Earth Day Is Too White and Out of Touch With Reality

Why is the annual event so benign and toothless when the threats to the planet—particularly to its most vulnerable populations—are so severe?

BY **EMILY ATKIN**, NEW REPUBLIC **April 20, 2017**
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This Saturday, on Earth Day, children will paint their faces at mini carnivals and teenagers will pick up trash in public parks. Zoos and museums will throw "parties for the planet," complete with composting workshops. Businesses will convene "swap shops" where people can exchange old clothes and other miscellany they don't want anymore. Bars will host "green-conscious" tap takeovers and donate the proceeds to tree planting (or, in some cases, not donate anything at all). And countless Americans will mark the day by going for a long run or practicing yoga outdoors, as if they don't already do that every weekend.

Meanwhile, in North Dakota, the Standing Rock Sioux tribe will brace for the flow of oil alongside their sacred land, thanks to the recent completion of the Dakota Access Pipeline. The people of Flint, Michigan, will continue to drink tap water through a filter, because tens of thousands of city pipes are tainted with lead. For a disproportionate number of low-income, minority communities across America, Earth Day will be just another day of living downwind of fossil fuel power plants, which President Donald Trump has promised to further deregulate.

Why is Earth Day so benign and toothless when the immediate threats to the planet—particularly to its most vulnerable populations—are so severe?

Anthony Rogers-Wright's answer is simple: "Earth day is mainly a white person thing." The organizing director at Environment America, Rogers-Wright is a rising star for his work highlighting climate change's impact on marginalized communities. But Earth Day is never really on his radar. "I mean, I might take my 19-month-old son to the park or something," he said, "But it's sort of like Black History Month. It's fine, but are we just going to forget about the plight of African Americans after February?"

For those who live with environmental problems every day—mostly low-income, minority, and indigenous populations in America and around the world—every day is Earth Day. While there are programs this Saturday for vulnerable communities, “they’re just not getting an equitable level of transmission,” Rogers-Wright said. “And that’s been the story for many years in the environmental so-called movement.”

Rogers-Wright derides the “so-called movement” because, he says, the nation’s leading environmental groups too often neglect environmental justice communities. Earth Day is a manifestation of that disconnect—an event that, like much of the environmental world, focuses too much on making white people feel good about recycling and driving Pruises than helping those suffering from environmental injustice. “It has turned into a device for the mostly white male-led nonprofit industrial complex to raise money for causes they don’t have a plan for,” he said, citing the amorphous fight against climate change and general environmental degradation.

The president of one such leading environmental group agrees. “Right now people might take a styrofoam cup and paint a planet on it with paint that might be tainted with lead,” said Aaron Mair, the Sierra Club’s first black president. “We need to make people uncomfortable, to shatter that convenience.”

Earth Day wasn’t supposed to be a corny celebration of green living. Founded in 1970, amid rising awareness of industry’s unchecked pollution of the air and water, its organizers aimed to apply the lessons of civil-right activism to the environmental movement. “The original founders of Earth Day literally borrowed pages from the then-happening civil rights movement to engage in righteous civil disobedience, righteous group mass action, to have humanity look at environmental degradation and the degradation of lives of individuals,” Mair said.

In fact, the organizers even made racial equality central to their message. As Brentin Mock recounted in Grist, Earth Day coordinator Denis Hayes “wanted to marry science with social justice activism.” At the time, Hayes said that

organizers' "goal is not to clean the air while leaving slums and ghettos, nor is it to provide a healthy world for racial oppression and war." Civil rights activist Channing Phillips, another organizer, recognized that environmental problems would not be distributed equally: "[Racial] injustice, war, urban blight, and environmental rape have a common denominator in our exploitive economic system."

The first Earth Day also marked the environmental movement's break from its white supremacist roots. Last month, on the occasion of the Sierra Club's 125th anniversary, Mair wrote, **"**Few Sierrans realize that race, population eugenics, and 'natural order' were critical features and values of our founders and naturalist societies of the late 19th and 20th centuries, which largely blamed environmental degradation on developing and non-European populations." He added, "It was not until Earth Day in 1970—nearly eight decades after the Sierra Club's founding—that environmentalism per se arose in response to the crises of ... pollution and environmental degradation."
The original Earth Day was not only intersectional, it was effective: Historians largely credit the movement that began on that day for the the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and the eventual passage of the Clean Air and Clean Water acts.

But echoes remain of the environmental movement's ugly history. Anti-immigration groups Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) and NumbersUSA, for example, have played a "major role" at Earth Day events in Dallas. Their argument is that strict immigration policies prevent overpopulation, and thus reduce stress on the environment. When environmental organizations shunned these groups' participation, they had their history thrown back in their faces. "Until fairly recently, The Sierra Club had a similar position and wanted to limit population growth in the United States because of the consequences for the environment," a FAIR spokesperson told the conservative Daily Caller last year.

Acknowledging this history is a key step toward a more inclusive Earth Day, Mair argues. "We've contributed to this schism that has historically excluded communities of color," he said. Owning that history is a critical piece of

changing history.” The next step: increasing diversity among event organizers, which is no small feat given that the membership and leadership of the major environmental groups is disproportionately white and middle class. “White folks will have to exercise some austerity with their leadership,” Rogers-Wright said, suggesting that Earth Day events be organized by “the original guardians of the earth—indigenous people.”Earth Day could also return to its roots as a civil rights–inspired protest.

At the same time, the onus is on the more privileged classes to change Earth Day from a feel-good exercise for well-off liberals to a day of mass activism to help the underprivileged, who have more immediate concerns than environmental injustice (let alone global warming). “A lot of working class are too busy working in their economic conditions,” Mair said. “People are worried about getting food on their tables.” That’s not true, it’s safe to say, for most people who come out for Earth Day celebrations—and they’re the ones with the donor money, volunteer time, and political capital to effect change in a way that the affected communities can’t. So stop partying for the planet, and start making Earth Day the force for social change that it once was.