

8 Ways Environmental Organizations Can Support the Movement for Environmental Justice

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Research continues to demonstrate that the very same processes that are degrading the Earth and its systems are also exploiting low-income, indigenous, and/or communities of color.

Whether it is flooding in Louisiana, lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan, or the construction of a pipeline through indigenous peoples' sacred land lives continue to be jeopardized and exploited to fuel our capitalist economic system. The environmental justice (EJ) movement, which is largely led by people of color, **demand**s that environmental racism be dismantled, and that all people have the opportunity to live a safe and healthy life and their voices be heard by decision-makers.

For decades, many low-income communities have been fighting for their basic human rights to breathe clean air, drink clean water, eat nutritious food and live a safe, healthy life. Although these communities are on the frontlines of environmental disaster, they have historically been left out of conversations and decision making around the very environmental issues that are directly affecting their lives. Too often, the media or government turn to large, mainstream environmental organizations instead of EJ groups when environmental injustices happen, despite their traditional conservation focus and being predominantly led by white staff. As mainstream environmental organizations and environmental justice groups **begin to work together**, how can mainstream groups use their "organizational privilege," and solid platform to meaningfully and effectively support frontline communities and grassroots EJ organizations? Here are 8 tips to get started:

1. PROVIDE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE WHEN NEEDED

Technical assistance might be conducting environmental and health analyses when professional experts are needed, or perhaps providing legal assistance. Environmental organizations can train and support the community on how to address the issues they have already defined as important when their assistance is needed. Trainings could include: administration of health surveys, water testing, or how to submit comments on environmental policies or local permits. Training community leaders on how to install rooftop solar panels, to create community gardens, or to weatherize a home would also bring necessary technical knowledge that encourages resiliency within the community, and may even manifest into local businesses or cooperatives, while supporting a just transition from environmentally degrading practices.

2. CREATE SPACES FOR RESOURCE SHARING AND NETWORKING

Environmental organizations can connect frontline communities with resources such as trainings, networking, funding opportunities, research opportunities, or other organizations and alliances that would support their work. For example, organizations can host a forum or conference on a local, statewide, or even regional level where mainstream environmental and EJ organizations are invited to learn and network around environmental issues in their area.

3. CRITICALLY EVALUATE WHO BENEFITS FROM YOUR ORGANIZATION'S ACTIONS

When environmental organizations are developing programs and projects, they should ensure that environmental justice communities are central to their planning activities. Communities have been historically and repeatedly targeted with undesirable land uses such as landfills, incinerators, power plants, and more, so they should be the main focus of programs and projects which result in environmental benefits, such as the implementation of clean energy programs, public transportation projects, home weatherization projects, community gardens, biodiversity projects, or **the establishment of parks and public lands**. Environmental organizations must provide space for communities to define the issue and outcomes they would like to see, and make sure not to paternalistically dominate the collaboration and ensure the community has autonomy over the project's implementation and success.

On another note, when engaging in **research-related activity** in communities, organizations should evaluate who is benefitting from the research or project. Is it driven by community-led goals, or is the research simply being completed for the researchers, organizations, or universities' benefit and experience? Does the research result in a concrete positive outcome for the community members that have shared their time, space, and emotions with you?

4. SOLICIT GUIDANCE, INPUT, AND FEEDBACK FROM FRONTLINE COMMUNITIES AND EJ ADVOCATES

When developing programs, comments, proposals, or drafts of documents, mainstream organizations taking the lead should engage with the EJ community. Ideally, EJ would be considered in all environmental endeavors, but at the least guidance, input, or feedback should be solicited from the people most impacted from the action and such information should be included in the final output. In this area of engagement, EJ advocates should have the space to be active participants, instead of being talked at by "professionals." EJ advocates should always have a seat at the table, even in conversations around topics that people do not typically perceive as environmental justice issues, such as access to and the development of **nature preserves**, or sustainable agriculture.

5. MAKE MEANINGFUL **DIVERSIFICATION** AND ANTI-OPPRESSION PART OF THE THE WORK

Although environmental organizations have made an effort to diversify, there is still very much **work to be done**. Unfortunately, many organizations exhibit the problematic and pervasive "W.H.O.M" (**We-Have-One-Minority**) syndrome, which is oftentimes accompanied with the tokenization of marginalized employees and volunteers. Tokenized minority employees are put in the position to speak on behalf of their entire marginalized group, putting immense pressure on them as individuals. They may also be dealing with racial tension, micro-aggressions, or other harmful behaviors that even well-intentioned employees sometimes partake in. This is exhausting and unhealthy for marginalized employees. Some organizations may market the fact that they're progressive and inclusive, although this behavior is not inclusive, or progressive. If organizations want to see real change and create a space where marginalized people feel comfortable working or volunteering, **an intentional effort must be made** to dismantle systems of oppression within the workplace and organization.

This is important for environmental or conservation organizations for a number of reasons. When discussing environmental issues, it is crucial to acknowledge that many

marginalized populations bear the **burden of environmental hazards** and also typically have less access to environmental benefits. Therefore, prioritizing their hiring and creating a safe space is vital. Sometimes organizations excuse their lack of diversity because “they do not receive applications from diverse populations”, but this probably stems from the fact that marginalized people do not feel welcome, or that the organization does not represent their values. It may not be possible for every organization to take on EJ issues, but it is possible for everyone to do their part and establish equitable and anti-oppressive practices within their organization. The oppressive systems that create environmental inequities and environmental racism are the same systems of oppression that organizations can begin to dismantle in their workplace – those that negatively impact current and future employees.

Organizations supporting a movement for a clean environment will only **benefit** from a diverse and inclusive space where marginalized people feel welcome. Diverse staff and volunteers bring experience, insight, and practices from various backgrounds into the organization. Implementation of diversity might look like creating an Advisory Board to oversee diversity and anti-oppression issues, diversity and sensitivity trainings with frequent follow-ups or check-ins, or implementing anti-oppression concepts into the staff orientation process.

6. WORK TO CREATE A MORE JUST DISTRIBUTION OF FUNDS

Below is an excerpt from **a report** developed by the National Committee For Responsible Philanthropy:

In 2009, environmental organizations with budgets of more than \$5 million received half of all contributions and grants made in the sector, despite comprising just 2 percent of environmental public charities. From 2007-2009, only 15 percent of environmental grant dollars were classified as benefiting marginalized communities, and only 11 percent were classified as advancing “social justice” strategies, a proxy for policy advocacy and community organizing that works toward structural change on behalf of those who are the least well off politically, economically and socially.

So, what role can environmental organizations play in changing this? If an organization is funded, they can make an effort to ensure that their actions and projects support grassroots organizing and encourage foundations to exhibit more equitable behavior in their selection of grant recipients. Organizations can help mitigate disparities in funding by using their resources (paid-staff, money, grantwriters, development department) to apply for and then re-grant funds to frontline organizations. This may also create employment opportunities in communities, such as hiring a local resident as a community organizer. It also allows frontline communities to better self-determine their organizing strategies, rather than outside organizations taking up space in the community organizing conversation.

7. USE YOUR ESTABLISHED PLATFORMS TO SUPPORT FRONTLINE COMMUNITIES

Established organizations likely have a large support base, while frontline groups are most likely spending most of their energy organizing and generating support on the grassroots level within their community.

Well-established organizations can support frontline communities by echoing their story, demands, and call to action. This not only builds a larger base of allies and community

supporters, but it also puts more pressure on decision-makers who may, unfortunately, more readily listen to a larger environmental organization with more social capital and political clout before listening to a frontline community. In situations where attention highlights outside organizations, that attention should be redirected to frontline communities. They should have the space to lead the movement from the **front and center**. One way that organizations can support demands from the frontline is by composing and disseminating a Statement of Solidarity – a short and informative document which states that the organization stands in solidarity with the actions taken by EJ communities. This a great way to inform audiences about the injustice that EJ communities are facing, and how everyday individuals can take action to support them and uplift their message.

8. INCORPORATE EJ INTO YOUR ORGANIZATION

If you're a staff member of an environmental organization, you may be wondering how your organization can start taking steps towards supporting environmental justice, but don't know where to start. One way mainstream environmental organizations can take a concrete step towards addressing environmental injustice is through incorporating environmental justice into their mission statement. With the incorporation of EJ into an organization's mission, it is then easier to justify prioritizing actions related to environmental justice. An organization might then prioritize hiring people with prior EJ experience, create positions specific to EJ, or possibly create an Environmental Justice Advisory Board for the organization.

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