

The background of the entire page is a dark, rich brown wood grain. The grain runs horizontally, with various patterns of knots and wavy lines. The lighting is slightly uneven, creating subtle gradients of dark brown and black, which emphasizes the natural texture of the wood.

**Diversifying the U.S. Climate Movement**  
**Four Interviews**



# Diversifying the U.S. Climate Movement

## Four Interviews

Marcelo Bonta

Nellis Kennedy-Howard

Thomas Easley

Jacqueline Patterson

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# Justification

Climate change is having devastating impacts in the United States, and people of color (POC) are disproportionately harmed. Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans in the United States often experience greater economic insecurity and live in places that are already overburdened with pollution, thereby increasing their exposure to climate-induced hazards and reducing their ability to be resilient. Research shows that POC are concerned about climate change and support government action more than Whites do (Benegal, 2018; Leiserowitz et al., 2010 & 2017; Macias, 2016; Pearson, 2017; Schult, 2016). With their growing population in the United States, POC are expected to become the majority by 2045 (US. Census Bureau, 2017) and an increasingly important electorate.

Despite their numbers and their support for climate action, POC are underrepresented in environmental organizations. In recent years, the percentage of minorities on the general staff of major environmental organizations in the United States does not exceed 16 percent, and is even less in leadership positions (Taylor, 2014, 2018). This lack of representation hampers environmental organizations from gaining support from POC for environmental initiatives and creates the perception that climate change is a White issue.

In this study, I interviewed four experts from the field of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the environmental movement to understand the barriers for civic engagement for people of color, and how environmental organizations can improve their diversity, equity, and inclusion. Civic engagement for the purposes of this study is defined as actions that build political will for climate solutions, such as voting, contacting public officials, and participation in advocacy activities. The questions I ask are:

- What are the barriers of civic engagement on climate change for people of color?
- Why do environmental organizations have difficulty recruiting and retaining people of color?
- What can environmental organizations do to improve diversity and inclusion and engagement from people of color?

This research will increase understanding of the cultural and structural barriers for people of color in the climate movement, and help environmental organizations engage more people of color in climate advocacy.

# Literature Review

DEI in the environmental movement is a fairly new field. It wasn't until 1990 when the lack of diversity at mainstream environmental organizations was called out as a problem (in a letter from several environmental justice leaders to the leaders of large environmental organizations on Earth Day 1990) (Taylor, 2014). A few critical articles came out in the 2000s analyzing the problem and proposing solutions, casting the lack of diversity and inclusion in the environmental movement as a serious deficiency (Silveira, 2001, Bonta and Jordan, 2007; Park, 2005, 2007, 2009). Angela Park's 2009 article "Everybody's Movement: Environmental Justice and Climate Change" interviewed environmental justice leaders in the U.S. and articulated the cultural and institutional barriers for people of color on climate change as well as solutions. Other than Park's 2009 article, there are no scholarly articles (that I could find) on DEI and climate change.

Two books that contain in-depth examination of the challenges of representation in the environmental movement are Mark Dowie's *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century* (1996) and Dorceta Taylor's *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection* (2016). Dowie examines the ineffectuality of the environmental movement by looking at its history and philosophies. He expounds on the elite origins of the conservation movement as the foundation for its failure to engage minorities and a broader base. His discussion of the environmental movement during the 80s and 90s, at the height of neoliberalism, shows how environmental organizations worked within the dominant capitalist system and failed to address the environmental justice issues of the time. He also provides developments in the grassroots activism that he sees as offering energy and hope to a flagging movement. Taylor chronicles the rise of the conservation movement from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century from the lens of race, gender, and class relations. She summarizes the philosophical underpinnings of the conservation movement and how those contributed to an environmental agenda that benefited the elite and excluded and dispossessed native Americans and people of color. Both of these books gave an in-depth account of the historical roots of the environmental movement's lack of representation, the marginalization of environmental issues in the U.S., and its ineffectiveness in the last couple of decades, even as environmental problems have become more threatening and global.

For a long time, people of color were perceived as not caring about the environment. A 1972 study of 1500 environmental volunteers nationwide found that 98% of them were White (Zinger, Dalsemer, & Magargle, H. 1972 in Taylor 2014). Other studies focused on participation in outdoor activities found that Whites were more likely to go camping, hiking, skiing, swimming etc. in public parks, forests and wilderness areas than people of color (Taylor 2014). This notion is being dispelled as an increasing number of surveys that that people of color are

both concerned and interested in the environment. On climate change, they may be even more supportive of government action than Whites. Leiserowitz et al. at the Yale Program on Climate Communications published a survey report in 2010 on “race, ethnicity, and public responses to climate change” that showed people of color were as concerned and often more concerned on climate change than Whites. All minority groups showed higher levels of belief in anthropogenic climate change, they supported government action on climate change, and said they would be willing to participate in actions to reduce climate change. Other surveys on people of color and climate change are Macias (2016), Pearson et. al. (2017) on “race, class, gender and climate change communication,” Schuldt & Pearson (2016) on “the role of race and ethnicity in climate change polarization.” Macias (2016) survey showed that people of color in the United States perceive greater risks for threats posed by climate change and nuclear power generation than whites, even when controlled for age, gender, household income, education, political views, and rural/urban place of residence. They also expressed more concern about these two topics than they did for more localized issues such as air pollution from industry and transportation. These studies show that there is huge potential in engaging this group of alarmed and concerned citizens on climate change.

To fill the gap on the quantitative data on diversity in environmental organizations, Dr. Dorceta Taylor for Green 2.0 conducted a study on diversity in environmental NGOs, government organizations, and foundations in 2014. She surveyed hundreds of U.S. based environmental organizations and found that the average percentage of minorities in members of the board was 4.6%, for paid staff members 12%, and interns 22.5% (Figure 1).

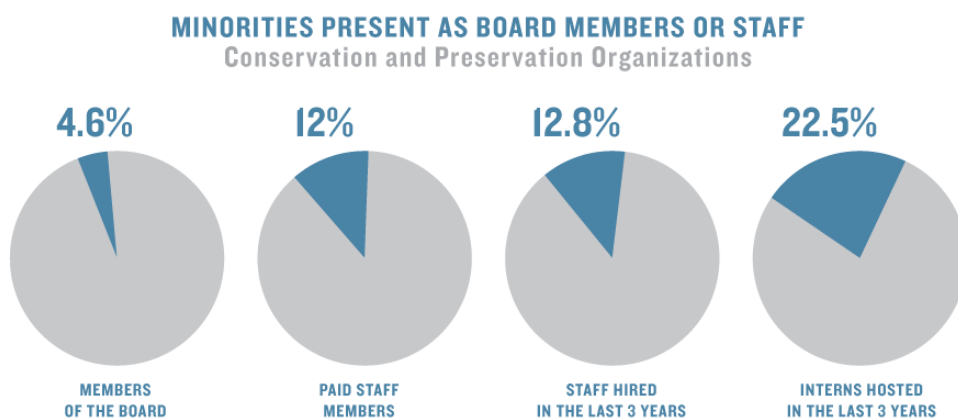


Figure 1. Minorities in U.S. conservation and preservation organizations. Taylor, 2014.

Her report is the most comprehensive study of diversity in environmental organizations so far. This was followed up in 2018 with a report containing updated statistics of diversity in environmental organizations and new data on transparency regarding diversity at environmental organizations. The study surveyed 2057 environmental

nonprofits and found that Whites comprised more than 80% of the board members of the groups studied; Whites constituted more than 85% of the staff of environmental nonprofits. Only 14.5% of the organizations said they engage in some form of DEI activity, and only 3.9% of the organizations revealed data on racial diversity. The report found that the percent of environmental organizations reporting their diversity data on Guidestar has declined steadily since 2014. The slump is even more apparent in the reporting of racial data (Taylor, 2018).

While more environmental organizations are recognizing that lack of diversity in the movement is a problem, few have invested resources to addressing this problem or making their strategic plans public. The organizations whose diversity strategic plans I reviewed are the Environmental Defense Fund, the Sierra Club, and EarthJustice. EDF had a huge document that specified their vision, goals, strategies, and milestones for DEI. The Sierra Club and Earth Justice had public plans that were much shorter. These gave me a sense of how these organizations are embracing DEI principles and integrating them into their work. Green 2.0 released in 2019 a report called “Beyond Diversity: a roadmap to building an inclusive organization” that surveyed environmental organizations on the diversity strategies they employed as well as the benefits they perceived diversity brought to their organizations and the environmental movement.

Finally, another body of work that I drew on for this research are works on diversity in the workplace in general. This includes Herring & Henderson’s *Diversity in Organizations: A Critical Examination* (2014); and D5 Coalitions’ “Final State of the Work: Stories from the movement to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion” (2015), and Maria Triana’s *Managing Diversity in Organizations: A Global Perspective* (2017). Herring & Henderson critiqued why diversity is important for organizations and provided examples of studies and case studies of organizations that have improved performance and outcomes because of diversity. D5 Coalition expounded on the difference between diversity, equity, and inclusion and how foundations can integrate them more into their work. Triana’s work extends more into how to implement diversity, equity, and inclusion.

# Research Design

## Methodology

I used both narrative inquiry and phenomenology in my research methodology. Narrative inquiry can be defined as “the process of gathering information for the purpose of research through storytelling” (The Writing Studio). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) note that, “Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world.”

Narrative Inquiry helps to reveal an individual or a phenomena through stories, actions, and the way of telling rather than asking what people think about a subject. As Schusler & Krasny (2010) points out, “Asking what someone thinks of a topic will result in their views, intent, or espoused theories; asking how someone acted in a specific situation is far more likely to result in an instructive story of practice that illuminates not only general beliefs but also practical considerations, opportunities, challenges, supports, barriers, conflict, complexity, and passion” (p. 212). For each of the interviewees I asked them how they came to do, what are their motivations, their challenges, and rewards, capturing the stories behind their circumstances.

A second methodology is phenomenology. Developed by Edmund Husserl in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, phenomenology seeks to understand consciousness through the examination of subjective experience. It entails the suspension of judgment while relying on the intuitive grasp of knowledge, free of presuppositions and intellectualizing. The methodology assumes that there is no objective reality, only perceptions, and those perceptions constitute a type of knowledge that can be described and transmitted to better understand human consciousness. It entails coming with a suspension of beliefs and judgments and allowing the subject’s experience to inform our understanding. In my interviews, I asked the interviewees about their understanding of the cultural and institutional barriers that prevent people from engaging with environmental organizations, as well as their perception of what environmental organizations can do to overcome those challenges. The intention was to have no assumptions about what these barriers or solutions are and allow the responses to emerge from the interviewees’ accounts of their experience. The fact that the four interviewees who came from very different backgrounds converged on similar answers implies that these barriers are a common experience for people of color, despite their differences in where they come from.

## Data Collection and Analysis

I interviewed four experts in the field of DEI and the environment, all of whom gave me permission to use their names and publish their responses. They are:

- **Marcelo Bonta**, founder of the Center for Diversity and the Environment and consultant at J.E.D.I. Heart;
- **Nellis Kennedy-Howard**, director of inclusion, equity, and justice at The Sierra Club;
- **Thomas Easley**, vice dean of diversity, equity, and inclusion at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies;
- **Jacqueline Patterson**, director of Climate and Environmental Justice at NAACP.

Each of these interview participants are leaders in the environmental movement and champions for diversity, equity, and inclusion. I had read Marcelo’s articles and heard his keynote speech at an AASHE conference in 2014. I emailed him asking to interview him and provided him with a consent form to use his name and his interview for publication. He recommended Nellis Kennedy-Howard at the Sierra Club as someone leading a strong DEI



program. I learned about Thomas Easley through a Yale alumni newsletter, and since I graduated from the school where he was recently hired, I was eager to learn what he was doing there. Jacqueline Patterson is a well-known figure in the environmental justice field, and I especially wanted to get her opinion on carbon pricing. Each of these interviewees responded to my request and signed a consent form. There were others that I reached out to but who did not get back to me or who declined to be interviewed.

I conducted all of the interviews through Zoom, which also recorded the videos with the interviewees' consent. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 2 hours. They were all one-on-one except for Jacqueline Patterson, which had two other people on the call. The interviews were transcribed into a google document and edited for clarity. I analyzed the interviews by reviewing their transcripts and videos, noting themes that emerged, categories of responses, and keywords describing emotions, perceptions, and actions. These were organized into an excel spreadsheet that enabled me to compare each of their responses to the same set of questions.

## Limitations and Ethics

Researchers are never completely objective and with interviews and the interviewees' responses are necessarily mediated by the interviewer and the medium in which the interview is conducted. As a young woman of color who has worked in the environmental field for over ten years, I was able to connect on a personal and professional level with the interviewees and help them feel comfortable talking about this subject. The fact that I am also a Ph.D student helped with gaining credibility and trust.

A few limitations influenced the quality nature of the information I was able to obtain from the interviewees. One limitation is that the interviewees are extremely busy people who were not able to give me as much time to discuss these topics as I would have liked. Talking about race and diversity is always a complex subject and for these people who have been thinking and working on this for over ten years, much interesting information is omitted in a 30-60 minute conversation. Another limitation is that because these interviews were not anonymous or confidential, this limited what the interviewees were able to say, especially when it came to discussing racism in specific contexts, the interviewees wanted to protect their own reputation and the reputations of their employers and colleagues. Another limitation is that I was not just a student, but also affiliated with an environmental organization, which could have made them somewhat cautious in what they said and also more directed in providing information that would be useful to that organization. Having a specific client in mind rather than it being pure research may have a limiting impact on some interviews.

# Findings

The interviews provided a complex picture of the interlocking systemic oppressions that exclude people of color from having access to power and participation in the environmental movement. They also reveal the opportunities that diversity brings to environmental organizations and ways to bring change. Their solutions revealed similar ideas for how environmental organizations can better engage people of color. The themes that they discussed are their personal stories of how they came to DEI, barriers for people of color to participate in the environmental movement, potential strategies for overcoming those barriers, and challenges in implementing DEI strategies.

## How They Came to DEI

I asked three of the interviewees how they came to DEI work. The fourth interviewee, Jacqueline Patterson, was not working in the field of DEI and so received a different question about her work. All three interviewees said that it was not their initial intention to do DEI. Marcelo Bonta graduated from Yale College and got an MS joint degree in Biology and Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning from Tufts University. While working at a national environmental organization in the early 2000s, where he was the only person of color, the way he was treated by his colleagues and superiors made him feel not respected and valued and made it difficult for him to do his work effectively. Nevertheless, he stayed four years, but it was “the low point of my career.” He described his experience there as “really really tough.” He decided to change his career to addressing DEI in the environmental movement because he saw a huge need and the negative impact that lack of DEI was having on the environment.

Nellis Kennedy-Howard is an attorney with certificates in Federal Indian Law and Natural Resources Law, and previously served as Senior Campaign Representative of Sierra Club’s Beyond Coal campaign in the Southwest region. Within a couple of months of being at the Sierra Club, she was asked to serve on the staff diversity committee. Initially she felt tokenized, but after she joined the team, she loved the work and felt like she found a community where people could empathize with her experiences as a person of color at The Sierra Club. When the position for DEI director came up, she applied because she felt that she could make more of an impact in the organization doing DEI than the field work she was doing.

My third interviewee, Thomas Easley, got a masters in forest genetics from Iowa State University. When he worked in forestry, he was often the only black person or person of color. This led to some “challenging” and “interesting” experiences. He became involved in mentoring other POC students and helping them overcome the challenges that he faced. He decided to get a PhD in education and changed his career to DEI. He worked in the

DEI office at North Carolina State University for thirteen years before starting as Vice Dean of DEI at Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.

All three started with passion for conservation and environment, had difficult experiences being an environmental professional of color, and transitioned into working in DEI.

## Barriers for People of Color

The four interviewees provided many examples of ways that people of color encounter barriers in participating in the environmental movement or their development as environmental professionals. They include 1) racism and cultural differences 2) systemic oppressions in society 3) lack of peer and mentor support 4) higher expectations for POC and burnout.

### Racism and Cultural Differences

Racism and cultural difference were cited as a big barrier. Marcelo Bonta shared his personal experience of overt and covert racism being the only professional of color at his environmental organization. He was once called “a little oriental” and his ideas were dismissed by his boss. He said, “I was the newest employee who just got out of graduate school, and I knew the latest approaches, especially for protecting habitat and biodiversity, and my boss would totally ignore me, make jokes about what I was saying, and then the second-in-command would repeat the same thing, and my boss would listen to him and things would move forward.” Jaqueline Patterson described being a speaker and the only person of color at a national conference on climate change: “There were some very strange exchanges....if I hadn’t been used to situations like the one I experienced at the conference, and if I was a different person, everybody in the world would’ve known about it. It would’ve turned that person off from the organization permanently.”

While talking about their professional biographies, I noticed that the interviewees downplayed their experiences of racism in the workplace. This was probably the most sensitive topic for my interviewees to discuss, and they were understandably hesitant to say negative things about former or current employers and partner organizations. Marcelo did not want to name the organization that he worked with because he didn’t want people to think it was just that organization or just his experience. He described his experience as “challenging” and “very very tough.” Thomas said his experience with the Forest Service was “interesting” but later used the words “PTSD.” Jacqueline said her experience at the climate conference was “strange” and “questionable” but it didn’t bother her too much because she has them a lot. When I asked her what specifically she experienced, she did not really want to talk about it, but just said there was a “lack of cultural competence.” My impression was that racism and oppression are rampant in the environmental field and the experience of it is deeply troubling for POC,

so much so that these people changed their careers to do something about it. It also shows their courage and their compassion so that others would not have as bad of a time as they did.

### **Systemic Oppressions in Society**

Thomas Easley expounded on both the systemic oppressions people of color face when they are trying to get into the environmental profession and the struggles they have once they get there. First, there are the systemic issues of discrimination in employment, housing, healthcare, and education that put children, especially from black families, behind due to their race and economic background. Then “communities have been left out of conversations around the environment, nature, and forests,” he said. It’s ironic that society spends so much energy keeping people of color from accessing opportunities at a young age, then bemoan the lack of diversity at elite institutions like the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.

Students of color who overcome overwhelming odds to get into to Yale then face all kinds of challenges when they get there like navigating a foreign culture, feeling inferior, not getting the support they need and not knowing how to ask for it. Because there are few of them, they don’t get as much peer support. And while faculty are there are to mentor or support students, students of color have a harder time asking for it than their White peers. Thomas said, “White students, even those who really care about these issues, do not really know or understand what’s happening, the stress that students of color carry, their pain and how tough it’s to be here. Unless you understand that the pressure of this place really can contribute to PTSD and other mental health issues, then you don’t get it.”

### **Higher Expectations for POC and Burn Out**

All of the interviewees talked about higher expectations for POC leading to burnout. Jacqueline Patterson talked about her experience as a person of color working in this field: “People act like we’re unicorns, and we’re just constantly inundated. Even more so for folks that are on the front lines, there’s just so much that they face, especially since the returns are questionable.” Marcelo Bonta said POC in the environmental field are expected to not only do their job, but often also be the DEI expert for their organization, and act as an ambassador for their organization to communities of color. All of this makes it very difficult for the few who make it to stay there.

Their assessments reveal several common barriers: 1) people of color experience racism in the workplace, from people calling them nicknames to not taking them seriously as environmental professionals. 2) People of color have to overcome enormous systemic challenges in society in order get the higher education required to be an environmental professional. 3) After they have proven themselves and gotten the job, lack of peer and mentor support makes it difficult for them to advance in their career. 4) They often feel like they have to do extra work to prove themselves which leads to burnout.



## Strategies for Advancing DEI

The four interviewees had very similar responses about strategies to address the lack of diversity and inclusion in environmental organizations. They were 1) Focus on inclusion, not diversity. 2) Create equitable partnerships. 3) Mentor and peer support. 4) Have leadership buy-in.

### **Focus on Inclusion, Not Diversity**

Regarding the first point, focus on inclusion, not diversity, they all said that trying to increase the diversity of an organization without also working on the culture to be more inclusive and equitable is a mistake. Jacqueline Patterson said, “I think that without having anti-oppression trainings, [efforts to recruit people of color] would be more harmful than good.” Nellis Kennedy-Howard said, “Diversity can often cause harm and be a false indicator for success, whereas focusing on the transformation of organizational culture to embody a set of core values that are rooted in things like promoting justice, advancing equity, and being more inclusive of all those who share our values, creates long-standing transformational, cultural change at an organization more than just diversity itself.” Marcelo Bonta echoed the same sentiment: “A lot of nonprofits and environmental groups come to me wanting to hire more people of color or get more board members of color, or to partner and work with a community of color. Both are good things to do as part of a broader strategy, but if they’re done in isolation, you’re going to make mistakes and you’re going to probably do more damage than good.” Thomas Easley talked about the challenges students face when graduate schools “roll out the red carpet” to recruit them and then don’t support them when they get there. He said, “What happens is that they’re bringing different people in and hurting them all over. They don’t need those kind of initiatives here, but rather a massive cultural change.”

### **Equitable Partnerships**

The interviewees talked about the need to create equitable partnerships. Marcelo Bonta talked about how predominantly White organizations trying to work with communities of color often end up offending and driving away those communities due to their patronizing attitude. He said:

One thing they can do is to create true and equitable partnerships, entering the space with humility, listening to understand, not starting with your agenda. Start by listening to their work and their agenda and using your creativity to understand how your work can really support theirs. If there’s an opportunity to work together, continue to step back with your leadership. Get to the space of co-creation.

Jacqueline Patterson said:

Meeting others where they are is what’s key. It’s not about trying to pull people over, it’s about meeting people where they are and joining forces with other groups to form allyship, understanding them, and

building those relationships before starting to introduce whatever you're trying to tell them. You should not go where you are not invited, and you should be understanding their problems, their solutions, and what they care about.

### **Mentor and Peer Support**

People of color need support along their career path of being environmental professionals. Thomas Easley said that for the students he mentored, he works on making them feel like they deserved to be there and are not affirmative action cases. He also said he relies on his own support community because the school doesn't provide it, "there is a mentality of getting here, getting green, and then getting out." Nellis Kennedy-Howard talked about how being a part of a diversity affinity group helped her stay at the Sierra Club. She also said those who are doing DEI work in environmental organizations need support and resources to help them be successful in their roles, and most importantly, that "they be given the grace and the space to learn, make mistakes, and grow, because this work is sadly so new to the environmental movement." Marcelo Bonta created the Environmental Professionals of Color Network so that people can find support and mentorship with each other.

### **Leadership Buy-In**

Another strategy that emerged from the interviews is that DEI needs leadership from the top, and the desire for change needs to be authentic. Nellis Kennedy-Howard advises: "Start with the leaders. Identify for yourselves a vision and goals that you can take to your board of directors and other senior leaders, so that you have grounded yourself with visions and goals before starting." Marcelo Bonta said leaders have to be clear on their "why" before they engage in this work. They should start with a statement that articulates their vision and motivation. Thomas Easley noted that "if we're not changing policies or the overarching structure, then I feel like we're just perpetuating white supremacy.....All that diversity workshops do around the country is help people feel better without changing anything. The structure is still left in place." The interviewees concurred that without a genuine desire to change and integrating DEI into every level of the organization, then efforts to increase diversity would do more harm than good.

## **Challenges in Implementing DEI**

The interviewees reflected on the challenges of implementing DEI in environmental organizations. The important ones were 1) the environmental movement's history of exclusion; 2) it's relative newness and lack of models; 3) resistance to changing power dynamics; 4) people being overstretched. 5) Disagreement about goals and strategies.

### **Historical Challenges**

In terms of the historical challenges, Dorceta Taylor's book and articles chronicled the environmental movement's elitist, exclusionary roots, where conservation organizations purposefully excluded people of color and pursued agendas that were harmful to POC and Native Americans. Until very recently, environmental organizations viewed POC as not caring about the environment and did nothing to help them get involved. Because of this, there is a lot of mistrust between communities of color and environmental organizations, and environmental organizations that want to do this work find that they are not starting on neutral ground. Marcelo said, "I think there's been a lot of progress, but still not enough, in part because we dug a hole for ourselves and we are still trying to dig out of that." Thomas Easley said it was like "being asked to go back to an abusive relationship."

### **Relative Newness and Lack of Models**

I asked the interviewees which environmental organizations are doing DEI work that can be held up as good examples, and their response was "not many." Because this is such a new field, organizations don't have many models to look to and many end up doing it without any expertise. The Sierra Club and EarthJustice were recognized as good examples, and other organizations have pieces of DEI going on, but not everything they need to do. Marcelo Bonta said a lot of the work is not effective and may be doing more harm than good. "Think of DEI work as going to school," said Marcelo:

You start as a kindergartener, you go on to elementary school, high school, and eventually college. Maybe you go graduate school; you become a professor. For environmentalists who decide they're going to do DEI, they think they can go from being a kindergartner to a graduate student overnight, then they try to make decisions like they're professors or experts in the field.

### **Resistance to Changing Power Dynamics**

Resistance to changing power dynamics was cited as a big barrier in advancing DEI. Thomas Easley said a big barrier for DEI at Yale is tenure. These professors have no expertise in DEI, yet they make all the decisions, and they never retire or rotate out of the committees. This led Thomas to say, "The people who are in power actually need to be quiet and sit aside. They need to get out of the way so that diversity professionals can do what we need to do." Marcelo Bonta emphasized bringing people to the table and "co-creating," rather than convincing them that you're right. Trying to do diversity while insisting on doing everything the same way sets people up for failure. He said, "When people are forced to conform and fit into a box that's not who they are, they can't bring their whole selves to the work. It usually ends with that person struggling to survive and still thinking in their head whether I should stay or not, and lots of times, they end up leaving." He also talked about well-intentioned organizations going to communities of color but having a dominant mindset and discounting the community of color's concerns or preferred way of doing things. He said, "Even though there's a culture gap, that doesn't mean

people of color are not doing this work or are not concerned. They are just doing it in their way. If we open our eyes to understand that supporting climate change or supporting the environment comes in different ways and different approaches, we'll start seeing a lot more people in organizations doing this work."

### **People Being Overstretched**

Another challenge is that DEI professionals are overstretched. Marcelo Bonta said that at many organizations, POC are doing DEI work on top of what they were hired to do. They are assumed to have expertise or interest in the subject just because they are POC, when maybe all they want to do is work with birds. Thomas Easley said that he had health issues after working in DEI at North Carolina State University for thirteen years, and it's not sustainable if he has to do it alone. Jacqueline Patterson said, "I could have two full-time jobs just answering emails." Being expected to create change that the institution is resistant to is a stressful job for anyone, especially when they are doing it alone.

### **Disagreement about Goals and Strategies**

Nellis Kennedy-Howard talked about the challenge of having people in the organization have different goals, strategies around DEI. She said at the Sierra Club:

There is a spectrum of folks who on one end have never had to think about the color of one's skin and never had a conversation about that, and then at the other end of the spectrum, there are folks at Sierra Club who have hosted their own dismantling racism trainings, and this is a passion for them....And then the second challenge that I see is the spectrum of willingness. There are folks who are at Sierra Club who have been here for years and years and see equity work as a distraction, and those who are just outright resistant. And then, on the other end of that spectrum, you have a group of folks that are impatient and frustrated and want us to become as just and inclusive as we can possibly be as quickly as possible. So, engaging that spectrum, along with the learning spectrum, make our work and our equity department very challenging.

## **Discussion**

The four interviewees corroborated findings in the literature about diversity in the environmental movement as well as providing fresh and personal insights. For example, the literature said minorities make up less than 16% of the staff of environmental organizations, and the interviewees provided what it actually feels like to be a minority at an environmental organization. Marcelo talked about how demoralizing it was to be the only person of color at the organization he worked at, and how depressed he felt being there for four years. Thomas



Easley talked about the stress and doubts that students of color have in being in an elite institution that caters mostly to White students. Nellis and Jacqueline seemed fairly stoic about it, with Jacqueline saying that had what happened to her at the conference happened to anyone else, it would have turned them off from the organization permanently.

The survey literature shows that people of color are as concerned or more so about climate change than Whites, and support government action on climate change more than Whites. However, they don't always identify as environmentalists or activists and are not as engaged politically on climate change. Marcelo Bonta said that just because people of color are not joining mainstream environmental organizations doesn't mean that they are not engaged. Lots of POC have started their own organizations or are working with their communities to solve these problems simply because it's more effective than working with mainstream environmental organizations that don't know how to work well with communities of color. Jacqueline Patterson shared about all the work NAACP is doing on climate change, but because of the current political climate at the federal level, they have decided to work more at the local level, helping communities where they can make an impact. Jacqueline said that when she started doing this work, some of the communities she went to didn't have the concept of climate justice, but now there is much more awareness among both POC and Whites.

The lack of time and competing priorities are commonly cited as barriers for people of color to engage on climate change, and the interviewees provided personal experiences on that perspective. Marcelo and Thomas both said that constantly being a minority at work and being around people in the dominant culture was a source of stress and pain. They felt like they had to work harder to prove themselves, are given more work to do, and have huge expectations (like changing the culture of Yale) placed on them. Marcelo said now that he's a perceived expert in DEI, lots of people want to talk to him but they don't want to pay him for his expertise. Jacqueline said she is always overworked and before her sabbatical feared she was "irretrievably broken." I had also reached out to other DEI professionals who did not get back to me or declined. Dr. Dorceta Taylor said she gets requests for interviews all the time and she simply doesn't have time for them all. I imagine that the other DEI professionals who declined have similar problems, which indicates that they are so in demand and there are so few of them.

The interviewees express similar challenges in DEI work and expressed degrees of frustration about that. Marcelo and Nellis both complained about organizations focusing on diversity, especially when it comes to hiring, without focusing on inclusion and equity. They emphasized the need for culture change, sensitivity, and authenticity in trying to do DEI. Thomas Easley felt that the elitism, hierarchy, and requirements for getting into Yale FES makes it difficult for talented students of color to be at Yale. He felt that while the school wants diversity, it often doesn't want to change the way it does things. Jacqueline said environmental organizations often want POC to get on board with what they are doing but not do anything for them in return. All the interviewees stressed listening, learning, supporting POC in true partnership, and meeting people where they are at.

# Conclusion

The conversations with the four interviewees gave me the impression that they were happy that the environmental field is making progress with DEI and that organizations are prioritizing it enough that they are paid to do it full time. The frustration is that the obstacles to DEI are so systemic and there is so much resistance to change that implementing it is very difficult. All the interviewees agreed that there is a lot more work to do and the environmental field is behind on DEI. While we need more experts like themselves, leaders of organizations need to be willing to commit the resources and communicate the message that DEI is everyone's responsibility and need to be integrated into every area of our work.

These conversations were limited to what the interviewees and their organizations were doing on DEI, the challenges they encountered and ideas for how to address them, but more research can be done on the issues they brought up. For example, the interviewees in this study were hesitant to talk about their experiences of racism at their workplaces, but an anonymous survey or interviews could bring more of these stories to light. Another idea is that since so few environmental organizations have implemented DEI strategies, more examples of equitable partnerships, effective outreach efforts, and recruitment and retention initiatives are needed so that we can learn from each other. Another direction for research is how POC find the support they need to do their work. A lot of POC are isolated in this work, and though they may find support in their friends and family, those people may not understand the environmental field. I would want to know what helps them succeed, who do they turn to for support, and what do they do to sustain themselves professionally. These areas of further inquiry would help broaden our understanding of the experiences of POC in the environmental field and improve DEI in environmental organizations.

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# Interviews

## Marcelo Bonta

President, Marcelo Bonta Consulting, LLC

Interview by Clara Fang

August 27, 2018



Marcelo Bonta is President of Marcelo Bonta Consulting, LLC, which provides DEI consulting to environmental organizations. Originally trained as a conservation biologist, Marcelo decided to dedicate his career to diversity, equity, and inclusion after finding himself the sole programmatic person of color at a national wildlife organization, experiencing firsthand the diversity challenge in mainstream environmental groups. His experiences led Marcelo to create the Center for Diversity & the Environment and run it for a decade, providing transformational trainings for thousands of leaders and organizational change processes for dozens of institutions. He also founded the Environmental Professionals of Color, a network for leaders of color to survive, thrive, lead, and innovate.

**Thank you for speaking with me, Marcelo. You have been working on diversity and the environmental movement for a long time. How did you get here and why have you chosen to do this with your life?**

It was never my plan. According to my plan, I'm supposed to be hanging out with endangered species and wildlife and supporting policies to protect them. Right after graduate school, my first job was working for a field office of a national conservation organization. I don't like to say the name of the organization because I don't want people to conclude, "Oh, that's that organization. They're bad. They're racist." I just want to say ambiguously, it is a national conservation organization, because you could find horrible experiences for people of color in any of these organizations. And I know a lot of these stories that are not said publicly because of just the work that I

do, and the environmental professionals of color network that I started. That's another piece of work I'm trying to see in the future, how do we uplift these experiences and these voices of what's really going on, the underbelly of the environmental movement.

So, when I was at this organization, I quickly found out that I was the only person of color in the whole conservation staff across the country. There were people of color in support staff in the main office, but no one ever told me that. That was my wake-up call the first week at the organization, and it just led to a lot of challenging experiences from there. I felt something was wrong, but I didn't have the language and I didn't have the tools or skills. I tried to do some work with a VP to move things forward, and then that VP left and the whole effort went down the tubes.

I also faced a lot of issues with overt and covert racism. Some of it was just ignorant language, such as referring to Asians as "little Orientals." I'm half Filipino, and I found it more offensive to be called "little" because that's a thing for Filipinos who have been referred to as "little" by racist, White Americans in the past. There was also the institutional, systemic, and cultural racism. For example, I was the newest employee who just got out of graduate school, and I knew the latest

approaches, especially for protecting habitat and biodiversity, and my boss would totally ignore me, make jokes about what I was saying, and then the second-in-command would repeat the same thing, and my boss would listen to him, and things would move forward.

I stayed there for four years, and it was really, really tough. It was the low point in my career. As someone who feels like I always have to give 150% to the work, I struggled a lot. I tried to leave after the second year and finally did in '04. I love wildlife, I love protecting species and habitat, and as I thought back then and still today, the only way we can responsibly and most successfully protect wildlife, habitat, and our planet, is if we're able to do diversity, equity, and inclusion right. Until then, the environmental movement's doing a disservice to its very mission, which is protecting the planet.

As you see in the country and in the world, environmentally-focused policies and approaches are struggling. Some would say we're failing, other say we're succeeding, but if we're succeeding, we're barely succeeding. If we really engage a broader constituency, do it in an inclusive way, all studies show that we're going to outperform what we've been in the past. And that's what excites me the most to do this work. But in order to get there, we need to be honest and understand where we are now; understand the limitations of having a homogenous, White dominant culture, how it's really hurt our mission and our work that we're trying to do; understand, dismantle it, break it down, and regroup, and co-create what we really need to have. It's only going to be then that we're going to get to the next level.

**You said in your article “Diversifying the American Environmental Movement” (2008) that the next 10 years are going to be critical for the environmental movement depending on how they manage to expand their base of supporters. How do you think the movement has done on diversity in the last 10 years? What impact has this had?**

The last ten years the environmental movement has made the more progress on diversity, equity, and inclusion it has ever had. Back then, there were at

most 12% people of color on the staff at environmental organizations, now it's more like 16%. Back then there were three DEI consultants that worked with environmental groups, and less than a dozen environmental groups doing anything on DEI, and none of them were effective. Fast forward ten years, there are tons of consultants working with environmental groups. There's so much demand there aren't enough consultants. Consultants have to turn work down because there's so much. I like to say I have a good handle of what's going on in the environmental movement, but there are way more environmental organizations out there that are doing the work that I don't even know all of them.

Now there's funding going to this work too. There are probably a handful of funders supporting DEI capacity building for organizations through programs. There are a lot of other foundations that opportunistically give to organizations around partnerships, trainings, and other things. Back then, the Center for Diversity and the Environment, and maybe one or two that weren't really active organizations, were doing some sort of DEI work. Now, there are a lot more organizations really focusing and trying to move the work forward in various ways, including Green 2.0, Center for Diversity and the Environment, and Green Leadership Trust. There are a lot of culturally specific POC led organizations that have started like Outdoor Afro, Latino Outdoors, Green Latinos. So, there's a wealth of organizations filling in that void around equity and the environment.

I think there's been a lot of progress, but still not enough, in part because we dug a hole for ourselves and we are still trying to dig out of that. So, if you look in 2014, at Dorceta Taylor's report that Green 2.0 commissioned, it shows that people of color in environmental organizations, government agencies, and foundations were 12 to 16%. Before that, all of the studies from 2000-2010 showed anywhere from zero to 12%. So, we went from zero to 12%, to 16%. The studies that I found are not consistent in methodology and approach, but Dorceta Taylor's Green 2.0 report was the most comprehensive and probably the most accurate. But numbers don't tell us everything, they don't measure the homogenous

culture that is just so dominant in the environmental movement, which is the biggest barrier.

**What do you think are the challenges for environmental organizations trying to advance diversity, equity and inclusion in their organization?**

Environmental organizations have made progress, but we're still behind and just because there's all this activity happening, doesn't mean it's effective work. I would argue that a lot of it is actually ineffective, and may be causing more damage than good. A lot of nonprofits and environmental groups come to me wanting to hire more people of color or get more board members of color, or to partner and work with a community of color. Both are good things to do as part of a broader strategy, but if they're done in isolation, you're going to make mistakes and you're going to probably do more damage than good.

For example, an organization wants to work with a community of color, but they bring this oftentimes arrogant dominant culture attitude like, "Hey we're the environmentalists. We know best." They're with another culture that does things differently from the way they do things, which is also a right way of doing things, but the environmental group says, "You're not doing it right. This is how you do it," and then it just all goes downhill. They don't understand that there's a different way of doing things in different cultures. They don't understand how to co-create, how to bring inclusive voices, and the repercussions and the impact of that is that you've just offended and hurt the very community you're trying to support. Trust has been broken, and now you're in a harder position than you were in before, because now you have to build up trust, you have to apologize, you have to understand your mistakes, come with humility, come with compassion and understanding, and hope that this community forgives you and opens their arms to you again.

The other mistake is jumping into hiring too quickly. Again, lack of preparation is the problem. They hire someone or bring in a board member of color. They set this person up for failure because they don't know how to work across difference. They try to make this person fit within the homogeneous culture

that's already there. They start doing subtle things implying that the person of color's experience and approach is not the right way. The White way is the right way here, and things break down, and either the person leaves on bad terms or the person underperforms because they're being forced to conform and fit into a box that's not who they are, and they can't bring their whole selves to the work. It usually ends with that person struggling to survive and still thinking in their head whether I should stay or not, and lots of times, they end up leaving.

**Why is diversity, equity, and inclusion important for the environmental movement?**

Some of the work that I do with organizations, as well as change agents who are trying to move this work, is being clear on their "Why?" For me, there are a few reasons. One, it's the right thing to do. Second, it's the wise thing to do. I mentioned earlier, all the studies show the highest performing groups are the ones that are diverse and operate in an inclusive manner. The demographics are changing. If we continue having this homogeneous White culture, our relevance will continue to shrink, and arguably, over the last twenty years, it's already shrunk. We're not a top ten issue in the country anymore. When I started at the conservation organization in the early 2000s, it was just dropping out of the top ten. Climate change has been brought up probably the most in terms of environmental protection but there haven't been any huge gains on a federal policy level. There have been some policies here and there, but no big bills have been passed.

Also, not only are the demographics changing and we need to be more relevant, but we're losing a huge opportunity. You mentioned all the studies out there that show that people of color are concerned about and support environmental issues all across the board, more than Whites. Environmentalists always complain, "We keep on speaking to the choir." There's another choir out there that you're not even speaking to. There's a huge opportunity to engage people of color, environmental organizations, and leaders. If we want change, it has to start with ourselves. If we want transformation on an organizational or movement level, then we need to transform on an individual level. And there are a

lot of individuals in the environmental movement who think they could just shift and change, and it's not like that.

Think of DEI work as going to school. You start as a kindergartener, you go on to elementary school, high school, and eventually college. Maybe you go graduate school; you become a professor. For the White environmentalists who decide they're going to do DEI, their liberal attitude is actually a barrier to thinking realistically of what they need to do. They think they can go from being a kindergartner to a graduate student overnight, then they try to make decisions like they're professors or experts in the field. I want you to get there and I'll support your growth to get there, but right now, you're a DEI baby and you should not be making decisions in this space. You should leave the decisions to the experts or the people who are the DEI graduate students or professors. And oftentimes in organizations, it doesn't correlate to the hierarchy and the status of the positions. You find the DEI leaders as support staff, mid-level folks, and you won't know until you explore it.

### **What are the barriers for people of color to engage with environmental organizations?**

I think there's a big cultural barrier. People of color are thinking, "Your group is predominantly White. I don't see anybody who looks like me there. I don't see you doing any programming in my community. I don't see anything to support my approach and what I'm looking to do. So why would I go there and waste my time? My community is suffering right now and needs help right now. I can't be patient with these White groups that don't understand, who are going to make mistakes, who are going to offend me, who are going to get in the way of the immediacy of the needs that I have. So, what am I going to do? I'm either going to the social justice or community-based organization that knows me, or I'm going to just start something myself, because I'm going to get way more headway than trying to work with this group that doesn't get me."

Even though there's a culture gap, that doesn't mean people of color are not doing this work or are not concerned. They are just doing it in their way. If

we open our eyes to understand that supporting climate change or supporting the environment comes in different ways and different approaches, we'll start seeing a lot more people in organizations doing this work. This is what's happening on a local scale in Portland and now on a national level. A lot of racial justice and racial equity groups over the last ten years have started their own environmental programs because it's filling a gap they're seeing in these mainstream organizations.

Environmental organizations are in this tough place of being at the beginning stages of this work, because even if there are groups that have made headway in the past few years, they still have a reputation as not being really sensitive to the needs of communities of color. To really break out of that they need to take some risks. Part of it is putting down your power, being humble, serving these communities, listening to them, and bringing what skills and information you have to support and uplift these communities, versus lots of times, the attitude's the other way around, like "Hey communities of color, how can you support us?" And if you start from that point, you're setting yourself up for failure.

### **How can environmental organizations support people of color?**

One thing they can do is to create true and equitable partnerships, entering the space with humility, listening to understand, not starting with your agenda. Start by listening to their work and their agenda and using your creativity to understand how your work can really support theirs. If there's an opportunity to work together, continue to step back with your leadership. Get to the space of co-creation. Everybody who's co-creating sees themselves in the creation of a project and the result. That needs to be an inclusive approach. It's not, "Hey, we're trying to protect the river. Come help us, even though your goal is not the river. Your goal is clean water for your people, but rivers first." There has to be a connection; it has to be both. How can we uplift clean water and river protection? To support clean water folks, river protection may be a part of it, but we need to step up and support them in passing bills and getting funding that's going to



support new infrastructure and pipe systems that are really outdated. That may not be what my river group does but I'm going to step up and do that if I'm going to be in this partnership.

**What about organizations that focus on specific policies? How can they partner with communities on legislation at the federal level?**

These policies have to get supported and passed by people. Who gets the benefits and the resources if this policy passes? If it's a carbon fee and dividend, who gets the result of the dollars at the tail end? White privilege is when White people get in the room and make important decisions for the rest of folks. There may be a few people of color, but those people of color may be forced to conform to White thinking. And they may think that the best dividend is where everybody gets \$100 kickback, but maybe that's not the most equitable way. Maybe if you make more than \$100,000 a year, you don't get anything and then scale it down the opposite way where the poorest of the poor gets the highest dividend. When you engage and listen and allow others to be part of the decision-making, you get creative solutions that's going to serve a broader set of folks. You're going to have a broader support. The more you bring a diversity of thinking in this work, the more you're going to get innovation.

I think for any policies, on climate change or anything, it's super irresponsible to not engage a broader base or perspective. That's how you end up with problems and unintentional consequences. A recent example is Starbucks, who said they're not going to carry straws anymore, because "we're environmentally responsible, so no plastic." They move forward with this idea, then they get pushback from the disability community, saying, "I'm paralyzed. I need a straw to drink. What am I going to do when I come to Starbucks?" And some people say, "Bring your own straw." Well, that goes back to the attitude of "you take care of yourself. Don't put pressure on the dominant culture to do anything." So, if Starbucks had folks from the disabled community at the table, they could have thought this through and found some other solution such as, "Maybe we should actually keep a few straws so those from the disabled community can request

them." I think simple answers could really avoid these missteps. I don't know what that is for carbon fee and dividend, but you never know until you bring in these broader and diverse perspectives around what you're doing. And it's your organization's job to try to create this accessible language and explanation of what you're doing.

In the state of Oregon, we're trying to pass some statewide carbon tax, and anytime someone asks me to push something environmental, I want to protect the environment and do my due diligence, but I want to know have you worked with and listened to all communities? If you haven't engaged me and I don't see the partnerships or the voices or communities of color, there's a good chance, right now, that I will lean towards not voting yes, but with a caveat. I will vote yes in the future if you engage and listen to communities of color or you do some messaging and you've done your homework. For some people, environmental protection is at the top of the list; it doesn't matter what's going on, and I think that's what a lot of us enviros are part of, but we also have to understand there are competing priorities for normal, non-environmental people. So how do we speak to those people?

**That's the way to get support for the policy. How do you get their input or buy-in for your strategy?**

I think we need to do a better job in the climate change space and say why is climate change important to a farmer? Why is climate change important to a Republican? Why is climate change important to a single mom? Why is climate change important to Latinos? We need to be able to address and tailor our relationship-building to the different communities we're trying to work with and get support from. The answer, with the climate policy that we want to move forward at a federal level, is always going to be engaging with a broader group of folks, which means communities of color. If we, as a climate change movement, can work with, support, partner with, and co-create with communities of color, we can be successful at moving forward any climate change policy.

So, on one level, bringing in diverse perspectives around the solution, and then having different

people think through, “How is this going to benefit groups in a way that we’d want to support it,” and then there’s the process of getting it passed, like “how are we actually going to build a political will to get it to pass,” and then getting feedback from more communities, like how they would like to be involved with that?

I do trainings and I teach and coach enviros on how to do better around DEI. I’ve seen that probably the most unsuccessful way of doing the work is going into a group and saying, “This is how you do it. Now go do it, and I’ll support you in doing that.” The most successful way is co-creating. This is why I love the work so much, because it’s still a challenge. I know in my head what would be best for this organization, but it’s not going to be successful if I say, “You need to do this, this, this, and this. Do it in this time frame, and I need these people, and if everybody’s fully engaged and on board, we’re going to take this organization to the next level in no time.”

For example, a DEI statement is a foundational element for an organization pursuing DEI. But why is it important to have one? I let them tell me, how do you think we should go about doing it? And they tell me, or they come to me with questions, like, “I can’t answer that question, but tell us in your experience, what has been the most effective way of doing things?” That’s a whole different thing when someone asks me, because they’re thirsty for the knowledge at that point. If I tell them, “Hey, you need to do a statement, and this is how you do it,” and they say, “Okay, sure,” in the end they put something together but they’re not really sure why they did it and why it’s important, and it becomes the shell of what it could be instead of something that has a soul to it.

I don’t know if there are some parallels in your situation, but I think there’s this dance. I think there are some things you well know in the policy realm, but part of what I love about DEI work is another piece, the co-creation. I say to my client, “Can you agree that we need a statement? Let’s talk about how we get there.” This is what I’ve learned over the years; if we can agree on the goal or the outcome, give people the freedom on how to get there. For you, it might be, “One of the most effective things for moving forward is engaging your policy makers, your politicians, whoever that may be. What do you think is the best way of engaging them? And I could see a plethora of different ways.

**That’s a lot like good teaching, when professors are able to get the students to arrive at the answers instead of telling them what it is. They feel more engaged and invested if they come up with the answers. What do you think we need to do to move forward on diversity, equity, and inclusion?**

We need more information and studies and thought-provoking work at that movement level, which I feel is where you’re going with the connection between organizations and movement. A lot of organizations are into their organizational work like, “Diversity, equity, inclusion-- let’s look at our organization and change,” but then they don’t necessarily see what they’re doing in context of the broader movement. Also, what does this mean on the individual level? My theory of change and approach to this work is that in order for us to approach institutional systemic racism, White privilege, and White dominant culture, we need to be working at each of these levels: at the individual level, at the organizational, and the movement-wide level with the idea that all feeds into each other to inform and move the world forward.



## Nellis Kennedy-Howard

Director of Equity, Inclusion, and Justice for The Sierra Club

Interview by Clara Fang

September 21, 2018

Nellis Kennedy-Howard is the Sierra Club's Director of Equity, Inclusion and Justice where she leads the effort to transform Sierra Club into an organization that welcomes and values people from all walks of life. Nellis is an attorney with certificates in Federal Indian Law and Natural Resources Law, and previously served as Senior Campaign Representative of the Beyond Coal campaign in the Southwest region. Prior to working for Sierra Club, Nellis spent four years working alongside Winona LaDuke as Co-Executive Director at the national Native environmental non-profit organization, Honor the Earth. She became an environmentalist after she learned of the country's largest uranium spill, which took place just miles from her family's home on the Navajo Reservation and which has been poisoning generations of her family ever since.

**Since the 1970s, Sierra Club has strived to be a more progressive organization and address its challenges with diversity, equity and inclusion. It has greatly broadened its activities to a wide range of environmental issues and made justice a core component of its mission. In 2013, its board of directors voted that the organization should advocate for immigrant rights. The following year, it endorsed and defended the Black Lives Matter movement (Mock, 2017). Its current campaigns include opposing President Trump's border wall, helping youth of color experience the outdoors, and fighting for gender equity. How do you feel about this evolution of the Sierra Club?**

We're very proud of our work. In terms of the larger green groups, we're pretty far advanced. I think Earthjustice is right up there too, the work that Chaz Lopez is doing, he's been doing a wonderful job there. So, I'm really proud of the work that we've done and how we are going to institutionalize our efforts. And we have a pretty long way to go.



How did you become DEI Director?

I started working for Sierra Club in January of 2012 for its Beyond Coal Campaign. Within just a couple of months of being at Sierra Club, I was asked to serve on the staff diversity team. It felt incredibly tokenizing to be asked to serve on a staff diversity team within just the first couple months by someone who knew nothing about me. I remember I shared a little bit about that with my manager at the time, and my manager said supportively, "I can see how you would feel like this is tokenizing, particularly given the context they don't know anything about you, and I welcome you to challenge this senior leader, to ask them any questions you have about their invitation."

So, I went back to the senior leader and said, "You know, I don't understand why you're reaching out to me. You don't know me. This feels very tokenizing and that you're just doing it because of the many identities that I carry, as a queer woman of color." The senior leader said, "You're absolutely right, and it was probably not the way I should have approached you," and that regardless of that, given my experiences and given my skills as an attorney, they thought that I would make unique contributions to a team that was designed to help Sierra Club become more diverse. I was so impressed with this leader's response, the humility that came with it, that it piqued my interest and I decided to serve on the staff diversity team.

The staff diversity team was made up of about a dozen people. We were largely a POC group, ranging in terms of sexual orientation, gender identity, and

other things. Given that the Sierra Club is a predominantly White organization, it was vastly different from the rest of my experiences here at the Sierra Club, and through that team, I found people who are empathetic to my experiences as a person of color at Sierra Club, and I loved it. I loved that time together. I think that's what helped me stay at Sierra Club. If you look at Green 2.0's reports, one of the things that they show is that folks of color in the environmental movement need to have affinity spaces, places where identity caucusing can happen, and people can gather together to share their experiences to overcome the micro and macro aggressions that can sometimes be experienced working in predominantly White organizations. So, for me, that was the staff diversity team. I served on that team, starting in 2012 until I took this position in 2016.

In 2015, Sierra Club conducted an organizational assessment to better understand the needs that we have around diversity, equity and inclusion. That organizational assessment was used to inform the development of the multi-year equity plan that was adopted by the board of directors in 2015, which included a clear commitment of resources and staffing capacity in diversity, equity, and inclusion. The job was posted later that year in 2015. I remember I was kind of teetering on whether or not to apply, and my wife asked me, "Well where do you think you can have the biggest impact?" And for me, I know that the commitment that Sierra Club had made by adopting the multi-year plan was significant enough that whoever filled this position would play the role of a key senior leader and have opportunity to influence literally generations after us and our work so it was an easy enough answer: "I'm going to apply." I was grateful to be selected as the final candidate in roughly March of 2016.

### **How has Sierra Club's strategy on diversity evolved since you started?**

At Sierra Club, we have a long history of working on diversity and justice, dating all the way back to the 1970s. In the early 2000s, we started to expand our thinking beyond diversity to diversity and inclusion. Then we expanded our thinking even further to diversity, equity, and inclusion, DEI, as it's commonly

termed. So, when I was hired, I recognized significant harms that I had witnessed in my time, four years at Sierra Club, because of the organization's strong focus on diversity, usually racial diversity, diversity for diversity's sake. Diversity is oftentimes treated as the silver-bullet solution of, "Get the right people in the room, and then all your problems are fixed." And because I had seen that in place, and people being tokenized because of their identities, and harm being perpetuated because of that strong focus on diversity, one of my first priorities being hired into my position was to shift our thinking, so that we were no longer focusing on diversity as a goal. In fact, we don't talk about diversity itself that much at Sierra Club. Instead, we focus on becoming more equitable, more just, and more inclusive, recognizing that diversity is an outcome of those things and the goal itself.

If we are talking about diversity, which is kind of rare, we like to be explicit, because sometimes diversity is used as code, as in, "I want to make a diverse hire." What does that mean? Diverse from what? Different from what? What does that look like? And it doesn't feel quite as right if they were to say, "I want to hire a person of this ethnic background." It doesn't feel quite as right; it feels tokenizing when it comes out of your mouth to say that, but "diversity" somehow became code to make it feel okay to talk about a specific kind of identity. So, instead of focusing on diversity, I worked on shifting to how are we becoming more equitable and more just, lifting up the voices of those who are oftentimes at the margins and pushed to the margins. But when we do in those rare incidences talk about diversity, we require explicit definition of what type of diversity you're talking about so that we're not using it in some coded way.

So, within the first six months, we changed the name of the department from the Department of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to the Department of Equity, Inclusion, and Justice. We've also done a lot to ensure that we don't acronym the name because DEI became another code word for "charity work," and we wanted to avoid that. Oftentimes you'll hear me say that I'm the Director of Equity, Justice, and

Inclusion. Inclusion, Equity, and Justice. Justice, Equity, and... just scrambling up the language so that people don't acronym the name, because words matter and for real. What we're really trying to do is to promote equity, practice justice, and to become more inclusive of those who share our values. That's what we have to do. So, within the first six months, we changed the name of the department.

We also established for ourselves a vision, which includes a clear listing of all of our values and a little bit about the theory of change that we want to employ. We identified three equity goals in our 2015 multi-year plan: 1) Creating a welcoming and inclusive organizational culture for all who share our values. That "all who share our values" is critical. We don't want to be inclusive of everyone. We can't be. We don't want to partner with people who are toxic. We don't want to welcome people in our organization who don't share our values. Not everyone is welcome at Sierra Club, but we really want to be as inclusive as possible to those who share our values. 2) Offer education, training, and support to build that organizational culture. We want people to build up their competency about what does equity look like, and how do we practice justice. We want people to be fluent in their understanding of issues of racial, social, and economic justice, and that requires a lot of education. And 3) Working to ensure that our partnerships and our goals reflect our commitments to equity and justice. Who are we partnering with this year at Sierra Club? Are we partnering with people who share our values? Are our commitments to justice and equity reflected in those partnerships? So those are kind of our three long term goals at Sierra Club.

Within the first six months, we gave those goals a little bit further, specified meaning. We developed that vision for us to rally behind and all of those things were adopted by the board of directors. Then shortly thereafter, we performed a staff retention analysis to understand what our retention and turnover rates were for people of color as compared to White folks at Sierra Club. Not so shockingly, we have a retention problem. It's not uncommon for people of color in particular to carry a

disproportionate amount of work, relative to their White counterparts, because of their identity. They need to affirm their knowledge and skills and expertise in ways that White folks don't necessarily have to do. So performing that retention analysis to understand the reasons why that was the case, and then within that we also adopted clear recommendations to help us improve the experiences of people of color at Sierra Club in hopes that we can improve our retention rates and improve our turnover rates, but not just because we want to improve our retention and turnover for folks of color, but because we want to be a more equitable and just organization that really lives out our equity values.

So, we performed that staff retention analysis, and then partly because of what we learned through that process, in 2017 we hosted the largest educational event that's ever happened at Sierra Club, called Growing for Change. Growing for Change was a two-day anti-oppression workshop that was mandatory for all of our staff, almost 700 staff, and 150 volunteers. About 150 people went through Growing for Change in 2017. We essentially hosted 13 workshops across the country over the course of 2017 so that people could participate in smaller groups. Getting 850 people in a room to try to have a conversation about equity and justice isn't very fruitful. But we know that if you break it down and you design an impactful curriculum that is created after diligent assessment to understand what are our needs and what is the baseline of understanding that we're trying to build around equity and justice, it can be incredibly powerful for people to go to workshops that say have 65 people in them. We had four facilitators in addition to folks from our equity staff that were there to support this two-day anti-oppression workshop.

We call it a workshop, not a training. You might notice that one of the lessons that we've learned along the way is that when you talk about training, people think that they've been trained. "Oh, I've had my racism removed because I got trained." That's not the case. We call it a workshop, because that's what it is. It's an experience; it's a conversation. We don't believe that training is a solution to things, but

the practice and continued conversation around the skills that we're hoping people can develop is absolutely critical.

We did Growing for Change in 2017 last year and then this year we're focusing on doing a couple different things. We're adapting the curriculum of Growing for Change for online use for our staff and our volunteers, and we are in the process of updating our multi-year plan. We're in the process of doing some collaborative engagement across the organization to understand where are we not quite hitting the mark? Where do we need to grow? What is working really well so that we can define for ourselves, what are the biggest efforts and priorities and outcomes that we want to achieve by the end of 2022?

So that's like a quick overview of some of the things that I do. But I do want to share that 98% of my work is internal facing. It's about transforming our organizational culture. It's not about the things that we're doing externally, because when we change how we operate and how we think, we can't help but have that impact externally to the rest of the world. We believe that by focusing on the culture, rather than the demographics, we will create long-lasting transformational change.

#### **How has that focus on culture rather than demographics changed the way Sierra Club views DEI work?**

The 2014 Green 2.0 report identified a green ceiling in environmental organizations, a phenomenon where despite increasing racial diversity of the US, the racial composition of environmental organizations and agencies has not broken 16% folks of color, which is embarrassing. Then shortly thereafter, in 2016, the Sierra Club broke the green ceiling. Hooray, we're more racially diverse! But in the same year we performed the staff retention analysis and it shows, yeah, we have more people of color than we ever had before at Sierra Club, but the turnover rates and retention rates are lower than that of White counterparts. We had achieved greater diversity, but it didn't offer any solutions. Diversity can oftentimes cause harm and be a false indicator for success, whereas focusing on the

transformation of organizational culture to embody a set of core values that are rooted in things like promoting justice, advancing equity, and being more inclusive of all those who share our values, creates long-standing transformational, cultural change at an organization more than just diversity itself. The outcome of that, more often than not, is a more racially diverse organization in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity, religion, each and all of those different things which are beautiful, but that in themselves are not our goals.

#### **How do you think the movement overall has done on diversity and equity in the last 10 years?**

From personal experience, I feel that in the last five years there has been significant changes that have made a real impact on the ways that we engage the partners and communities and the places that we work and live and love in beautiful ways and there's still so much further to go. I think that one of the demonstrations for how the movement is changing is People's Climate March. That was a huge undertaking, a huge event, to prioritize the people and the voices the way that they were was absolutely extraordinary, and I don't think it would have happened if it weren't for all diversity and equity types of efforts that are out there. I'm really grateful to see that happen and I think that a lot more is still necessary.

#### **What are the main barriers for people of color when it comes to engaging on climate change?**

It's not surprising that the people first and most deeply impacted by climate change are communities of color. Communities that have been given the least resources, have been unheard because of the struggles that they face, are likely to be the first ones to be most impacted by climate. I know that native communities and First Nations are at the top of that list in many ways, and it's absolutely heartbreaking. I don't have the data or the specifics in front of me. I could put you in front of people at Sierra Club who are working to advance justice and equity in the climate initiative who could speak more clearly to that. But given that 98% of my work is internal facing, I can't speak to that as well as they probably

could, but I'd be happy to put you in touch, if you're interested.

**What do you feel are the barriers in terms of doing equity and inclusivity in the organization?**

There are two things that come to mind immediately with that question. One is the spectrum of understanding and competence in those skills around equity work, particularly racial equity social justice work. There is a spectrum of folks who on one end have never had to think about the color of one's skin and never had a conversation about that, and then at the other end of the spectrum, there are folks at Sierra Club who have hosted their very own dismantling racism trainings, and this is a passion for them. How do you engage an organization that is made up of 700+ staff, thousands upon thousands of volunteers across the country, and millions of members and champions and supporters, when you have a spectrum that is so vast in terms of understanding? And then the second challenge that I see is the spectrum of willingness. There are folks who are at Sierra Club who have been here for years and years and see equity work as a distraction, and those who are just outright resistant. And then, on the other end of that spectrum, you have a group of folks that are impatient and frustrated and want us to become as just and inclusive as we can possibly be as quickly as possible. So, engaging that spectrum, along with the learning spectrum, make our work and our equity department very challenging.

**What advice would you give to an organization starting this work?**

My top line advice is to start with the leaders. Work with your senior leaders to determine where do you want to go with this work? Is it diversity, is it equity, what is it that you are wanting to do? What are you wanting to achieve? And to identify for yourselves a vision and goals that you can take to your board of directors and other senior leaders at CCL, so that you have grounded yourself with visions and goals before starting.

Another piece of advice that I would give, is to offer whoever is leading the work on equity (and I would recommend that the focus be on equity and not diversity for all the reasons that I've shared with you) the support and resources to help them be successful in their roles, and most importantly, that they be given the grace and the space to learn, make mistakes, and grow, because this work is sadly so new to the environmental movement. We're still trying to figure out what it looks like, and it can't be held to the same standards of accountability that perhaps some other work can be in terms of metrics and success, but that it really is a learning journey that requires that space to learn and make mistakes.

**Thank you for the work that you do, and for sharing your insights!**



## Thomas Easley

Dean of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies

By Clara Fang

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Thomas Easley is the Dean of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. Prior to that, he worked for thirteen years as the Director of Community for Diversity in the College of Natural Resources at North Carolina State University. He holds a master's degree in forest genetics from Iowa State University and a Doctor of Education from NCSU. Thomas spent an hour with me to talk about diversity, equity and inclusion at Yale and the challenges of diversity in the environmental movement.

### **What is your personal story of making the shift from forestry to diversity?**

I think that ever since I started my college career, I've been doing diversity. When I was working in forestry in Montana, I was the only black person in the county. When I was at Iowa State, I was the only black person in the department. When I was at University of Georgia, I was the only black person in the school. Just my being there was some sort of work towards diversity. So, I feel like the fact that I'm here in this role as a black man, and I'm young, and I'm from the south, is a form of protest.

And, of course, I have my scholarship. But for me, my scholarship is not just what I write or what I read, but also what I live. You can't read that in a book. You have to talk to me to get that. Coming from a person of color perspective, we do what's called tacit knowledge. We pass it down through word, we pass it down through relationship, and it's not just on paper.

When I was at Iowa State and worked for the McNair program, there were students who were first generation and people of color from African American, East Asian, Indigenous American backgrounds, and people from



low socioeconomic backgrounds. The aim was to get everyone in that program into graduate school to receive a terminal degree. In most fields, a terminal degree is a doctorate. I came into that program identifying as an African American, and all my students (more than 12 in total) were land mix, which was a term we used at the time, and English was their second language. So, everyone actually spoke Spanish because in my cohort, I had all Latin American students.

At first, my question was "why did the administration do that to me?" But then my question to the administration was, "why did you do that to them?" Why did the administration put all of them with someone who was not as prepared to work with them because of the language barrier? So, I took a class. The only reason that happened was because these students joined the program and at the time I got signed on, they needed a counselor and I was the only one available.

I told my students that when I meet with them, the rule was that they would speak English with me and I would speak Spanish with them, and that they would bring all of the BS to me and take all of the truth out



when they left me. After the first meeting, they all knew what I was talking about. They would bring all the lies to me, like people saying they were an affirmative action case, that they didn't belong there, that they didn't earn their way in there, or that they're an imposter. They would bring that and leave it with me. Then, they would go out with what I knew to be true: that they're brilliant and that they earned their way there. I told them to just show the institution what I already know to be true. They were smart, and they were going to get out of there even smarter than the rest. I was the only counselor that was able to help all my students, after graduating, go on to graduate school. That really caught my interest in what's now my current work.

Another influential experience was the time I was involved in research dealing with GMOs and transgenic plants, our lab encountered a number of activist groups that were against that kind of science. We found bombs in different plots, and our researchers were threatened too. We organized a town hall to better communicate what we were doing, that we were just doing what already happens in nature. That made me think about how communication is really important, getting on other people's level. Communicate what you're doing, articulate why you have made decisions, explain it and express it in multiple ways, and connect with people. You might be able to help people along their journey and be successful, regardless of background.

These experiences are what made me switch from forestry to diversity. Diversity is hard, because of these racist systems that make treating people like a human so hard. We need to flip these systems and bring humanity back. That's how I came to Yale FES. My attitude was that I did not come here to live these ideas and these policies. I was brought here to help other people understand why it needs to change.

### **How did you come to be the Dean of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at Yale Forestry?**

I didn't pursue this current job, but rather Yale came after me. The main reasons Yale found out about me are because I have a consulting business and because I have a lot of videos about the work that

I've done. I'm a hip-hop artist with a label and I'm known for this thing called "hip hop forestry." I'm the first person to come up with it and the only person working on it, but I'm sure that's about to change.

I can honestly say that working here for a year feels almost like working at NC State for ten years, just because this place is so much of its own bubble and all of the issues really hit fast here versus down south. But down south, we live with it all the time. We have to deal with it, so I'm able to engage with it without problem, but there are too many people here that don't know how to engage with these issues around race, gender, etc. I credit this to being at a private Ivy League school which deals with donors more so than grants. It's a different approach that faces a different kind of pressure. People don't struggle with dealing with these issues around here because they've been in this nice ivory bubble called Yale University.

When I came to Yale, I got bigger, because everyone knows about Yale. More people know about Yale than Jay Z! When I came to Yale, I could see that everybody wanted a piece of my success. It's been an adjustment for me to see how people look at this place. When they see other people that have made it, they think "oh my god, you've made it, can you come and talk to me?" I've never had so many people want to hear what I think and what I want to say as I have in the last year.

### **What is your mission and job description?**

My job description states: "The Assistant Dean of Community and Inclusion leads ongoing efforts and envisions new directions for growth in the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies in the areas of community inclusion and diversity." But you should strike 'ongoing.' It says leads ongoing efforts, but you know what I've been doing since I got here? Trying to create them. We didn't have efforts going on.

"The incumbent with a demonstrated passion and commitment to the environmental field reports to the Dean of the school and is responsible for working collaboratively across the school's

administrative leadership team in addition to key partners across the university and experiment.”

“The Assistant Dean will lead efforts to increase the diversity of student, staff, and faculty recruitment and retention. They will infuse core values of diversity, inclusion, and equity into the education, research practice, and outreach activities of the school and promote a cohesive community within the school around the strategic mission and goals.” So, one of the things is to work with the Dean’s office, faculty, students, admissions, the registrar and alumni, communications, human resources to develop and implement practices that will increase recruitment and retention.

### **What percentage of students are POC at Yale FES?**

Out of 330 Masters and PhD students, Latinx and Hispanic students make up 1.82% of the student population. 0.61% are US based and the other 1.21% are international. Asian students make up 18.84%, with 6.36% US and 12.12% international. Black and African American students make up 4.85%, with about 2% US and 2% international. For Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, we have none.

We do not have any indigenous students right now. We had two, but they graduated last year. Currently, White students make up 60%. 55% of that’s US based and 2.7% is international. The multiracial group makes up 15%, and that’s 11% US based and 4% international.

### **Why do you think there is a lack of diversity in environmental studies programs?**

I believe those numbers look like that because of the systems of institutional and structural racism that run the industry of the environment. That’s whether you’re talking activism and/or people who are actively engaged in the work itself. Communities have been left out of conversations around the environment, around nature, and around forests and a number of things. But now, we’re trying to bring them back in.

All the institutional racism in society that impact people of color are also the reason the numbers look like that—housing, the breakdown of wealth, and the

fact that communities do not have access to health or really poor environments. We say that we really want to open up and bring people in, but there are many barriers that make it hard for people to get in.

One of the challenges lies in something that we do with regards to admissions. We want our prospective students to have worked one or two years after college. So, the average age for people here is 26 or 27 years old. The exception is if you went to Yale undergrad, then you can transition into what’s called the 4 Plus 1 Program and get your bachelor’s and Master’s in five years.

But what about the people who didn’t go to Yale? In other schools, like state schools, students are told to go ahead and get their master’s right after their BS, because the BS is the equivalent of a high school diploma these days. That’s a barrier because the people that we are trying to attract are taught to go ahead and get their Masters, while here people are telling them to go work and then come back to get their Masters. This means that undergrad Yale students have an advantage in getting into the graduate programs here.

But, I’m proud to say that this year they opened that up a little bit. Since I have been here, they have accepted more students right out of undergrad. I now have two coming from NC State, both of which have 4.0 GPAs.

I think one of the ultimate barriers here at Yale is tenure. An institution like this one puts so much power in the hands of people who are brilliant, but who don’t know everything. How can a faculty member who’s not engaged in admissions talk about admissions? How can a faculty member that’s not engaged in fundraising have a conversation about fundraising or impact of policies? But when you’re on the board of permanent offices, you can sit at the table, you can vote, and you can talk about things. To me, that’s a poor structure. It keeps informed people out and it keeps people in that have power but do not have the experience to make wise decisions. So, they basically keep going in circles. It’s one of the reasons why they cannot get any faculty members of color here. They have the same people sitting at the table and having the same discussion.

Those are just two barriers, but I could keep going. It's the same barriers with testing, applications, and such. I see how they do things here and it's way different than where I came from. They really do look at people who think like them and look like them. They look at people who have the same pedigree and come from the same schools. I was not able to be in those rooms when I was at NC State. I just read the research and heard what people said. Now, I'm here and realizing that everything I heard about is all true. The good thing about being here is that they don't hide it. At least they're talking about it in some ways.

### **What challenging experiences do POC have at FES?**

When the students of color come here, they're already predisposed to feeling unequal, and the school reinforces those feelings. White students, even those who really care about these issues, do not really know or understand what's happening, the stress that students of color carry, their pain and how tough it's to be here. Unless you understand that the pressure of this place really can contribute to PTSD and other mental health issues, then you don't get it. It would sound as though people are just complaining because they have not had to deal with it. As we get to know people, we find that there are inequities in every community. It may be race with one, and it could be gender with another. It could be socioeconomic status in another place. It could be religion. For inequities, the content changes, but the context is the same.

Yale has many secret societies, like the forestry club, that for some may operate like a family, and for others operate like a fraternity or sorority. That means that if you're not in, you know you're not in, because you see what you have access to and what you don't have access to. It's such a critical part of Yale. It's a part of their identity and a part of their routine. But those things make it challenging for people of color to be here because they're not really inclusive, or at least they do not appear to be. I'm speaking generally, because I recognize that there are some students of color who are in the forestry club. But there are some that do not really coalesce with that.

So, I just think that the culture of this place makes it tough for people to be here. The way students of color understand it, this is not a culture of family. We're all here in the School of Forestry, but it's not a family in that if you really get in to trouble, we will get you out of that trouble. If you're at an HBCU, every student will know your name and know what's going on with you. People invest in you. But here you can be here and just be a number. Even in a place as small as this. There is a mentality of getting here, getting green, and then getting out. That's what students are here to do. When students first get here, they roll out the red carpet for them and show them everything. When school starts, they really get to see what the priorities are.

One thing that students of color particularly have to deal with is being treated as a representative for their racial group in classes and when they have conversations with people. Even though people know, for example, that one black student can't speak for all black people, they still ask questions about all black people.

Names are another thing that can be challenging for professors. For me, I want to learn a student's name. If I chop it up, I apologize. If they want me to say it differently, then that's fine, or they can even give me a nickname to use. But I caution my students who come in here with nicknames. I tell them that I people aren't taking the time to get to know their name, they're not taking the time to get to know them as a person. If they want to give me a nickname, then they're contributing to me not getting to know them by cutting it off. If they want someone to be patient with them coming in, they have to be patient with that person and me, too.

Reciprocity is something that I think a lot of people really don't get because everybody is more concerned about what they want. I get it, because we can't be objective about ourselves. I just tell people to realize that if they want it, then they need to give it to other people too.

I feel like our students of color feel like they don't get the same access to all of the information that other people do. For example, we require all students to have a summer internship, and by the

end of the first term, a lot of students have internships, and some are still looking. Often, those will be our students of color. They will feel like no one has told them about the experience, so they have to go figure it out on their own. A lot of times, people of color feel like they're in that field and not in that field. It's both a feeling and a perception, as well as a truth. It's like there's this extra information that they could have to add to their success, but they don't get access to it. Sometimes, professionals may not feel comfortable talking to them. Professors may not know how to communicate it to them. Sometimes, students are going to be intimidated to go in and ask because they think "they're a professor and I'm a student."

I think this whole hierarchy around here makes it challenging. But, what's so interesting is why the hierarchy is tough for the students of color while white students push past it all the time. I feel like both our students of color and our white students feel the same way. They're not sure if they can do it. I also feel like certain students let the hierarchy get in the way when it's convenient. Regardless of color, the hierarchy is always there. I don't feel like our students of color use their voice where white students did.

I'll give you an example. We have this environmental justice mentoring program that we just started with the New Haven Adult and Continuing Education Center office. The students came in wanting to do something in the community, wanting to address environmental justice, and wanting to be out there. We went out and set something up and then came back to the students to ask if they could come. But we were met with excuses for why they couldn't attend, like how they couldn't miss class, despite the fact that they had missed the same class a week before for an international trip. Now, that's taking advantage. They don't have a problem with seeking their own opportunities that people in New Haven would never have access to, but when it comes to doing real work, the 'rules' suddenly apply. When students are comfortable and doing more fun work, then exceptions can be made.

When we took 12 students out into the community two weeks ago, I wish you could've seen their faces.

I wish you could've been there to see how their whole expression and posture changed and they realized that what they were hearing wasn't what they heard in their classrooms. They had to learn to see what people were really dealing with and learn to see how their institution has been contributing to the problems they have. I don't think we don't have to go international to deal with stuff if we don't want to. We can just go across the street. Students have to stop making themselves feel like they are helping the world when they should just start around the corner for a change.

Another thing that we have to deal with is the pressure of finding our own community on top of the pressure from the community that we're also trying to represent and save. What works here doesn't work out there. That's what I tried to get my colleagues to understand. I like being black, and I won't be white. I say that to them every so often. What does that mean? It means that I don't look up to my white colleagues. I like who I am, and I like what my family does. I like what my community does. I'm also indigenous, and I like what my grandfather taught me as an Indian man. I bring all of that in here with me when I come to work. That means that, like I already said earlier about the policies, we do things differently. For example, the way that meetings are run here are how my community does them.

The reason that I do that to them is because when the issues first started happening, the first thing they would say to me is "we don't do that here." But, that's why they brought me here. I tell them that they shouldn't say that they want to do something differently and then keep doing the same thing. It doesn't work. That's not really diversity.

**What are ways that you envision changing that? What strategies are you employing, and what have you learned?**

I have to be on top of things the whole time that I'm here. I almost felt weird answering that question because each time I come up with an idea, it's always challenged.

The environmental justice mentoring program that I mentioned is one of them. Diversity, equity, and

inclusion students are involved in that as well as one of our faculty, Marian Edelman, who's a lawyer by practice. She has litigated environmental justice around the country. So, that's one initiative that we have where we're working in the community, which invited us. I think that's why it's been successful so far because we're responding to the community.

Another initiative that we have is continuing to work on how we communicate about diversity of community and inclusion in the school. With the students, we've done a meaningful conversation initiative where we talked about how to have meaningful conversations. We talked about class and how that dynamic works out in the job and within ourselves, and then how we could take that outside of here.

Another initiative that we're doing with staff is understanding identity development, and how we can show up at work and bring that into the workplace. We helped them better understand how race plays out in the workplace, how gender plays out in the workplace, and how religion plays out in the workplace so that everyone understands that they're responsible for the workplace. People can impact how others feel, good or bad. We just started that in January, so our next session is coming up the week after next.

We're trying to increase our capacity to address various issues around diversity and inclusion as they come up. That's why we've changed minds, and are continuing to change minds, as we do training for faculty who are teaching the modules and their TAs with the Center for Whole Communities. They're going to be leading that. The center is going to help us rethink modules and how we do things here, and then we're going to take what they give us and apply it to ourselves.

We're about to hire a new Director of Admissions, and once we do that we can really get on with recruitment, which is the thing that I really want to do. The new director will be my ultimate indication of whether or not I have been successful. It will show how I have impacted recruitment and retention of the people who are here.

I don't really like programs. To me, programs don't get to the root of anything unless we're going talk about the policies that uphold everything we do here. Don't expect us to just talk about culture and make people feel uncomfortable, only to have them walk away and avoid dealing with it. I'm not a proponent of doing workshops. I'm a proponent of creating movements. Workshops have to be a part of something else.

They have to address whatever we're doing at all levels. What the administration wants to do now is what I did in 2000 to 2013 before realizing it didn't work. When I came here, I decided we weren't going to keep doing these workshops, especially since this work that I didn't believe in was being handed off to me. All that diversity workshops do around the country is help people feel better without changing anything. The structure is still left in place. Even though people have learned something, it's unclear what will end up changing. If the relationship changes while the environment doesn't, then eventually I am not going to be able to stay here.

That fact that I've gone through workshops with people and re-injured myself in the process by reliving something that I didn't want to open up and deal with makes it even tougher. I don't want people to feel like I feel, because I'm not angry with them. I just want them to understand that even when they do something, they've still got a lot more that they could be doing.

I think it is really important for us to change how we do tenure and how we hire people. We also need to change what we do to retain people. I don't think I know it all. I really don't. But, all of the diversity professionals around here are pretty smart people. There are only five of us. There's one at the School of Medicine, The School of Art, The School of Drama, The School of Law, and then me. We all know these things that need to be changed and implemented in our environments, but we're separate from each other. We have to try to come together and work together. But people don't ask us what we think. Instead, they just ask us to do what they want us to do.



For my part, I make people listen to me at Yale FES and I don't let them ask me to do anything that is unproductive for my work. If I'm part of the solution and part of the community that they're trying to bring in here, then they need to listen to me as I generate ideas about what it will take for that community to get here. The only thing I need to ask is how things have been done in the past. I don't need to ask how they're feeling about what I'm doing. On a certain level, I really don't care because of previous experiences that I've had and research that demonstrates that when people are in power, they're not going to stop doing what works for them. They're going to keep doing what they think is right, so I'm going to keep pushing them.

The other issue that I have is if we're not changing policies or the overarching structure, then I feel like we're just perpetuating white supremacy. If the administration doesn't actually want to make the change, then there's no need for me to stay here. If we don't change anything and I decide to stay, that's when I'll start to be worn out. That's when I'll be beating myself up and running into a brick wall. I had health issues when I left NC State, and I won't let any other institution get me to that point. I love myself too much to let that happen.

For me, it's straight common sense. The administration cannot achieve what they are trying to achieve unless they change the system and change their approach. If they're not going to change that, then why would they want me to beat myself up trying to do this work? However, we can still get something done. It's just going to take more time because it means that I have to get them comfortable with the idea of my new work because if I do it all by myself, it's not sustainable.

The orientation we have for new students involves spending several days in the forest with your new classmates. I'm a forester, and if you're a forester, taking students outdoors to the forest, make sense. But, if I'm not going to be a forester, that does not really seem like it's orientation. It seems more like indoctrination. It's a way to indoctrinate students into who and what we are, so I do not feel like it is actually useful. I have been pretty vocal about that around here. I ask the administration, "what's the

purpose of this?" What's the point of being at Great Mountain? I'm peaking as a forester who uses the skills that they're teaching them, and I know that they're not going to use them when they leave. They say that it's part of our identity, but the students can't use it. They're not going to use it. That's why I say it's indoctrination, and the administration should own up to that. They should just say that's what it is instead of trying to convince themselves that it's some other thing.

I feel like I'm coming in with this grassroots level type thinking where I believe things should be basic. I believe that people like to sound pseudo-intelligent to make things complex, but there is no need for that. Brilliance is basic. What are people really learning here? Sometimes, you'll hear from professionals who are coming back to visit the school and can tell you what they experienced. Since we changed modules this year by adding two days of diversity enrichment at Great Mountain, it was a different experience for the students coming in for their first year from what I heard about the past few years where that topic was only covered for 2 to 4 hours. That still doesn't make things perfect. It just means that we dealt with things a little bit deeper on topics like race, the impacts of FES on the world, and a number of other things.

### **What advice would you give to environmental studies departments trying to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion?**

It is important to know your system. The initiative has to come from working to make the administration comfortable. What most people want is to be able to have different initiatives for bringing in people of color, for bringing in women, and for bringing in LGBTQ students. Down South, there are plenty of schools doing that. But at Yale FES that's not what they need. What's happening here is that they're bringing different people in and hurting them all over. They don't need those kinds of initiatives here, but rather a massive cultural change.

The incoming students are still expected to apply and abide by these rules. But these rules don't align with them. Here, faculty members don't get tenure for being a great teacher, but rather for getting



published a lot. So many of those published faculty can write well but can't teach well. That means that the place where they have the greatest opportunity to impact this industry by sending out leaders into the world, the one place where faculty have the largest opportunity to make change, they don't actually get any credit for. That really needs to change. By tying student success to faculty success, this will become a whole new institution.

**Anything else you would like to talk about?**

I do want to say that I'm doing the work that I'm doing here because there is a great group of folks here. I love the curiosity and the tenacity to want to do this work. I love the patience that they're trying to have. It's just going to take time. I don't know if the change will happen while I am here, but I will lay the blueprints for it to be implemented moving forward.

I think that people of color often don't want to be a part of the environmental movement because of many of the reasons I stated before. Organizations that are a part of it tend to keep operating in the same mindset. The people who are in power actually need to be quiet and sit aside. That's what needs to happen for a little bit. They need to get out of the way so that they can allow diversity professionals to do what we need to do. If people of color had that mentality, that would really scare the people that are preventing this change from happening. But, people of color never do that. We're always benevolent. I just don't share that perspective anymore. I'm still going to be nice and gentle, but I also understand a lot about what it took to get here. I'm all about setting up environments where people can empower themselves to do things.

## Jacqueline Patterson

NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Program  
Director

By Clara Fang

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### **Can you tell us about what you do and what the NAACP is doing to address climate change?**

The NAACP is addressing climate change both on the mitigation side and the adaptation side of the equation. We have two strategic objectives surrounding mitigation, and the third is largely about adaptation. We want to make sure there is equity with both mitigation and adaptation.

On the mitigation side, our first strategic objective is to reduce harmful emissions, particularly greenhouse gases. We work with 1200 branches and chapters throughout the country on everything from passing clean air ordinances at the local level, particularly in places where there isn't preemption, to clean air resolutions at the local level to at least start the dialogue around what quality of air folks want.

Before the 2016 election, we worked more at the federal level on protection and defenses of the Clean Air Act and rulemaking under the Clean Air Act, like the new source performance standards from power plants and the Clean Power Plan. Since the election, we've focused more on local efforts to reducing emissions. We work on clean air ordinances and with communities on a plant by plant basis. We also work with youth on doing citizen science projects, like testing their own air, water, and soil, and then helping them to develop an advocacy plan around the findings from this testing and monitoring.

We have a primer coming out on April 1st that's called "Fossil Fuels Foolery: The Top 10 Manipulation Tactics that Fossil Fuel Companies Use." We're



excited because someone is sponsoring a cartoonist to help to illustrate it.

Our second objective is advancing energy efficiency and clean energy policies and practices. While we want to stop the bad, we also want to work on building the good. We put a lot of effort into making sure that not only are we transitioning to a cleaner and more energy efficient economy, but that communities of color and low-income communities are really a part of that transition and not just at the lowest rungs of the ladder. We want them to be at all levels and leading the new energy revolution.

We launched the solar equity initiative last year, where we work with GRID Alternatives and Sunrun to do solar installations for low income homes. We started by doing this on a community center, the Genesee Center for Domestic Violence Prevention and Intervention in LA. We're working on making sure that people of color, low income people, and women are getting trained in the solar industry so that they are part of one of the fastest growing job categories. We're working with the most marginalized in our society, like homeless veterans, to make sure they get connected, trained in solar, and placed in jobs. We also started a Power Up employment project for formerly incarcerated people to get trained on solar, as well as energy efficiency retrofits, weatherization, and so forth. We're really trying to make sure it reaches all areas of society.

In Texas, we're doing a solar installation on an immigrant rights center in Laredo, Texas, which is a border community. It's in an area with 40% unemployment and a list of other challenges as an immigrant community. We are working closely with them to not only have solar so that they're saving money on their electric bills, because they've had more days above ninety degrees than Death Valley, but also to set up a solar training center that would be the only solar training center within hundreds of miles. Normally, the NAACP just does civil rights advocacy policy change work. But with this, we felt like we really needed to be intentional about having people be able to touch this work closely in order to be better advocates. Otherwise, people might not necessarily see how it ties into our civil rights agenda. We've been very practical about our work there.

Our advocacy side is about advancing energy efficiency resource standards, renewable portfolio standards, community solar policies, and net metering policies. Our economic justice side is about passing policies around local higher provisions and disadvantaged business enterprise provisions for minority and women owned businesses

Our third objective is strengthening community resilience in the context of climate adaptation, recognizing that sea level rise is already displacing communities, disasters are already taking lives and displacing communities, and that shifted agricultural yields are making food insecurities in so many communities even worse. We're both working on helping communities build adaptive practices and the policies that they need to have better systems that will be able to weather the storms, both literally and figuratively.

### **What are the challenges in what you do?**

The reason we're putting out that "Fossil Fuel Foolery" report and really homing in on the manipulation tactics is because those companies have historically targeted our communities to build relationships, make it seem like they're our friends, and pretend like they're acting in our interests. In reality, they are wealth-building monopoly schemes, and we want to uncover that. Up until now, it's been

a challenge because they have been very shrewd about integrating and incorporating themselves into our communities and incorporating some of the community folk into their operations. So, it has definitely been a challenge trying to confront some of that.

It's kind of sad, like telling your friends that their partner is cheating on them, trying to tell people who have really built up relationships. It's not just a money thing, since these companies have been very intentional about building relationships with these communities.

A challenge that we have managed to overcome by having this very practical project has been the notion of "what does this have to do with civil rights?" That is a notion that comes up both internally and externally, and even with other organizations. We have had to do some internal and external education about how completely connected this environmental work is to our civil rights agenda.

### **What do you think about carbon pricing as a solution to climate change? What are the concerns of the EJ community?**

I think the concept of anything that's going to reduce carbon emissions, given our catastrophic slide towards climate change, is worth discussing. The EJ communities, and various people within those communities, have had challenges around the notion of pricing something that kills. There is a concern about legitimizing it by making it part of the market as something you can pay for, like how you can pay for gum. That seems to be the basic language and framing of it, the notion that there shouldn't be something in the market that's unnecessary and fatal.

Another thing is that if we know that it's more expensive to burn carbon in general, then we know from experience that it's less expensive to burn carbon in communities of color and low-income communities. The concern is that it might actually result in reducing carbon emissions where it's most expensive to operate, and therefore potentially increasing operations in places where it's less expensive to operate. That's another challenge around not having source-based regulations, and

instead having a general price per ton on carbon. It leaves that level of flexibility and latitude.

Folks have concerns with the framing, language, and concept of carbon pricing, as well as the operationalization and ways that it may actually have a regressive impact. There's also a concern that no matter how much the dividend is, it's not enough or even comparable to the costs that communities are paying. That's a critique, though it's not as articulate as someone who works on this very deeply would be able to make, that you hear most often.

### **How might we communicate our response to the concerns of the EJ community?**

That's a good question. I think you can do so in a couple of ways. One would be to have more of a push towards the illegalization of carbon emissions. The tax should be framed more as a penalty rather than prices people can pay for a good or service. I think that outlawing and penalizing would be the kind of language that people would find more acceptable, as well as having some source regulations so that everything isn't just at the whim of the market.

By having this kind of across the board price, it means that companies get to decide where to start and where to stop based on what's going to be better for their pocketbooks, and marginalized communities will be on the losing end of the equation. Coupling this price with specific limitations that are put on the very facilities that are in those communities will decrease the chance of it having a disproportionate negative effect on those communities. If plants that are only in use at certain times become fully operational because they've taken other plants that are more expensive to operate offline, then these communities will be harmed.

Those types of moves would make it less challenging and would mitigate the negative impacts. We are currently putting together a carbon pricing paper that looks at the various models and recommendations and lays out some of the equity challenges around them, so that might be even more helpful to you.

### **How have organizations communicated with EJ community on this?**

Unlike your question of how to make your message more favorable to the EJ community, other organizations are insistent on getting us on board with their current message. Some years ago, when I went and spoke at a climate conference, it was quite a situation. During the speakers' lunch, it was a sizeable room, and yet I was the only black person. There were some very strange exchanges. Anybody who isn't used to being in those kinds of situations would have found it very questionable. It wasn't just that I was the only black person there, but that there were hardly any people of color there at all. The reflection of the utter homogeneity in the room was the utter lack of cultural competence.

### **How long has your organization been working to connect environmental issues with civil rights issues?**

This is actually the ten-year anniversary of it being a part of a formal national program. Before then, it was happening more at the local level in areas that were facing very specific EJ challenges. As a national program with a framework around intersectionality with civil rights, we've only been working on this for ten years. We started this official work at the national level by having workshops on this at our annual convention. At the regional level, we started workshops at Civil Rights Advocacy Training Institutes.

In the beginning, people were bemused. When I first did a workshop, I was in Oklahoma City for Region 6, which is our Southwest Region, the name of it was Climate Justice 101. One of our clients thought that the workshop was going to be about the climate of workplace discrimination, the idea of environmental justice didn't even occur to them. They later understood because we always use stories of things that are actually happening in our communities to make the link. Another time that we did this workshop, someone thought that the workshop was going to be about the climate of injustice in the world. They had no notion of what we were talking about.

We've come a long way from there in that we've built up a lot of state and local leaders who can speak to this from very real community-based perspective. Now, it's not like we're going into communities blind and asking for this topic to be implemented. We're having these conversations at the national level and at the regional level. If people come wanting to learn more about it, implement a solar project in their community, or address a coal plant in their community, then we go to the community. We put our wares out and have these different forums so that if people say they want to learn more, they can invite us. We won't go to communities uninvited.

**What is your advice for improving the culture of the organization to be more welcoming? (hiring diverse staff and leadership, anti-oppression education, EJ education, etc.?)**

I think that anti-oppression training is important, for sure. There are groups that could help with this, such as People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), and SURGE. I would start by having a conversation with a couple of those groups. There are also individual consultants that will help, like Angela Park, who is very good. She has worked with LCV and some of these other big green organizations, so she would be a great person to do that.

They can work with leadership to put together an action plan for doing these kinds of trainings. Whether it's starting at the national level or connecting with certain chapters so that each chapter can get connected with the local SURGE and they do trainings together. There are people who can help put these trainings together.

**What is your advice for doing outreach to people of color on climate change?**

I think that without having anti-oppression trainings, it would be more harmful than good. Like I said, if I hadn't been used to situations like the one I experienced at the National Conference, and if I was a different person, everybody in the world would've known about it. It would've turned that person off from the organization permanently.

So, I think that without doing the groundwork of trainings, it would be counterproductive in a lot of ways. Unless there's an openness to really listen to EJ concerns, it would also be counterproductive. People would feel like you've wasted their time by asking them about this when you have no intention of changing in any way. That's even worse than continuing on with what you're currently doing.

After in-depth anti-oppression training, volunteers would get a better sense of what the best approaches are to having outreach conversations. Whether it's having them join their local EJ group, meeting others where they are is what's key. It's not about trying to pull people over, it's about meeting people where they are and joining forces with other groups to form allyship, understanding them, and building those relationships before starting to introduce whatever you're trying to tell them. You should not go where you are not invited, and you should be understanding their problems, their solutions, and what they care about.

**What organizations have done this well and transitioned to being good allies that we can look to as examples?**

I don't know if you've heard of the B Initiative, or Building Equity and Alignment for Impact. It is a national group that's big green, philanthropy, and grassroots groups all coming together to really talk about where the common ground is and how we can build together.

There aren't many models, but the Sierra Club's EJ program, specifically, would be good to look at. It's run by Leslie Fields, an African American attorney, and they have a group of organizers that have a certain ethos and are very deliberate and intentional about how they organize and build relationships. They tend to be well-received in what they're doing, so I would definitely look to that model. I would even recommend that you all have a conversation with Leslie because she can really speak from a similar perspective as CCL as someone who's walking a similar path.

**What do you perceive are the barriers for people of color to be engaged in climate policy at the federal level and how could we address them?**



I think the biggest barrier is that there's so much happening that's pulling on people's time and energy. Just since the last few weeks, I've accumulated 2000 messages that all start with "Dear Jacquie." That's after I've filtered out all the listserves and non-essential things. That's on top of the other stuff that I do, like writing proposals, running trainings, doing talks, etc. I could have two full-time jobs just answering emails.

That's the problem with being a person of color in this work because people act like we're unicorns, and we're just constantly inundated. Even more so for folks that are on the front lines, there's just so much that they face, especially since the returns are questionable. In particular, this is happening at the federal level now. We used to do a lot more with the Clean Air Act and all the rule-making, but now we focus more on clean air ordinances and things that we can actually influence and move now. People are just making a calculation as to where best to put limited energy and time. Even if people are middle class and don't have income as a concern, they still have limited time and energy, and there's always the calculation of where to best put those resources.

I think the important thing is to make sure that there are multiple benefits. For example, when the People's Climate March was being planned, I was concerned because I wasn't sure what it was going to result in, while making people spend the money, energy, and time to go there. I was thinking that to make the event worth it, we would have to have some workshops or something during that time so that people could go to contribute something, but also return with something they learned that they could implement in their community or a toolkit they could use at home.

Similarly, when people are engaged at the federal level, even if its symbolic or just kind of raising awareness and not going to have any immediate results, it's important to make sure that there's time built in for learning. It can't just be a thing where people fly in, have a talk on Capitol Hill, and then fly back out. There has to be time for people to build fellowship or learn something so that it's not just an action that they contributed.



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