

The Environmental Movement Doesn't Resemble the Obama Coalition

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Notes on the Unbearable Whiteness of the Green Movement

Last week Earth Island Institute hosted a discussion here at the David Brower Center in Berkeley to explore what the results of the 2012 election will mean for the environmental movement. I had the pleasure of moderating the evening's conversation with a rock star cast of [California Assemblywoman Nancy Skinner](#), former Clinton-era EPA official and the former Western Director of the NRDC, [Felicia Marcus](#), and Michael Marx, a veteran corporate accountability activist who now leads the [Sierra Club's Beyond Oil campaign](#).

Portions of the conversation were expected. Everyone agreed that Barack Obama's re-election, the Democratic gains in the US Senate, and the significant Democratic wins in the California legislature will prevent any rollbacks of major environmental laws. We won't have to play defense, and that's a relief. At the same time, everyone agreed that Democratic wins don't mean we're headed for Ecotopia. The Democrats are unreliable allies, at best, and environmental advocates and organizations will have to keep pushing for laws and policies that protect public health, our air, our water, our wild places, and the planet's atmosphere to see any forward motion.

"We have to be smart about picking issues," Assemblywoman Skinner said. When asked what that means, the three environmental veterans agreed that the best chances for defending the environment will come through the (California and federal) executive branches' existing regulatory powers. "Anything we could get out of this Congress wouldn't be good," the Sierra Club's Michael Marx said. So progress will have to come from federal and state agencies enforcing their existing powers to the best of their ability. This could mean new rules on CO₂ emissions, new rules on chemical disclosure, and tighter prohibitions about extractive industries on public lands.

The real electricity of the night came when Assemblywoman Skinner spoke with passion about what should be obvious, but so far seems to have gone unmentioned by the eco-commentariat: The fact that the environmental movement bears very little resemblance to the coalition of voters who kept President Obama in the White House.

"The president was re-elected with strong support from African-Americans, Latinos, women, and young people," Skinner said. "And the environmental movement, at least its leadership, remains mostly old white guys."

Environmental movement, make a note-to-self: When we look more like a Romney-Ryan election night gathering than an Obama-Biden election night gathering, we're in trouble.

That might be overstating things a bit — but not by much. Yes, the environmental movement is plenty youthful, with youth-led or youth-dominated groups like [Energy Action](#) and [350.org](#) spearheading the effort to stem climate change. And, just like in much of the progressive NGO sector, women are in key leadership roles in many environmental outfits. (Rebecca Tarbotton of [Rainforest Action Network](#) and Frances Beinecke from [NRDC](#) come to mind, as does the estimable Betsy Taylor of Breakthrough Strategies.)

But all of those individuals and all of those organizations share something in common: They're rather pale.

This isn't news, of course. The unbearable whiteness of the green movement was called out publicly for the first time at least 20 years ago, when [Dr. Robert Bullard](#) and others noted how environmental groups had neglected issues of environmental racism and injustice. Since then,

some important progress toward alliance-building and solidarity have been made. The “Big Green” groups appear to have internalized the idea that a healthy environment is a human rights issue. National civil rights organizations understand how pollution and environmental destruction can harm their constituencies. (Just see this [NAACP report on coal](#) published last week.) And there are a constellation of organizations and individuals — [Green for All](#), [Urban Habitat](#), [Little Village Environmental Justice Organization](#), [Communities for a Better Environment](#), Van Jones, Carl Anthony, Majora Carter, Will Allen (to name just a very few) — for whom there isn’t a division between caring about civil rights and human rights and caring about the environment. Or, as Bullard likes to say: “If you drink water, you’re an environmentalist. If you breathe air, you’re an environmentalist. If you eat food, you’re an environmentalist.”

Still, despite this progress, I think it’s fair to say that most Americans perceive environmentalism to be a white thing. Backcountry camping, buying organic food, and going to climate change protests remain “Stuff White People Like.”

I can’t say I have any mind-blowing prescriptions for resolving this. At least, nothing beyond what’s already been said a million times already: The need for enviros to listen more and talk less; the importance of reducing self-righteousness and self-importance in favor of meeting people where they are at with humor and patience; the necessity of demonstrating how a healthy environment can truly lift all boats; the value of ecological education programs that expose kids of color (and all kids) to wild places; the virtue of real solidarity in place of on-again, off-again recruitment.

No, all I’ve got to offer is a long, hard look in the mirror — and with it the recognition that our environmental movement resembles the America of the past more than it does the America of the future.