

Race must be part of the environmental conversation

By Fred Tutman

As an African-American and an environmentalist, I went along for a long while with the idea that race and class are irrelevant to the cause of environmental protection. I assumed that the environment itself is connective and bridges the social divide. But I can no longer ignore that a color-blind, class-blind environmental movement is also too often blind to the needs of those with the least access to clean air, water and land.

By ignoring the obvious social divisions in society, a relatively non-inclusive green movement has emerged. The largest environmental movements, with the most resources, have evolved into cliques of upwardly mobile Caucasians. These groups do not intentionally discriminate; I would never argue that the environmental causes intentionally exclude. Surely everyone is free to join. But typically these groups fail to talk about or work on problems that capture the hearts and minds of anyone but those who adhere to their "groupthink."

Most environmental "clubs" cater to and draw members from affinity groups with the heritage and resources to pursue popular outdoor hobbies. (Have you ever noticed that ski slopes, sailing marinas and hiking clubs are overwhelmingly populated by nonminorities and people with social access and financial resources?) This is not because minorities and the poor are less interested in these pursuits. It is because lack of access, income, opportunity and social mobility are very real barriers to participation in them.

People of means and status also generally live in places with healthier air, water and land. They want to protect beautiful places with clean water and sparkling air. People who live in crowded, urban neighborhoods near industry and highways value clean water, air and open space just as much. National polls tell us so. However, for them it is not a question of protecting but of attaining. The two groups may share the same outcomes but see the way to achieving them in very different terms.

The green movement lives in a perpetual state of denial or indifference that race and class are relevant to the way we address important issues such as stormwater, climate change, and clean air and water. Environmentalists are primed to protect raw nature, not restore resource wealth to neighborhoods that have been deprived of it. But consider this: How many "living shorelines" are to be found in areas accessible to the socially disadvantaged?

Many people of color find it unacceptable that to be considered environmentalists they must first discard their own values and experiences to adopt a consensus vision of the environment that is in conflict with their experiences. To reach them, the environmental movement doesn't just need to "work on its messaging." Rather, it needs to work on greater results and shared benefits for all members of the community. After all, wouldn't people of color flock to environmental causes if more of this work solved their most relevant environmental problems?

Unfortunately, major movements are often so eager to convert others to their own environmental perspective — or tell everybody else how to live, or what constitutes environmentalism — that they fail to stand in the shoes of their audience. By failing to tackle the most egregious environmental wrongs, the greens have inadvertently ratified the related social inequities. They appear unfriendly to the environmental problems of particular interest to the people who could care less about joining environmental clubs.

The green movement sends the tacit message that, although there is deep concern about the planet, there is very little support for those suffering on it. So outsiders to the green movement seek deeper rewards and a stronger voice elsewhere, be it churches or their own social groups.

Environmentalists of color struggle to get white colleagues to recognize the inseparable fusion between social/economic injustice and environmental disparities. But for the most part, these concerns are not considered relevant environmental problems because they are usually regarded as strictly "our" problems, i.e., not in the mainstream. The majority view is that everybody is in the same boat; therefore, everybody benefits from improvements in the environment. This just is not true.

So why should this matter? Because the environmentalists' reluctance to take up the causes important to those who lack comparable access to healthy neighborhoods, and beautiful natural places like beaches and mountains — the causes of the poor, minorities, and the generally disenfranchised — reflects on the morality of their good work.

Let's build a true "rainbow" movement, with membership and goals that reflect the diversity of the whole community. The environmental movement must cast its nets wider and cover more issues and causes. The movement must take off its blinders and take a hard look at how it views environmental problems and allocates the benefits of a clean environment. Genuine diversity can multiply the impact of environmental causes.

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