

Is the Green Movement Too White?

by Chris Clarke of the Ecology Center

Four years ago Becky Lum waited her turn at an automatic teller machine at San Francisco State and noticed some people working the line, collecting signatures for a forest protection initiative. The canvassers talked to each person, one at a time, as the line progressed. Becky fished a pen out of her pack in order to sign. She'd been looking forward to a chance to add her name to the petition. But when the canvassers reached her place in the line, they skipped her and went on to the next person. Becky was the only Asian-American person in the line.

I heard about the incident and brought it to the attention of some people I knew who were working on the campaign. I supported the initiative, and didn't want its success eroded by the unconscious racism of otherwise well-intentioned volunteers. The two organizers I spoke to had the same response, "They probably assumed she wasn't a citizen."

A minor incident, to be sure, though it deterred Becky from devoting any time or energy to the initiative, which lost. It's probably a safe assumption that the above incident was multiplied a few times that day; the initiative certainly suffered due to lack of support outside relatively affluent, largely-white environmental circles.

And I certainly don't intend to single out that particular campaign for criticism, as it's no worse than most of the rest of the mainstream environmental movement. Consider:

There's a well-funded conservation group that (quite rightly) criticizes Japan's horrid environmental policies, but does so with a large inflatable Godzilla puppet, leading one observer to wonder why they didn't use Speedy Gonzalez to symbolize their opposition to NAFTA.

The same organization declares a rainforest people's struggle to maintain their traditional way of life "over," and solicits money to "ease their transition into the modern world."

Another dreadnought organization signs on to proposed legislation which would restrict immigration-from Mexico and Asia.

And (lest we at the Ecology Center be accused of being holier-than-thou) a grassroots environmental organization in the East Bay criticizes other groups for racist practices, while maintaining an almost totally white Board of Directors (possibly partly due to its volunteer status); of its staff of 35 people, only four are people of color in positions not centered around manual labor.

There has been significant progress made by mainstream groups in addressing their own racial bias over the past few years. Greenpeace and the Earth Island Institute, in particular, have taken the lead among the "Big 20" environmental groups in rearranging their priorities to better reflect the diverse makeup of the society they purport to represent. Earth Island sponsors a precedent-setting Urban Habitat project, and has appointed the apparently indefatigable Carl Anthony as the Institute's president. Greenpeace has aggressively tackled the issue of environmental racism, notably toxic industry's preferential location in communities of color; the group's outward focus has also been reflected in its hiring practices. And if one expands the field of view to include other than well-funded national organizations, hundreds of local grassroots groups are fighting toxic dumping and speculative development of urban open space, advocating urban gardens and restoring creeks, and they're doing it in a culturally-inclusive way.

But the fact remains; most national "environmentalist" organizations are lily-white. And those established groups that have addressed the issue to some extent have done so after pressure has

been applied from communities of color. Why has the established environmental movement been so slow to address issues facing communities of color? Why do some activists' demands for the preservation of biodiversity apparently exclude human racial and cultural diversity?

Part of the answer can be found in the attitudes of the environmentalist organizations' staff. Though people of color tend to give a higher proportion of their income to charitable organizations than do European-Americans, and though fundraising done by most ecology groups takes this fact of life into account, mainstream environmentalists tend not to return the favor by addressing issues of immediate importance to people in the neighborhood, nor do they admit that those communities may have important ideas about issues not directly relevant to said neighborhood.

ETHNIC PURITY IN THE WILDERNESS?

Let's look at a typical example of this selective blindness: the assertion that non-white people don't pay attention to wilderness issues. You'll hear this one a lot, and certainly, if one's only standard is the racial makeup of organizing meetings of the wilderness-protection groups, it has the ring of truth.

But even just a bit of research brings one to the conclusion that probably the most effective wilderness organizing in the world has been done by indigenous people that depend on wilderness as their home, their larder, their habitat. From the G-O Road battle in Northwestern California to the lowlands of Brazil, native people are at the forefront of much of the wilderness-protection action taking place today. Though mainstream activists are starting to belatedly give credit where it's due, the "official" green picture of native people is generally a patronizing one, treating vibrant, present-day cultures as extinct, and one-dimensional at that.

When local values come into conflict with "green" values, that patronizing tone can become derogatory. Witness the dispute between small-scale Chicano ranchers and large Green Corporations like the Nature Conservancy in the mountains of New Mexico. Though there was room for reasoned objection to arguments presented by both sides, the Nature Conservancy and the National Audubon Society characterized their opposition as merely self-interested, backwards yokels. Locals' suggestion that low-intensity grazing may actually have been a sustainable use of the land was ignored. Though TNC and Audubon's hearts may have been pure, one can't deny that their modus operandi differed little from that of Chevron's in Richmond, as they followed their absentee agenda without input from the people in the neighborhood.

The problem stems, generally, from the European notion that wilderness is defined by its absence of human influence. This notion originally proposed that wilderness was a thing to be conquered by European settlement; it now claims that wilderness is a thing to be protected by European-American management. A peculiar mental disjointedness allows mainstream environmentalists to both acknowledge the existence of Native American culture, for instance, while describing the pre-conquest American landscape as untrammled and untouched by "humans." The idea that humans can live, and have lived, in a sustainable relationship with their habitat that approaches the classic definition of an ecological niche, is largely outside the accepted terms of argument. The unspoken assumption is that such people are not fully human.

And once you make that assumption, any decision you make about the land those people live on will likely deprive them of their full spectrum of rights, whether it's a "debt-for-nature" swap in which people lose access to traditional hunting grounds (subsumed in a new park) or a "sustainable" development program where native people are plugged into the world economy, selling nuts or tree sap to green

capitalists. From the vantage point of a person forced to abandon her traditional culture to the marketplace, there may not seem to be much difference between the World Wide Fund for Nature and the World Bank.

You don't have to look to the rainforest for examples of environmentalists causing injury to people of color. The World Wildlife Fund's panda trademark can be seen on boxes of rubber stamps of endangered animals; WWF accepts part of the profits from sales of the stamps. The Oakland-based manufacturer of WWF's rubber stamps, Rubber Stampede, is being sued by a former employee, who alleges that her ex-bosses knowingly violated worker safety laws, exposing an almost entirely Spanish-speaking work force to dangerous solvents without providing the required protective gear. The manufacturer had also been lauded by environmentalists for using starch packing pellets instead of styrofoam.

WHAT TO DO?

It's easy enough to come up with horror stories; harder to suggest ways to prevent them.

But there are a few things I've picked up along the way that are helpful for a person seeking to explore and combat their own racism. Though I've usually heard them targeted at individuals, they seem eminently applicable to organizations. They might just serve as well for groups with million-dollar budgets as they do for the individual.

Talk to people. It's a cliché but it's one for a reason. The best cure for racism is friendship. The more you know about a person or group of people, the more likely you are to take their feelings into account. Unfamiliarity, in this case, breeds contempt.

Use your defensiveness as a learning tool. If people direct your attention to some behavior they feel is racist, gauge your reaction. Do you feel insulted, angry or guilty? If the accusation is ridiculous, shouldn't you be reacting less strongly? The first step to ridding yourself-or your organization-of racism is to admit it may be there.

Take the time to learn the issues important to other people. When I worked with the "peace community" in Western New York, people there moaned about Black people's lack of interest in the MX missile. But there were plenty of peace activists in the Black community: they just had their sights focused a bit closer to home, on the cops and thugs in the neighborhood.

Celebrate diversity in human cultures with as much gusto as you would celebrate biological diversity in a Brazilian forest.

This article is reprinted with permission from Terrain, the monthly publication of the Ecology Center.

[\[thistle homepage\]](#) [\[Volume 9\]](#) [\[9.05 - contents\]](#)