

# The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations

Mainstream NGOs Foundations Government Agencies

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# Executive Summary

**Environmental institutions have been working on diversity efforts for the better part of five decades. This report discusses the findings of a study of three types of environmental institutions: 191 conservation and preservation organizations, 74 government environmental agencies, and 28 environmental grantmaking foundations. It also reports the findings of interviews conducted with 21 environmental professionals who were asked to reflect on the state of diversity in environmental institutions. The study focuses primarily on gender, racial, and class diversity in these institutions as it pertains to the demographic characteristics of their boards and staff. It examines the recruitment and hiring of new workers as well as the types of diversity initiatives undertaken by the organizations. The report also discusses other kinds of diversities such as cultural, sexual orientation, inter-generational, and rural-urban.**



## The study found that:

### 1. ALL THREE TYPES OF ENVIRONMENTAL INSTITUTIONS HAVE MADE SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS ON GENDER DIVERSITY, BUT THE GAINS HAVE MOSTLY GONE TO WHITE WOMEN, AND MUCH REMAINS TO BE DONE.

- a. The percentage of females in leadership positions and on the staff of environmental organizations has increased over time.
- b. Women occupied more than half of the 1,714 leadership positions studied in conservation and preservation organizations.
- c. Women comprised more than 60% of the new hires and interns in conservation and preservation organizations.
- d. Women also dominate the executive director's position in environmental grantmaking foundations.
- e. Women have the greatest likelihood of becoming chair of the board in environmental grantmaking foundations.

### 2. HOWEVER, MEN ARE STILL MORE LIKELY THAN FEMALES TO OCCUPY THE MOST POWERFUL POSITIONS IN ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS.

- a. There is a significant gender gap as more than 70% of the presidents and chairs of the board of conservation/preservation organizations are male.
  - i. Size matters too. The presidents of the largest conservation and preservation organizations (budgets over \$1 million) are overwhelmingly male (90%).
- b. Men also dominate the executive director positions in government environmental agencies.
- c. Males are far more likely than females to be on the staff of government environmental agencies.
- d. Males occupy the majority of the top leadership positions in environmental grantmaking organizations.
  - i. 76.2% of the presidents are male.
  - ii. 55% of the chairs of the board are male.
- e. Males also dominate the board membership in all three kinds of institutions.
  - i. More than 56% of the board members of the environmental organizations studied are male.



### **3. THE CURRENT STATE OF RACIAL DIVERSITY IN ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IS TROUBLING, AND LAGS FAR BEHIND GENDER DIVERSITY.**

- a. The percentage of ethnic minorities working in environmental organizations has increased over time.
- b. Despite the growth in the ethnic minority population in the U.S., the percentage of minorities on the boards or general staff of environmental organizations does not exceed 16% in the three types of institutions studied.
- c. Once hired in environmental organizations, ethnic minorities are concentrated in the lower ranks. As a result, ethnic minorities occupy less than 12% of the leadership positions in the environmental organizations studied.
  - i. They rarely occupy the most powerful positions (such as president or chair of the board) in environmental organizations.
  - ii. Size also matters.
    - None of the largest conservation and preservation organizations (budget over \$1 million) has a president who is an ethnic minority.
    - Overall, the smaller conservation and preservation organizations were less racially diverse than the largest ones.
- d. Yet ethnic minorities and people of multi-racial backgrounds comprise about 38% of the U.S. population.
  - i. Ethnic minorities are severely underrepresented in the environmental workforce.
  - ii. Though ethnic minorities are also underrepresented in the science and engineering (S&E) workforce nationwide, they are employed in the S&E workforce to a much greater percentage than they are in the environmental workforce. Asians, Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans comprise 29% of the S&E workforce.
- e. The diversity manager's position is the only position that minorities are more likely to hold than Whites in environmental organizations.
  - i. However, relatively few of the organizations had such a position.

### **4. THE MEMBERS AND VOLUNTEERS OF ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS ARE PREDOMINANTLY WHITE. THE ORGANIZATIONS STUDIED REPORT A MEMBERSHIP OF ABOUT 3.2 MILLION PEOPLE.**

- a. About 59% of these members are male.
- b. The volunteers are evenly split between males and females.
- c. Very few minorities are members or volunteers of the organizations studied.

### **5. ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS EXPRESS A DESIRE TO DIVERSIFY THEIR BOARDS AND STAFF.**

- a. However, few have a diversity manager or have formed a diversity committee.

- b. Diversity managers were more commonly found in government environmental agencies than in conservation/preservation organizations.
- c. None of the grantmaking foundations studied had a diversity manager.

## **6. CROSS-RACE AND CROSS-CLASS COLLABORATIONS ARE STILL UNCOMMON IN ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS.**

- a. Few of the organizations studied collaborate with ethnic minority or low-income institutions or groups.
  - i. Environmental organizations are less likely to collaborate with low-income organizations than with ethnic minority organizations.
- b. However, environmental organizations indicate that they collaborate frequently with other groups in their networks.

## **7. ENVIRONMENTAL JOBS ARE STILL BEING ADVERTISED AND ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS RECRUIT NEW EMPLOYEES IN WAYS THAT INTRODUCE UNCONSCIOUS BIASES AND FACILITATE THE REPLICATION OF THE CURRENT WORKFORCE.**

- a. Recruitment for new staff frequently occurs through word-of-mouth and informal networks.
- b. This makes it difficult for ethnic minorities, the working class, or anyone outside of traditional environmental networks to find out about job openings and apply for those jobs.
- c. There is both a spatial and strategic mismatch in the recruiting strategies of environmental organizations when it comes to searching for minority workers.
  - i. Environmental organizations recruit from minority-serving institutions infrequently.
  - ii. Environmental organizations recruit from minority professional gatherings infrequently.
  - iii. This means environmental organizations are not recruiting from places where they are most likely to find new and talented ethnic minorities.
  - iv. Existing pipelines for finding minority environmental employees are currently underutilized by environmental organizations.

## **8. MOREOVER, ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS DO NOT USE THE INTERNSHIP PIPELINE EFFECTIVELY TO FIND ETHNIC MINORITY WORKERS.**

- a. Though environmental organizations host ethnic minorities as interns, they have been very reluctant to hire these talented students onto their staff.
- b. In effect, this creates a ruptured pipeline in which talent flows into the organizations but is allowed to dissipate out instead of being nurtured through the entire organization.



## **9. ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS SAY THAT THE BIGGEST BARRIERS TO HIRING MINORITIES IN THEIR ORGANIZATIONS ARE FEW JOB OPENINGS AND LACK OF MINORITY APPLICANTS.**

- a. The organizations do not recognize that their advertising and recruitment strategies could be barriers to minority and low-income applicants.
- b. Despite the claim of few job openings, most of the organizations in the study reported that they hired staff in the last three years. A low percentage hired minorities in that same time period.
  - i. Of the 493 staff hired by conservation/preservation organizations in the last three years, only 63 (or 12.8%) were ethnic minorities.
  - ii. Of the 683 staff hired in government environmental agencies in the last three years, only 80 (or 11.7%) were ethnic minorities.
  - iii. Of the 35 staff hired in environmental grantmaking foundations in the last three years, only 6 (17.1%) were ethnic minorities.

## **10. THE MOST POPULAR DIVERSITY INITIATIVE BEING UNDERTAKEN IN ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IS THE PROMOTION OF WOMEN ALREADY WORKING IN AN ORGANIZATION TO LEADERSHIP POSITIONS.**

- a. Environmental organizations are much less likely to promote ethnic minorities already working in an organization to leadership positions.
- b. Promotions go primarily to White females. Women of color are still on the outside looking in, along with their male counterparts.
- c. This results in a narrowing of the gender gap while perpetuating the already wide racial gap in the leadership of environmental organizations.

## **11. ORGANIZATIONS WERE POLLED TO FIND OUT WHAT KIND OF DIVERSITY ACTIVITIES SHOULD BE UNDERTAKEN IN THEIR REGION AND WHETHER THEY WOULD SUPPORT SUCH ACTIVITIES IF THEY WERE DEVELOPED.**

- a. Despite the professed interest in increasing diversity in environmental organizations, there is a gap between the desire to see diversity initiatives developed and actually supporting such activities once they are in place.
- b. In many instances organizational representatives were significantly more likely to say diversity activities should be undertaken in their region than they were to say that their organization was likely or very likely to support in the activities once they were put in place. For instance,
  - i. More than 70% of all three type of organizations indicated that pipeline for greater inclusion of minority and low-income participants in the environmental workforce and on the boards, yet only 40% of government agencies and 50% environmental NGOs and foundation indicated they would be likely or very likely to support the activity if it were developed.



- ii. Similarly, more than two thirds of the organizations indicated that training programs for minority and low-income residents should be developed, but less than 45% of the organizations would support such training programs.

## 12. THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROFESSIONALS INTERVIEWED FELT THAT:

- a. In general, diversity in environmental organizations has improved over time, but significant work has to be done to make the workplace more inclusive and welcoming to a broader range of people.
  - i. The dominant culture of the organizations is alienating to ethnic minorities, the poor, the LGBTQ community, and others outside the mainstream.
  - ii. Diversity, equity, and inclusion should be core values that are included in the mission statements of environmental organizations.
- b. Ethnic minorities are grossly underrepresented in the leadership of environmental organizations. Increasing racial diversity in the organizations should be a high priority.
- c. A significant number of talented ethnic minorities are willing and able to work in environmental organizations, but discriminatory hiring practices prevent them from obtaining jobs in such organizations.
- d. The environmental discourse has to be broadened to include a wider range of people and the issues they are concerned with.
- e. Greater effort should be made to facilitate the emergence of the next generation of leaders. This group should be more multicultural than the current cadre of senior environmental leaders.
- f. Diversity data should be collected and tracked in environmental organizations. This is particularly true of nongovernmental organizations.

### A Note about Terminology

Several terms are used to describe non-European residents of the United States in the scholarly and popular literature as well as in the social and political realms. This report uses the terms “ethnic minority” and “people of color” interchangeably to describe non-European Americans and White to describe Euro-Americans. At times the report makes specific references to specific racial or ethnic groups such as Blacks, Hispanics (Latinos, Chicanos, etc.), Asians, Native Americans, and Arabs.

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Marcelo Bonta, Director, Center for Diversity & the Environment, 2007

Charles Jordan, Chair of the Board, The Conservation Fund, 2007

Source: Bonta & Jordan, 2007: 13.

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