

# How the Environmental Movement Can Better Engage Women of Color

BY Aparna Rajagopal-Durbin, Earth Island Journal October 9, 2018  
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As a cisgender woman of South Asian Indian descent who has decided to make a career in the environmental space, I often get asked to discuss challenges faced by people with marginalized identities in the environmental and conservation space. A part of me gets it: Black womxn, Indigenous womxn, and womxn of color (BIWOC) in particular do face some challenges. But viewing inclusion and equity as a challenge, rather than an opportunity, is where the environmental movement often stumbles and fails.

True, BIWOC are underrepresented in mainstream environmental organizations, and particularly in the Big Green sector (check out [data from Green 2.0](#)). And notwithstanding the mainstream environmental movement's push to recruit BIWOC into entry level positions, we continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions.

The recruitment, retention, promotion, and engagement of BIWOC can seem daunting to mainstream environmental groups. But the reality is quite different. We are not a challenge; we are an opportunity. And the opportunity

lies in reimagining what the “environmental movement” is, and actively dismantling some of the barriers we face. So below are some common misperceptions about BIWOC and the environmental movement, and ways organizations with resources and power can work to change the paradigm.

**“BIWOC are not involved in environmentalism.”**

Though well-intentioned, this statement amounts to erasure of the efforts of BIWOC throughout history to address environmental issues, as well as the work of BIWOC leaders of today. BIWOC have been on the front lines of environmental justice advocacy since the beginning — often because they and children of color are disproportionately impacted by environmental harm. Here I think of Dolores Huerta and womxn delegates at the First National People of Color Environmental Summit in 1991. BIWOC continue to lead organizations that connect communities in meaningful ways to their environment. Here I think of Rue Mapp of **Outdoor Afro**, Jaylyn Gough of **Native Women’s Wilderness**, and Jolie Valera of **Indigenous Women Hike**, among others. BIWOC were pivotal in important environmental events in history as well as in shaping the environmental ethos that mainstream organizations embrace. Here I think of Zilpa White, a freed slave who lived independently on Walden Pond prior to Henry David Thoreau, who had no

choice but to live “off the grid,” and who actually served as an inspiration to Thoreau (for more information, read “[Black Walden](#)”).

**“BIWOC should reclaim their space in the environmental and public lands movement. After all these lands are all of ours.”**

This statement has been a rallying cry of the public lands conservation sector, which has been clamoring to involve more people of color in their work because the votes of the growing majority are pivotal to their advocacy efforts. But this statement constitutes a different kind of erasure, one that perpetuates colonialism by erasing the centuries of genocide, removal, dispossession, assimilation, and dehumanization of Indigenous people by the US government and White settlers in service of creating public lands (among other things).

This means that I (as a non-Indigenous womxn) don’t use a possessive narrative around public lands. This means that I refrain from using the term “people of color” in a sweeping and simple way to refer to an entire group of people as if they are a monolith. There is so much diversity amongst us. And this also means I need to acknowledge settler colonialism and support Indigenous peoples.

**“As one of few BIWOC in this movement, you should serve on a panel to speak to ways we can diversify our movement and become more culturally relevant.”**

This one is tough because I have indulged this request often. But then again, I make my living from doing this work. Other BIWOC, especially those who are committing their time to supporting their own communities, are often pressured into speaking for “their people,” which can be oppressive on many fronts. First, it feels tokenizing to be asked to speak simply because of our identities. Second, it feels as if we’re asked to speak for an entire group of people simply because we all share an identity. And finally, my colleagues are asked to speak but often not compensated or supported in return.

**“We’ll give you funding once you create a theory of change, a logic model, show you’ve applied for 501(c)(3) status, and create world peace.”**

Ok that last piece was facetious, but the point is that organizations of color receive disproportionately less funding than white-led organizations, and BIWOC-led organizations even less. Ironically, studies show that the fastest growing group of entrepreneurs are BIWOC, who are bucking the system and establishing their own organizations to do the work of community engagement and equity that the mainstream environmental movement has struggled to make happen. Logic models, theories of change, flow charts, and business plans are all hallmarks of a dominant culture that is attached to linear thinking and frameworks and documents and research (I find [this piece on](#)

White Supremacy culture helpful in unpacking this one). As long as foundations and grantors continue to make funding contingent upon organizations jumping through this many hoops, BIWOC will continue to be underfunded.

**“Can you speak to women’s experiences in the environmental movement? But don’t talk about race: We’re just interested in talking about women.”**

Equity and inclusion efforts in the environmental space are siloed. There are initiatives and programs for women, for people of color, for people in the LGBTQ community, and other marginalized identities. But the reality is that we don’t walk through the world with just one identity, or one marginalized identity. As a woman of color, I cannot just speak to the experience of being a woman because those experiences are inextricably intertwined with my experience as a person of color. Intersectionality demands we recognize the way oppression is interconnected. For example, a heterosexual, Black, female-identified person may experience power and privilege differently than a queer, Black, female-identified person or a heterosexual, White, female-identified person. Activist Audre Lorde reminds us: “There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”

**“You’re so articulate, put together, and professional. You’re a great fit for a senior level position.”**

Those BIWOC who are rewarded in the mainstream environmental space through promotion, etc. are often rewarded because they possess one or more dominant identities or they’re able to code switch and change their behavior or appearance to access privilege. I credit part of my success to the fact that I was raised in an upper middle-class stable family environment, went to college and graduate school, assimilated early to “American” ways of being after my family immigrated here, and was able to practice my stoic demeanor after years of practicing law. A combination of anti-Blackness, respectability politics, and other oppressive structures has created a system in which only those BIWOC who play by certain rules are rewarded. If we don’t play by the rules, we’re either unprofessional looking, inarticulate, angry, hard to understand, or (if you’re using code), “just not a great fit for the position.”

At this point, you might be feeling guilty (“I’ve said some of these things!”) angry (“Who is this lady purporting to tell me what to do?”) or sad (“I’ll never get this right. I’m going to give up.”). I’ll ask you all to lean into these uncomfortable feelings for a bit and process through them, and come out the other end with a plan to take one of more of the misperceptions above and flip the script. There is so much opportunity to better engage and include BIWOC.

