Even though green groups have a collective annual budget of over \$500 million—significantly more than the Koch network's \$400 million—they have been largely outflanked by polluting industries and the right-wing.

As climate change has emerged as the flagship environmental issue in the 21st century, environmental justice leaders—predominantly people of color—have too often been relegated to the sidelines in the big



federal fights. Ten years ago, environmental justice communities were largely excluded from the drafting of Waxman-Markey, the cap-and-trade bill that passed the House of Representatives but never made it to the Senate floor for a vote.

With less access to Capitol Hill, these communities have tended towards community organizing and direct action tactics as they did in Warren County in 1982. Sometimes these campaigns, like the movements against the Dakota Access and Keystone XL pipelines, made national headlines.

Today, though they are excited about the inclusion of racial, economic, and environmental justice language in the Green New Deal resolution, environmental justice leaders I have spoken to fear the same exclusion or tokenization will happen again—or worse, that climate legislation will do real harm by intensifying pollution and costs in their communities.

At a March convening to begin drafting a Green New Deal, leaders of the Climate Justice Alliance voiced concerns that the progressive climate platform was not being developed according to the Jemez Principles and the Principles of Environmental Justice. “I’m not saying there hasn’t been some positive movement and some incorporation of environmental justice with white organizations,” said Goldtooth, whose organization, IEN, is part of the Climate Justice Alliance. “But the challenges are still there with the Green New Deal.”

These concerns are not unfounded. In June, New York state passed the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, a state-level model for a Green New Deal, and one of the most comprehensive climate bills ever

written. Environmental justice organizations were part of the coalition that led the charge for the legislation.

But by the time the policy was signed into law, Governor Andrew Cuomo had written out requirements prioritizing investments in communities of color and protections for union workers, among other key environmental justice provisions.

**“Among my generation it is becoming more common to see Black, brown, and Indigenous people—and particularly women—leading the way”**

Our generation must do better. “Now we have young people that are moving into spaces and are linking the various movements,” Dr. Bullard told me. “The intersectionality arguments many young people in their organizations and movements are linking together, whether it’s folks who are working on climate, energy, Black Lives Matter, criminal justice, food security... You start to bring those pieces of the puzzle together—that’s very refreshing and it will pay off in the long-run.”

The environment is no longer a white sanctuary. The messy business of society, power, and race is everywhere and intertwined. People of color have made the question of *who*—who leads, who is represented, and who deserves justice—unavoidable. Among my generation it is becoming more common to see Black, brown, and Indigenous people—and particularly women—leading the way.

“We see the legacy of a climate movement that has deeply failed people of color on many, many counts,” said Aru Shiney-Ajay, a 21-year-old child of Indian immigrants who has taken the year off from Swarthmore College to



help train young people for Sunrise. "I think about why I want to really invest in leaders of color, and I've seen how much people have invested in me and how much Sunrise has been this life-changing process of growth. I want to give that to other people."

But an inconvenient truth remains: climate change does not answer to racism, politics, or even justice—at least not directly. Its only

principles are chemistry and physics. And this might be its greatest cruelty. Power is grazing the fingertips of people of color for the first time. But as we finally start to grasp it and change an environmental movement rooted in a racist past, science may have other designs.

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