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## Racial & environmental justice: a primer

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## Racial & Environmental Justice: A Primer

DR. CORRIE GROSSE

SEASONS

Discussions about race and environment are often difficult but critical. Author Naomi Klein writes, “we need everyone to change everything,” imploring us all to work together to effect big change.

As educators, Outdoor U has a responsibility to address important questions in our field. How do we reach a broader audience? How do we ensure that everyone has equal access to the vitality and solace offered by the natural environment? But even more, how can we ensure that injustice is not preventing people from connecting with the environment? How can we ensure that the white and Somali school children who visit the Abbey Arboretum have the same capacity for imagining themselves as outdoor educators, foresters, or climate change activists?

Biodiversity is essential to healthy and resilient ecosystems. Our social systems and communities are the same. Diversity helps us thrive because it means more minds coming to the table to brainstorm solutions, more experiences shedding light on problems, and more relationships to draw on when the going gets tough. Diversity is central to realizing a value that most people share: community. We all want our natural and social communities to be healthy.

Building diversity at Outdoor U requires what former CSB president Mary Dana Hinton calls transformative inclusion. This means transforming the “we” rather than just adding new people. In the United States, a country founded in a context of slavery, with ongoing inequality on the basis of race, it is important to consider race specifically when we talk about inclusion and ask the kinds of questions I pose above.

As a white person, answering the above questions first necessitates that I recognize the privileges I enjoy because of my race – those

unearned benefits of being white. I am able to spend my time worrying about climate change because I do not have to worry about my child getting asthma from living next to a coal-fired power plant or diesel bus station.

Answering the above questions requires doing some deep learning about racism and how to be anti-racist, because it is not enough to be not racist, as author Ibram X. Kendi points out. Being anti-racist is about deconstructing and rebuilding the systems that perpetuate racism, supporting people of color-led initiatives, and speaking out to help others begin their anti-racist journeys.

In the context of Outdoor U, staff eloquently articulated an anti-racist agenda in a statement posted on their website:

With humility and determination, we are committed to (at a minimum):

- Reduce barriers to outdoor experiences for BIPOC (black, indigenous, and people of color) and other marginalized peoples;
- Educate, ourselves and our CSB/SJU students, about the history of racism and decreased access to the outdoors and environmental careers for BIPOC;
- Create and foster relationships with people and organizations, both within and outside the CSB/SJU community, that lead to authentic outdoor experiences for BIPOC youth, college students, and adults.

Such actions are not only urgent and just, they are fundamental to practicing the Benedictine Values and educating young people to be critical, principled, courageous, and passionate leaders.

Educating ourselves about racism includes learning about the connections between race and the environment. Starting in the 1980s, a new field of community organizing and academic

scholarship emerged under the umbrella of environmental justice. Environmental justice

“Identifying our shared values and understanding how different passions intersect is a first step to working together.”

is the idea that achieving social justice requires a healthy environment; and that creating or preserving a healthy environment requires meaningful participation of all people, especially those most affected by environmental degradation.

In 1987, a landmark study by the United Church of Christ demonstrated widespread environmental racism, a term used to describe the fact that race proved to be the *most significant* predictor of living next to a toxic waste facility. Toxic facilities pollute both the natural and built environment, making people sick in the spaces where they live, work, and play. Motivated by this disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on communities of color, a trend that continues today, people across the country fought and continue to fight for recognition of the links between race and environment and for solutions for hardest hit communities.

Class is also an important factor. Toxic industries typically target poor communities, which are often people of color communities, because these communities may have fewer resources (legal, financial, political) with which to create opposition. Climate change also affects these communities first and worst. For example, climate change will damage wild rice yields. This disproportionately affects the Anishinaabe, especially the poorest Anishinaabe who depend on wild rice for subsistence.

But race and class are only two facets of identity. Legal Scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality urges us to always consider how all our identities – race, class, gender, sexuality, immigration status, ability – combine to inform how we experience privilege and oppression. So even when we focus on race, as I do in this essay, we must realize that how people interact with the environment, how we experience privilege or marginalization in relation to the environment, is shaped by all of our identities, together.

Imagine that a white, able-bodied man went walking in the Abbey Arboretum. He wouldn't end up thinking about how his ancestors were forcibly removed from the woods of Minnesota, as a Native person might. He likely wouldn't worry about walking alone, as a woman might. He wouldn't have to figure out how to navigate a rocky

trail, as a person with a physical disability might. A Native woman with a physical disability would have a different experience of being out in the Arb. This is the idea of intersectionality.

People of color must navigate these disproportionate environmental and climate impacts in a context of structural racism, a form of racism that pervades all our social systems (e.g. criminal justice, education, housing, to name but a few). This systemic structural – not necessarily individual – racism is the underlying cause of police murders of black people, like that of George Floyd in Minneapolis this summer.

Structural racism means that, despite being significantly more concerned about climate change than white people (Yale Program on Climate Change Communication), black and Latinx Americans may have less energy and resources to work on environmental issues.



Corrie Grosse (bottom left, COP 24 in 2018) attends the annual United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP) with CSB/SJU students in the Global Climate Policy course. Their experience at the COP includes interviewing stakeholders from around the world, inviting the students to make connections between race, class, gender, etc. in the context of environmental and climate justice on both local and global scales. CORRIE GROSSE.

As a new mother of a white child, I cannot fathom the worry a black mother must feel raising a child in this context of structural racism. I imagine she may not have much mental space to spend on climate change or prairie restoration, no matter how passionate she is about these pursuits. That isn't to say that people of color are not leaders in environmental sectors. They deal with racism on a daily basis and lead communities in struggles for environmental justice. Winona LaDuke and MN350's Executive Director Sam Grant are two local examples.

In closing, I hope this essay helps you, fellow Outdoor U members and supporters, to begin to understand how race connects

with your existing interest in the natural environment. Identifying our shared values and understanding how different passions intersect is a first step to working together. In this spirit, I invite you to continue learning about privilege and race, to throw your hands and hearts into dismantling racism, and in doing so, to advance our efforts to steward all environments for humans and the more than human world.

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