October 18th, 2020

Climate Justice is Racial Justice

Sunrise on the District

Host: Madison Matthews **| Speakers:** Mattias Lehman & Fred Tutman

Sunrisers 00:05
(singing) Rise. In hope, in prayer, we find ourselves here. In hope, in prayer, we're right here. In hope, in prayer, we find ourselves here. In hope, in prayer...

Madison Matthews 00:24
Hi everyone. I'm Madison Matthews from the Sunrise DC hub, your host for today's episode.

Sunrise is a national organization that fights to stop climate change and create millions of jobs in the process. This podcast is brought to you by the DC hub of Sunrise. Today, our topic is: What do we mean when we say climate justice is racial justice? It rolls off the tongue and sounds intuitive when you say it. Climate Justice is racial justice. But what does it mean?

In this episode, I'll be learning, laughing and growing right alongside you as we investigate the inextricable link between climate justice and racial justice. Today we'll be talking to two incredible people: Mattias Lehman and Fred Tutman. First we talked to Mattias an activist from Sunrise national. Second is Fred Tutman, a member of our community here in the DC area. Fred is a Black Riverkeeper who discusses how race is integral to the way he practices climate justice.

On May 25th, George Floyd was murdered. Four days later, Mattias published an article titled: The Climate Justice Movement Must Oppose White Supremacy Everywhere by Supporting The Movement for Black Lives. During our time with Mattias we'll understand the theoretical framework that lies beneath these two movements, and hear Mattias' story as a Black man fighting for both climate justice and racial justice. We started off with Mattias' activism journey, where he joined the BLM movement in 2014, after the murders of Black men and boys, including Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and too many others.

Mattias Lehman 02:07
When I really got involved was in December. I was on a bus in Portland because I'd been, I guess, couchsurfing is the word. I didn't have a place that I was living in. And I was about to move for work so I didn't get a new place. And I didn't really have full time employment yet. So, I was couchsurfing with friends. And that meant a lot of taking buses from one person's house to another. And I was on one of those buses in downtown Portland and the bus stopped. And I was just reading my book, just chillin'. And it wasn't until like, 10 minutes in, that I was like, that's weird. This bus is still stopped. That's a really long red light. And looked up and there was a protest in front of the bus...

Protesters 02:50
(sounds of protests)

Mattias Lehman 02:51
...because the Michael Brown jury had just come back. And I realized I would much rather be the person protesting than the person on the bus salty—

Madison Matthews 03:01
Totally!

Mattias Lehman 03:01
—about the protest. Like, don't want to be that guy. And so got off the bus and joined what at the time was a very small group of organizers and protesters.

Madison Matthews 03:12
You got off the bus?

Mattias Lehman 03:15
Yeah.

Madison Matthews 03:16
Oh, that's awesome. I just wanted to make sure I had that.

Mattias Lehman 03:21
Oh, that'd be a sad story. *(Laughter)* Like then I said, nah...

Madison Matthews 03:24

(Laughter) I'm gonna DM them later and...

Mattias Lehman 03:26
Racial justice isn't for me, I'm going to send out a tweet or something. You know, Black Lives Matter. That's it. That's activism.

Madison Matthews 03:34
When does Sunrise come into this organizing movement that sort of started in December 2014?

Mattias Lehman 03:41
I first heard of Sunrise in, I believe it was the summer of 2018. I was volunteering for a senate primary. Actually, it was not a primary, it was a general because California has the elect the top-two system. Kevin de León was running against Dianne Feinstein. And I was just like combing through endorsements. And I was like, oh, Sunrise Movement. I've never heard of that. That was like my first exposure. And six months later, maybe less I was kind of like looking to start organizing as like, the core thing that I did. And I saw, I think, like, I would say it's the coolest thing I've ever seen. *(Sunrisers singing in the background)* There were a bunch of people—young people, you know, all under 30, many under 20—sitting in the Speaker of the House's office, Nancy Pelosi and saying we demand a Green New Deal.

Unknown 04:40
"That's why we must demand a New Green Deal now. And it must happen."

Mattias Lehman 04:47
I had heard of the Green New Deal from before. I do know that there's been a lot of iterations of what Green New Deal means. But in my head loosely, I was like, oh yeah, that's talking about climate change from the lens of environmental racial justice. That's dope as shit.

Madison Matthews 05:06
So you with Sunrise, what was the journey of being like, coming to Sunrise and then getting involved in Sunrise national? What is that process?

Mattias Lehman 05:16
It was a little bit of a, like it sounds abrupt and I guess it was, but it was a little bit of a slow process. I've never been a climate activist. Not because I don't have the same existential dread that everyone under the age of 35 does: are we going to have a planet? But because, well, I don't need to tell you. Climate activism, and especially environmental politics, for my whole life has just

been old white people who are like, "we have to save the polar bears and coral," and I'm gonna be totally honest, I don't even know what type of life form coral is. I'm sure the ocean will miss it. I will not personally. On the other hand—

Madison Matthews 05:57
I respect the coral reef, you know?

Mattias Lehman 05:59
You know, no I like it, it looks dope I'm sure. If I were into diving, I bet I...water deeper than I can see the bottom of scares me so...

Madison Matthews 06:08
Me too. Who knows what's down there?

Mattias Lehman 06:11
Exactly. But like, you know, I grew up in a neighborhood that was affected by pollution, I grew up with asthma, I almost died when I was two because of a severe asthma attack. So, it's not like environmental issues didn't affect me. But the types of environmental issues that environmentalists talk about are just so removed from everyday people's lives, that I just never saw myself in those spaces. So I think getting along with Sunrise felt easy, because it was oh, here's these young people who are thinking about racial environmental justice, not saving the polar bears. They're talking about how do we create good union jobs, doing the work of revitalizing our economy, and using climate change as an opportunity? I'm not gonna lie, Obama said that in 2008. I remember hearing and being like, that's dope. And then he didn't do any of it. I still feel that nostalgic energy for like, yeah, we actually could reshape our economy in fundamental ways that are good for people's lives.

Madison Matthews 07:00
So Sunrise, a climate organization chose to nationally focus its efforts on racial justice, what was it like? How did the meeting of intentionally choosing to focus on racial justice go?

Mattias Lehman 07:12
I just remember, like leaving work, I guess, and thinking, I don't know if this is a movement that I want to be a part of, if we're not going to be able to do something here. And it's important to not just believe in intersectionality, but to practice it, and to show for it every day. And luckily, when I talked to, you know, other leaders in Sunrise pretty much everyone was like, Yeah, no, that seems right to me.

Madison Matthews 07:38
(laughter)

Mattias Lehman 07:39
And so I remember going into that meeting being like, you know, Sunrise is a multiracial organization. It is not a Black organization. It's not a Latino organization. Our leadership is varied. And I wasn't sure I was ready to go in and just fight people. And I wasn't the only one that was thinking these same things. It was very clear that a lot of people had been grappling over the weekend, about, you know, what all was happening and where we could be involved.

For me, it's hard to grapple with that sort of pain in public, even if it's a small public, you know, even if it's a group of people that I know. So I was pretty nervous and raw and not well composed. I think someone looking back at that meeting would be like, Man, you could have been so much more persuasive and convincing, it's good that everyone was like, already aligned. Yeah, I remember being just angry for those first couple of days. And it's an anger that I've felt a lot in 2014, in 2015, in 2016, with cases like Philando Castile or Tamir Rice. Yeah, I don't know, it ended up being a very simple meeting, in part, because, you know, the primary had just ended. Unfortunately, Bernie had dropped out. And a lot of people were looking for direction. This was one good way for us to lend our work to people who were organizing, had direction needed, you know, needed backing.

Madison Matthews 09:05
And have you noticed, I mean, the DC hub has grown massively, since Sunrise's involvement in Defund the Police. And have you felt that at a national level?

Mattias Lehman 09:16
Yeah, I mean, A that's super dope to hear. I think one thing that I've been sitting with over the past couple months is I'm like, Man, Sunrise had a strategy that was set out years ago. People have been working towards these goals. And I and a couple other people are just like, we should do this and we pivot. And I'm like, What if it was wrong and terrible, and I just destroyed a climate justice organization?

And for me, that was just a moment of like, yeah, Sunrise. I'm not gonna pretend Sunrise doesn't have flaws, doesn't need to be pushed to have a more robust racial justice lens, has a long way to come on Indigenous justice and centering Indigenous wisdom on this issue. But in that moment, I

was like, Oh, yeah, this is a movement of people that are ready to throw down, need some education, need some impetus, but are there for it.

Madison Matthews 09:58
Yeah, I've attended a decent amount of meetings and trainings at this point, and have been very impressed and felt supported in the fight for racial justice and for Black Lives Matter. So shout out to you for helping making that happen.

Mattias Lehman 10:19
(laughter) Definitely not just me

Madison Matthews 10:21
You in part. I mean, it is a big deal, and you should be proud of yourself.

So I want to jump into the article a little bit. In your article, you say, "As a movement for climate justice, we know that it is necessary to dismantle the underlying systems of extraction, segregation, and racist inequality that have allowed for the exploitation of people and the environment they live in." So for people who don't know, who are new to the climate justice movement, like me, and I'm sure a lot of other people that will be listening to this, how would you even begin to explain the relationship between people, exploitation and climate justice.

Mattias Lehman 11:02
So when I look at the American economy, and the American society really, going back to its foundations, there are two things that it's founded on. One is the extraction of resources from land—and as such, the genocide of people off of that land. Two is the extraction of unpaid labor from people via the West African slave trade. Those two fundamental things basically are what make manifest destiny. We learned about manifest destiny in high school as this, like, value neutral thing that sent explorers west and it wasn't. It's the fucking root of genocide.

Those roots have just very much instilled themselves in American society. We talk about how our economy grew so quickly early on. Part of it was because it's a big country, but it's a big country because it was just constantly stealing land from people that were living on it. And part of it is because of a lot of domestic product that was made, but that was done by people who had no choice and who had no wages. And even when slavery ended, you know, it didn't fully end. It was still kept around for people who were imprisoned who, as we know through the prison industrial complex, are predominantly Black. And so, we look at all of this wealth, the growth of the middle class, and so on, all of that was rooted in the notion that people and land are resources to have

value forcibly extracted from them. And so I don't think you can have an economy that just kind of like churns and burns through resources, if you don't have disposable communities where it's okay to extract resources from the land, pollute the land and—in the same breath—pull labor out of people who would much rather be getting paid for their work or doing something different than fueling the economy.

And so when we look at how quickly that economy grew, and how quickly we exported that economy to the rest of the world, it becomes very clear that you wouldn't have a mass fossil fuel economy like the one we have, if you haven't designated some communities as disposable, places where you can dump waste, places where you can exploit labor. And until we solve that notion, we're never going to avert climate change in any meaningful way. You can even see that in the way that some people talk about how we transition to a green economy, which is heavily rooted in then exploiting metal extraction from Africa, or in heavily controlling countries that have our remaining forests, right?

When we talk about America saying, “Whoa, you can't cut down the Amazon,” while we're cutting down trees in our own country. That's a form of imperialism. So I think if you look at all of those things together, it's very clear that until we start having an economy that doesn't actively set aside certain communities and certain people as disposable, and shit on their communities and shit on their lives and exploit their labor, then we're not gonna be able to avert climate change at all. Those things for me are just so inextricably tied.

Madison Matthews 14:00
I guess what I'm hearing is that it is the extraction of land and the extraction from people. And it seems like people and land are seen to have a similar value, which is just objects or things that are used for profit. And so—because it comes from this idea of we don't value people, people are in disposable in the same way that land is viewed—then, until this sort of mindset of exploitation and extraction is dismantled, we won't be able to move forward. Is that correct?

Mattias Lehman 14:44
Yeah, exactly. And I think it is tied to that notion of the disposable community. You know what NIMBYs are right?

Madison Matthews 14:50
No, I don't.

Mattias Lehman 14:51

It stands for: not in my backyard. It's a type of politics that says, "oh, pollution, no, no, no, not in my backyard. That goes somewhere else." And it's predominantly practiced by white suburbanites who have the money and power to say: we don't want that oilfield here, we don't want that landfill here. And if every community had the power to be NIMBYs, we would all say: we don't want that pollution here, we don't want that oilfield here. It's only that some communities don't have the power to fight back against that, that even allows a dirty economy to function.

Madison Matthews 15:22
A dirty economy. I like that. Yes. So let's take a step back and back up a little bit rewind. Can you tell me why you decided to write this article when you did? The article is titled: The Climate Justice Movement Must Oppose White Supremacy Everywhere — By Supporting M4BL. So yeah, can you just tell me about why you decided to write this article?

Mattias Lehman 15:50
Yeah, I mean a couple of reasons. But I think primary, and I'm just going to go to my emotional response, not what I wanted people to think, not what my organizing goals were. I was watching the beginning of a revival of an organizing movement that I had belonged to six years ago. And [I] was feeling an intense urgency to throw down for that movement in any way that I could. And to me, that meant looking at all the organizers around me, whether they were Sunrise organizers, or whether they were environmental organizers who sometimes look to us for guidance. And it was to say to them: look, this is a fight that you profess your values include. If you're not willing to show up for it here and now, it's very clear how little those values actually mean to you. Personally, it was also just coming from a place of like, deep raw, emotional pain, and trying to figure out how I could sustain myself at Sunrise while I wanted to be in the streets for Black Lives Matter at the same time.

Madison Matthews 16:53
I hear you. I hear you in that emotion. The urgency to do something now was something I was feeling as well, heavily. Were you more thinking that you wanted to return to the roots of working with Black Lives Matter? Or did you feel like Sunrise was ready to take this on and center Black lives?

Mattias Lehman 17:19
I'm not sure. I don't think I knew what was going to happen. That same weekend, I just like started tweeting about shit. *(laughter)*

Madison Matthews 17:26

Why you have all them followers? *(laughter)*

Mattias Lehman 17:28
From both my account and from the Sunrise account, I was just like: you know, this weekend George Floyd was murdered, we're going to talk about racial justice. And if you're here for it, you're here for it. And if not like the door is over there, there's lots of people on Twitter.

Madison Matthews 17:42
There's one more thing I want to line out for people to make sure they can understand the connections. In the article you say, "we cannot achieve climate justice without moving away from police and prisons." So in order to make it clear for people how these two things are clashing, how prison abolition is connected to climate policy, or climate justice, could you spell out those dots?

Mattias Lehman 18:15
Yeah, so I talked about eco-fascism before. And eco-fascism is basically the notion that when fossil fuels start being threatened enough by people who are afraid of and pissed off by climate change, what is going to oppose them is going to be private security forces. It's going to be police. It's going to be federal agents. This is not some weird conspiracy theory. It's what happens at places like Standing Rock. When Indigenous people come out and say, we don't want this pipeline here, the police come in. [Indigenous people] get pepper sprayed. They get tear gassed. They get hosed down in freezing weather. They get beaten with batons. The police are the front lines between people protesting and people who are powerful and have money.

If we do not avert the worst of the climate crisis [the world] becomes increasingly a world that has fewer resources, increasingly, a world where people are moving to different places for safety and increasingly a world where frankly, very wealthy, white people are afraid of the sudden influx of people who are looking for resources, looking for jobs, looking for food, looking for housing. Those same private security forces won't just be turned on protesters, they will be turned on climate refugees as they have in our southern border. And if we want to envision a world where the extremely wealthy fossil fuel oligarchs are not able to simply say: No, actually, we're not going to make changes on climate change and you can't stop us because we have security forces and police and the army backing us up. We need to think seriously about the ways in which the role of the police is to protect property and stopping climate change is gonna require a little bit of destruction and repurposing, and stripping of property from those extremely wealthy fossil fuel barons. And the thing that's going to be in our way there is the police, is federal agents, is private security like Blackstone.

Madison Matthews 20:17
So one of the concluding questions that we have for you is, what does it take to be a climate activist or an activist?

Mattias Lehman 20:28
I think this is like the critical question for our generation, because organizing seems so fucking scary. You look at people who are organizers—and I remember thinking this way when I saw Varshini Prakash—she was just like doing interviews and they had her do photoshoots. And then she was marching and protesting Pelosi, and I'm like, “Oh, God, it seems like this person does everything.”

I think what people don't realize is that so much of organizing is just taking a thing you're good at and putting it towards making the world better. In my case, I'm good at like two things. I can talk a lot and I know my means and so I do comms work. But if you were to ask me to run logistics for an event, I'd be screwed. I'm not organized enough. It would all fall apart, all the details would be missing. And so organizing really is just finding one thing you're good at, or passionate about, or excited by, and seeing how you can dedicate that to the movement and working in tandem with other organizers who are all also kind of good at one thing. I just think more people should realize that we aren't superhuman organizers. We're just people who are passionate and trying to use our skills as best we can.

Madison Matthews 21:39
That was Mattias Lehman from Sunrise national. We are going to take a quick break now and when we come back, we'll be talking with Fred Tutman to discuss how race has been integral to the way he practices climate justice here and the Greater Washington Metro Area. See you soon!

Sunrisers 22:17
(song break)

Madison Matthews 23:28
Hello, friends! Thanks for sticking with us. We began our conversation with Fred by asking him—what exactly is a riverkeeper?

Fred Tutman 23:36
So Riverkeeper is an advocate for clean water. It's a part of a movement that started on the Hudson River a couple decades ago. And that movement is branded in that you can't call yourself a Riverkeeper or a Coastkeeper or a Soundkeeper, unless you've actually been licensed by the

folks who own that trademark, which is a nonprofit organization called Waterkeeper Alliance. So there's only one authorized Waterkeeper per watershed or water body. And I'm one of about 300+ waterkeepers from all over the world. It's true, I'm the only African American Waterkeeper at present, but not the first. There have been others before me and there are many Waterkeepers of color from all over the world actually. In fact, we have quite a growing movement on the African continent right now. There's a Kenya Waterkeeper. I think there's one in Uganda. I have been mentoring, in fact, the Waterkeeper program in Dakar, Senegal.

Madison Matthews 24:36
So as a riverkeeper, what does your office look like per se or your day to day?

Fred Tutman 24:41
So my work is different almost every day. I'm very much a community based Waterkeeper. I enjoy making eye contact with people and communities in this watershed. We work or attempt to work where the worst problems are to be found. And often those problems [are] of empowerment. They're not just pollution problems. They're problems of helping communities really take charge of their environmental future. So it's empowering work. It's inspiring work. It's never the same two days in a row. Sometimes we're in court, sometimes we're in the field. Sometimes we're in, you know, meetings with neighbors and community members. We run an office on the waterfront of the Patuxent that's kind of a clubhouse for Waterkeeper folks in the sense that you can come talk to your Waterkeeper, we have convenings there, teach-ins we call them. So it's a really busy operation, over 110 miles of watershed, 110 linear miles and where the longest and deepest river stays entirely in Maryland. Patuxent is one of those Algonquin named rivers like several others in the DC area that people probably know like Anacostia and Potomac.

Madison Matthews 25:46
Speaking of the story, can you tell us about what your relationship with the Patuxent has been throughout your lifetime?

Fred Tutman 25:55
So the Patuxent was the river I grew up next to. I lived on a family farm, still live on that same family farm my great grandfather established almost a hundred years ago, right near the banks of the Patuxent. We watered our crops from that river, swam in it as kids, fished in it, played on it. So the river sort of came through the neighborhood and went somewhere else. It never occurred to me until I was an adult, until I was a Riverkeeper, exactly where it went or where it came from. But essentially I would say it's my home river, the river I'm probably most connected to in Maryland.

Madison Matthews 26:25
And your home is in Southern Maryland.

Fred Tutman 26:28
Well, we're really in the central area of the Patuxent. Southern Maryland is really considered to be the three Southernmost counties that touch the Patuxent, so Charles, St Mary's, Calvert. I live in Prince George's, which is roughly about the midpoint. However, Prince George's has more territory of the Patuxent proportionally than any other county.

Madison Matthews 26:51
I'm in Montgomery County. Does the Patuxent run through there?

Fred Tutman 26:55
Absolutely. In fact, the Patuxent not only runs through Montgomery county, but some of the residents of Montgomery draw their drinking water from the Patuxent reservoirs, the two reservoirs in the north. So, you might be drinking Patuxent water. *(laughter)* Okay, well, there you go.

Madison Matthews 27:12
It's part of my life more than I knew.

Fred Tutman 27:14
Sure, absolutely.

Madison Matthews 27:16
So can you tell us about the history of advocacy of the Patuxent River during your time and prior, and specifically, I want to know if you're familiar with the significance of the Patuxent to Indigenous Americans?

Fred Tutman 27:34
Well, sure. I mean, the Patuxent actually was a tribe, and some people think the river was actually named after the tribe that was commonly found on that river. I understand that the Patuxent Native Americans, were Algonquin speaking Indians. So that's a language, a trade language, apparently it was common. You know, the Patuxent, in terms of its heritage of activism is actually fairly extraordinary. It is actually the river that gave rise to the creation of the Maryland Chesapeake Bay program. So in other words, there really wouldn't be much of a Bay movement in Maryland if the Patuxent hadn't stepped up and it citizens hadn't started basically fighting: filing

lawsuits, struggling, activating, going all the way back to the 50s. Because the river stays in Maryland—it starts and ends in Maryland—it's basically a river in one jurisdiction, that many people think is a bellwether for the rest of the state.

Madison Matthews 28:25
Fred goes on to describe his work as a deeply community-oriented activist, and what it means to create sustainable communities.

Fred Tutman 28:34
Patuxent River is at the heart of a community. We not only have staff and a community surrounding us in a clubhouse, and lots of boats and people who test water and do various things related to our work up and down the river. I'd say we're very volunteer leveraged in the sense that we're very much about trying to get people directly engaged, and of course, bring to the table folks who haven't been engaged adequately. And when I say engaged, it's activism which is very, very different than education, right? We're not trying to educate polluters by any stretch of the imagination. For the most part, if we're talking about commercial polluters, you know, ones who pollute for profit, we're trying to take them down. We're trying to make sure that they stop doing what they're doing and that we do so with enough forcefulness that we don't have to fight that battle twice in a row.

So we're trying to definitely do work that transcends simply managing the pollution. We're really trying to create sustainable communities and a network of activist citizens up and down the river. I assure you, if you make a lot of noise about the dirty water in your community, you're much more likely to get something done than someone who's waiting for the government or waiting for someone to come along or waiting for a corporate giveaway, to take care of that problem for you. This is a self-help movement and the Patuxent needs all the help it can get.

Madison Matthews 29:52
As a Black person in the environmentalist world, Fred was often tokenized or invalidated. His views and the issues he specifically addressed were often overlooked. He described founding Patuxent Riverkeeper as the organization he would want to be a part of: a transparent movement with a lot of reciprocity. Here, Fred describes an event he attended.

Fred Tutman 30:14
I'll give you a quick example. I went to a meeting not long ago, that was labeled for people who wanted to do water protection and as I hit the door, a very perky lady came up to me and said, "Oh, are you here to save the Bay?" And I said, "Well no, actually, I'm the Patuxent Riverkeeper. I'm

really interested to talk about how we can save the Patuxent." [She responds,]"Oh, it's all the same thing."

I'm gone, first of all, because she's taken charge of the conversation, to the extent that she's reframed it on her own terms. And I'm sure it was innocently done, I don't think she meant anything mean by that but it hasn't occurred, I think, to at least some whites that we come to these movements as people of color on our own terms. We have our own associations for these rivers, our own aspirations. Yes, it's true that while Black lives matter, so do Black aspirations and ambitions, and attainments. We care about those things too. So to the extent these movements expect us to conform our values to that which they are doing, or that we're standing in their shoes—what I'm copying all the other white Riverkeepers out there—that's absurd. We have to be our own men and women in these movements, or they don't serve us, and we'll go elsewhere.

So the presumption that people of color aren't interested in the environment is, first of all, outrageous. The presumption that diversity is a solution to that problem is equally outrageous. I've never heard a Black community say "we want some more diversity up in here"—ever. *(laughter)* It's a frame that has been created on our behalf in movements where we can't really tell our own version of the story. And I think that's the secret, the secret's out, of Patuxent Riverkeeper. We have more Black, brown, BIPOC, you know—Black, Indigenous, people of color—and participation, because this is the place where people can be themselves. They can say what's on their mind, work on the issues and we'll help with those issues that are of concern to them. It's a very transparent movement with a lot of reciprocity. It's a family in a way, a loosely knit one. And families don't always agree, but it's a very different approach than: let's go get a grant from the richest people we can find in this watershed, and then do a top-down movement to educate and outreach to everyone we can find.

Madison Matthews 32:19
I'm envisioning what you're saying and that is what I want to be a part of.

Fred goes on to describe the difficulty as a Black man of fitting into organizations that do not take the community's concerns seriously. While Patuxent Riverkeeper was founded to uplift their communities, it's clear that not all environmental organizations have the same emphasis on racial equity.

Fred Tutman 32:41
There's never a place where we haven't brought something to the table that was really going to make these movements better. So, I believe these movements have missed the boat. What's really

happening here is that they [don't] want to change. They've already settled what the grants are for. They've already decided what the issues are. And they've already determined where we fit in them. And so there's really nothing more for us to do as people of color, but to stand by and applaud or, you know, chip in in some way. But we're footnotes. So, if I get worked up about this, it's like it's so obvious to me, after 17 years of talking to people from many walks and realizing that the folks who are really pinning these labels on us about what people of color need and want don't really know us. They need our help to understand more acutely what people of color are about when it comes to the environment. And boy, oh, boy, do we bring a lot to that table.

Madison Matthews 33:32
So these communities that are bringing things to you that they would like help with fixing, I'm assuming these are the kinds of projects that would create good trouble?

Fred Tutman 33:44
Always, always, always right. In Lothion right now and in Anne Arundel County, citizens want help getting rid of too many industrial trucks. And that has a nexus to the environment, right? But the front end problem, the thing they really want to see as an outcome is they want those trucks to go away. In Brandywine, they've got too many power plants and Superfund sites and waste disposal sites. So our conversation with these communities is largely about what they want and what we can help them with. We can't help them with everything. But the stuff we can help them with, we're more than willing to build that movement locally. And hopefully when we're done, when I'm done, when I retire, when they drag me out of here, when the next Riverkeeper takes over hopefully, we will have created an interconnected network of activism that is multi-ethnic and diverse and freewheeling and brave enough to adjust its agenda such that it keeps the faith with the people who are doing all the work in these communities that frankly, nobody cares about nearly as much as the people who live there, who work there, who play there.

Madison Matthews 34:50
And can you talk about what that looks like on the ground? Let's take this example of Brandywine.

Fred Tutman 34:56
Citizens of Brandywine came to us and asked for help trying to put an end to all of these different permitted facilities that were owners, that were bringing toxic waste and other burdens to the community. They asked for help filing a civil rights complaint, which we helped them do. And that complaint resulted in at least some changes to state laws that will actually help make sure that these communities have a lot more information about what's coming down the road at them, such that they can actually do something about it.

Likewise, I mentioned Lothion or Savage is a place up farther north. You know, again, people had local development problems. They felt that it was inappropriate development and indeed there is inappropriate development. And it was a development that is inconsistent with its surroundings, something that would actually change the character of the neighborhood. Right? Good for somebody's profits, but lousy for people who are deeply embedded there, who have a heritage of being in that place, who have rights, incidentally. But those rights get trampled when you're up against big money, big politics and influential power.

Many of the environmental groups that do this kind of work stand with wealth. And wealth is the culprit, and the investors, for at least some of the burdens we find in these communities, not just communities of color, but generally. So these are systemic issues, and we fight them at a systemic level. And the only way to really do that, I think, in a nation of laws, is through the court system. But there are also administrative means, you know. There are citizen avenues that people can use, teaching communities how to use the Maryland Public Information Act or the Freedom of Information Act, how to prepare a complaint letter. I mean, there's a list of toolboxes that one must have, I think, to be an effective advocate, and we're purveyors of various types of toolboxes.

Madison Matthews 36:47
While Patuxent Riverkeeper is perfectly positioned to provide these tools to the communities it collaborates with, large "big green" organizations have their strengths as well. Fred described these to us and also went into the limitations that being "big" brings: a lack of local focus and accountability to local interest. Often, this leads to the invalidation and erasure of those folks most affected by the environmental issues. Fred laid out his principles for a strong movement: not subject to big money donors' whims, rooted in community coalitions, and responsive to local issues.

Fred Tutman 37:24
There's a lot to unpack there. I guess what I'm saying is that usually the word I get back from these "big greens" is: everybody wants the same thing, so they should want what we want because doesn't everybody want that—clean water? It's too simplistic. Actually, it's the values that come with it. I don't think that movements funded by capitalism as opposed to communities, I don't think those movements can ever really articulate anti-capitalism ideas. There's no way they could. It never would occur to them and moreover, it'd be foolhardy for them to do so.

So how you structure this movement, these movements, how you saddle them up, matters greatly in terms of what they can really do. And there are things that big national massive environmental

groups can do that smaller groups can't. I'd say those groups can lobby Congress much more effectively than we can, they can run national and international messaging campaigns, such that they need to or want to. We wouldn't even attempt it. We're much more organically connected to people in communities, where humanitarian movement, where environment is the focus. And we do care about the resource, but we care about it in utility to sustaining people's lives safely, you know, robustly, sustainably.

Madison Matthews 38:38
I'm wondering if this framework of having community building that is not in capitalist interests, is that one of the reasons why you feel like it needs to be more of a long term goal? People are talking about: we need to do something fast, if we don't change what we're doing, then in the next 20 years we're going to be done for.

Fred Tutman 39:05
It's, "what's good for our brand?" It's, "what's good for profits?" It's, "what kinds of organizations do we want to be connected to?" I mean, all kinds of other layers on top of that yet, ironically, I've yet to meet a single environmentalist in 17 years of trying that will actually admit that funders influence what they do at all, even in the waterkeeper universe. "Oh, they don't tell me what to do." And you know, what's really funny? The reason is because you only get funded if they don't have to spell it out: "You'll never get a grant, if we have to tell you and bang you over the head with a two by four that you should under no circumstances get involved with some Black cause or something radical." I mean, if they got to tell you, that's a clue that they don't really want to be funding you.

And so I think these, again, are things that people can't see if they're inside the envelope of these movements that have become largely corporatized, that have adopted and synchronized with corporate values. Pollution trading, market solutions to pollution is a great sign of that, right? The solution to pollution is more capitalism? We're going to find some way to incentivize people so that they won't pollute, but they will conserve instead? It's an outrageous idea for Black communities who, incidentally, generally don't have much to trade with. We'll get lots of trades, but no credits. And yet, this is a movement that's blind to that. And I've had people say to me, who cares if it's unjust if it cleans up the planet? Well shucks, at last, somebody finally said it: that these are perfectly good movements, even if they don't have black people in them. That's the underlying point of view.

Madison Matthews 40:37

Wow, I haven't even thought of that before and you're so right. How can we use capitalism to solve the very problems it has created? Well, thank you for your insight on that. And I'd like to wrap up by asking you a concluding question, if that's all right. For you, what does it takes to be an activist?

Fred Tutman 40:56
Desire for change, a passion for change. I think a willingness to take calculated risks. I'll be honest, Patuxent Riverkeeper has always been a financially risky proposition for me, personally. It just is. You know, it's funny enough people have said to me, Riverkeeper, Patuxent Riverkeeper is really picky about who they take money from. My rebuttal to that is: why aren't you? *(laughter)* Maybe we should be, you know, would you take a check from Satan?

I mean, really. I think the presumption that anything good for the environment is grist for the mill. I don't think so. I think corporate funded environmentalism is pretty limited. It almost always avoids changing anything substantial, except maybe how people feel about things. People feel pretty good after this stuff, but you know, their circumstances haven't really changed much. And I know that upsets people, because I think they realize you can't have big movements without that kind of financial mass. And I think that's the paradox these movements have to face: you can be really big and get very little done, you can get really small, and you can do a whole lot.

But it comes with some risks, and it comes with some compromises. It's a lot of work. It's true. You can't staff everything out. That's true. You can't really compete on the same basis as the big greens and so we stop trying. We're actually doing work they would rather not do, or don't know how to do, or hasn't occurred to them is worth doing. I don't think you could call up a big green and say, if you were Brandywine, "Would you help me file a civil rights complaint?" These are groups reluctant to get mired in a local problem because they realize that there's no end to the amount of money that's unfunded that they could throw at those types of issues and problems.

I guess, I would drive a distinction between that which is big and hires a lot of people and has a lot of organizational mass that shows importance—and I'm not suggesting these are groups that are motivated by money, as much as there are people in these organizations that do nothing all day long, but think of clever ways to get more money from rich people—and Patuxent Riverkeeper. Nothing costs really, it's all voluntary. I mean, we'd love it if people donated, appreciate it, we need it. But the idea that people couldn't take a kayak out or couldn't participate in a meeting or something because there's a financial hierarchy, you know, "the major donors get all the perks here, buddy." I mean, come on. What kind of movement is that after all? That's just exemplifying, amplifying the capitalism that created these pollution problems in the first place.

Madison Matthews 43:24
So both Mattias and Fred touch on capitalism. They both talk about it as an underlying root cause. Fred shows us a perspective that what will really solve climate change is not only policy, but centering our community's desires, and allowing BIPOC to lead the way. This adds to what Mattias points out in that the system of capitalism and extraction is the very system that holds back both racial justice and climate justice. What we see is that climate justice cannot exist without racial justice because, what these two are getting at, is until we value Black and Indigenous bodies, the earth will not be free.
What does this say about our present?

What does this say about our liberated future?

I know we covered some heavy topics in this episode and if you're looking for some action items, here's some ways you can help:

- If you want to help out with Patuxent Riverkeeper, which is Fred's nonprofit, here are a couple ways to get involved. You can volunteer with Patuxent Riverkeeper, and you can find more information at their website: https://paxriverkeeper.org/ You could donate to Patuxent Riverkeeper on their website as well.
- We also urge you to donate to your local mutual aid network.
- If you want to read and learn more we suggest Mattias' article titled: The Climate Justice Movement Must Oppose White Supremacy Everywhere — By Supporting M4BL.
- And lastly, contact your local Sunrise hub to get involved with our fight for climate justice.

If you want to reach out to us you can email us at **sunrisemovementdc@gmail.com**. You can also follow our hub on Instagram and Twitter ***@SunriseMVMTDC*** to stay updated with our hub. Y'all, we really appreciate you listening and we hope to see you next time. Bye!

Thank You to Mattias Lehman and Fred Tutman for taking time to interview with Sunrise on the District! *We also want to take the time to thank our wonderful podcast team. This episode would not have been possible without these folks: John Draughon our engineer/audio king; Emily Deveraux on logistics, thank you Emily; Liana Shivers and Harry Frey, the incredible producers of this podcast; Rachel Jones, who designed the beautiful graphics. For this episode, I'm your host Madison Matthews, and shout out to all the other Sunrise volunteers who helped make this episode happen. We could not have done it without y'all!*

Resources

Patuxent Riverkeeper (Fred's non-profit)

DMV Mutual Aid Resources

Ward 1

Venmo: @Ward1-DCMutualAid

Cashapp: $Ward1MutualAid

Email: w1mutualaid@gmail.com

Ward 4

https://actionnetwork.org/fundraising/ward-4-mutual-aid

Ward 6

https://www.serveyourcitydc.org/

Email: info@serveyourcitydc.org

Silver Spring Mutual Aid

https://sstpmutualaid.wordpress.com/

Venmo: @sstp_mutualaid

Email: silverspringcare@gmail.com

Prince George's County Mutual Aid

https://www.gofundme.com/f/8z2y6-prince-george039s-county-mutual-aid-fund

Indigenous Environmental Network Emergency COVID-19 Mutual Aid Fund

https://www.ienearth.org/covid-19-emergency-mutual-aid-fund/

Readings

Mattias' Article: The Climate Justice Movement Must Oppose White Supremacy Everywhere — By Supporting M4BL

On EcoFascism

On the Exclusion of BIPOC in Environmentalism

On Centering Indigenous Wisdom in the Environmental Movement

On Capitalism and Green Capitalism