

Reclaiming Your Environmentalism

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By Fred Tutman

People ask me almost everyday why more [African-Americans are not environmentalists](#). My usual answer is, “who says we are not?” Yet everyday I meet people who seem to think that being an environmentalist of color is some sort of novelty. Nothing could be farther from the truth! My heritage with the environment like many other people of color sets a strong foundation for environmental stewardship. To my great fortune, I grew up in a rural stretch of Maryland’s Patuxent River corridor. The four corners of my world, and my playgrounds were collectively the wind, sun, sky, the forests and of course the nearby river. As a boy I gigged frogs, hunted imaginary wolves with tobacco sticks, and I collected and sold Japanese beetles to my great grandfather at a penny a bug. Among my warmest boyhood memories were at dusk with my great grandfather where he and I walked through the gloom of the woods, or sat on fallen logs waiting for deer; where the silence was a sort of like being in a church.



So my people and I were tied to nature and the earth’s rhythms on many levels. Were we environmentalists? Sadly, many do not regard indigenous people as such. But we had a heritage of self-sufficiency on the land, of growing our own food, of continuing a

family tradition of being in grace with our surroundings. We were in a perpetually renewing contract with mother earth and thought of ourselves simply as those specially favored by nature.

Throughout my conservation career, I have worked around environmentalists eager to teach the rest of us how to live and love nature in their own image. And perhaps many of us from various walks do need to be reconnected to the earth—but there are just as many who happen to be absent from mass environmental causes who already have a rich heritage with the earth.

Truly we all have very different context for the environment. And it seems to me that is exactly what diversity means. There is no reason one must join a club or carry a membership card in order to claim status as an environmentalist. The many expressions of our individual environmental connections are as unique and as personal as our fingerprints and yet this truism easily gets overlooked. That is exactly why more ethnic and cultural inclusion is so desperately needed in the environmental movement. Because we each need to claim the full environmental heritage to which we are each entitled.



The stories of our individual ties to the environment are rich, layered, textured, powerful and empowering. Much more layered than the simplistic and very misguided [notion](#) that “black people don’t care or know about the environment.” So in my view, the environmental movement doesn’t just need to embrace “diversity.” Instead people need to understand first and foremost that the many faces of environmentalism actually ARE diversity. Only then can we look at relative social justice and fairness with an honest and appraising eye. Deeper respect for the environmental context held dear by people of all walks and ethnicities is the only way environmental movements will ever reach their full inclusive potential.

Fred Tutman has served for ten years as the Riverkeeper for the Patuxent, which is Maryland’s longest and deepest intrastate river.

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