

## The Green Movement Is Talking About Racism? It's About Time

**The same people and organizations we admire for protecting our wild places also have a history of being apathetic—or plain antagonistic—toward issues of race and social justice**

**[Brentin Mock](#)**

Facing a new White House administration led by Donald Trump, environmental leaders recently [signed an accord](#) pledging their allegiance to civil rights and social justice. Among the signatories are several leaders of the Sierra Club, including its executive director, Michael Brune, who in recent years has steered the organization toward rather bold stances on a range of issues that aren't traditionally recognized as "green." In 2013, its board of directors voted that the organization should [advocate for immigrant rights](#). The following year, the Sierra Club [endorsed and defended the Black Lives Matter movement](#). Since President Trump came into office, the organization's resolve has only strengthened, as Brune indicated in a [November 18 blog post](#): "I'm proud of how the Sierra Club has begun to address the intersection of climate with inequality, race, class, and gender, and I guarantee that we'll go even deeper."

This shift toward racial justice matters has not been universally accepted among the Sierra Club's ranks and may even have [cost it a few members](#). Those who disapprove have often expressed sentiments amounting to "racism is not the environmental movement's responsibility." But Brune says the organization won't be backing off anytime soon, a position he forcefully defended [on the group's blog](#). He will assure his members, he tells me, "that we are continuing to protect wildlife and wild places, and this is how we can best do that in the 21st century."

What Brune is acknowledging is the darker legacy of the green movement. Some may believe that environmentalism has little to do with social justice issues, but the mission of the Sierra Club, and many conservation groups like it throughout the late-19th century and most of the 20th century, was anything but race neutral. In many ways, racial exclusivity actually shaped the environmental mission, which is what makes the Sierra Club's leap toward civil rights advocacy such a radical move. It's important not because a network like Black Lives Matter needs environmentalists, but because environmentalists need black lives. Given the history of conservationists elevating endangered plant life over endangered people of color, it is environmentalism's soul that most needs saving.

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The rise of the conservation movement in the late-19th century came at the expense of America's racial promise to the black Americans it had enslaved for almost 250 years. In 1907, when President Teddy Roosevelt was looking to make America great again, he wanted to pull together what had been cast to ruin during the Civil War, which ruptured the nation fewer than 50 years prior. Roosevelt's understanding of greatness, however, meant setting certain sections of the United States apart from the growing population of black people and immigrants who were filling American cities. The U.S. government had promised land to newly emancipated black citizens after the Civil War, but those properties were [yanked away from them](#)—and from many Native American tribes—to [make room for new national parks](#) and monuments.

This was done at the behest of white men who are considered the first class of environmentalists: men like John Muir, Frederick Jackson Turner, and Madison Grant. They are called the fathers of [conservation](#), the [public parks system](#), and the nation's hunting societies and forestry movements. Many were also leading proponents of much darker philosophies.

Grant, known for having a hand in the creation of conservation leagues like the American Bison Society and national parks like Denali and Glacier, was also known for being a eugenicist and [white supremacist](#). His virulently xenophobic worldview became the basis for America's extremely restrictive Immigration Act of 1924.

Similarly, Turner saw the western frontier as the basis for white American nationalism, and his ethnocentric theories framed the suspicion about immigration that we're still seeing today. Noted historian and environmental studies professor William Cronon once explained in a [PBS interview](#), "If you believe that wilderness is fundamental to American national identity, then you need to protect wilderness to protect that part of America. And so, curiously, the frontier thesis can support immigration restriction, extra-national imperial expansion, and national park formation all at the same time."

Muir was not as instrumental as Turner and Grant in terms of shaping immigration policy, but his views on the ["uncleanliness" of Native Americans](#) were enabling, as was his silence on the eugenics science adopted by his peers.

All of these men were putting their full force into conservation at a time when African Americans were being killed at near-genocidal rates. Every vestige of [Reconstruction had been destroyed](#) by terrorist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, the [lynchings of African Americans were becoming a defining characteristic of the American milieu](#), and Jim Crow was becoming the de facto law of the land. And yet, throughout all of this racial turmoil, President Roosevelt believed the nation should [soft-pedal its way](#) through this terror and refused to prioritize protecting black lives.

But Roosevelt did believe that radical steps were necessary to preserve land. Elizabeth Kolbert recently wrote in the *New Yorker* about [the camping trip](#) Roosevelt took with Muir in 1903 and how this has "been described as the most consequential camping trip in American history"—it led to the creation of 18 national monuments, five national parks, and 150 national forests. On October 4, 1907, Roosevelt told a crowd that "the conservation of natural resources is the fundamental problem. Unless we solve that problem, it will avail us little to solve all others."

So there's no debating who they wanted to protect the land for. As Roosevelt said after claiming [Grand Canyon in 1908](#), "Let this great wonder of nature remain as it now is. You cannot improve on it. But what you can do is keep it for your children, your children's children, and all who come after you, as the one great sight which every American should see."

You could have forgiven a black farmer back then for believing that the reason Roosevelt was so hell-bent on preserving these forests was because white folk were running out of trees for lynchings.

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Many of the oldest environmental organizations in the United States have helped institutionalize Roosevelt's beliefs about the paramount importance of conservation. The Sierra Club is perhaps the most visible and most modernized of these, and it's certainly [grappling](#) with the racist genesis of environmental thought and policy. As a membership-driven organization, the Sierra Club has steered away from pure conservation toward the new environmentalism that focuses on issues like urban pollution and clean water, forged by people like Rachel Carson in the late 1960s.

But the Sierra Club has fallen back on racist conservationist principles at various points throughout the 1980s and 1990s, particularly on the issue of immigration. There were intervals when its board of directors was almost overtaken by a faction who wanted to make immigration restriction the Sierra Club's top priority. These

dissidents claimed that immigration would set off overpopulation bombs that would be harmful for the environment.

Consider the words of John Tanton, who served as the Sierra Club's national population committee chair in the 1970s and later founded the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which the Southern Poverty Law Center branded a hate group. In a letter to a right-leaning foundation, Tanton [wrote in 1988](#): "What will happen when [the white population] goes into minority status, and the groups that comprise the new coalition majorities don't share the same [environmental] values?"

This is not far from what Madison Grant [wrote in 1925](#): "From the racial point of view it is not logical to limit the number of Europeans while we throw the country open without limitation to Negroes, Indians, and half-breeds. Nor is it the part of wise patriotism in any way to enhance the already large proportion of peoples of so-called colored blood among us."

Similar sentiments have not completely disappeared at organizations like the Sierra Club. "There are very few people who are still here who were around during those times, but it's still in the room," says Brune. "We recognize that Sierra has this unfortunate past, especially with this takeover attempt and some ugly debates over immigration and race. That led to an uneasy truce back then that muzzled us as an organization, meaning we couldn't speak up for the immigrant families whose rights were being violated."

A handful of organizations have been willing to confront racial problems in a public way—Sierra Club, Greenpeace, 350.org, and Earthjustice are a few examples. But that shift has occurred only over the past few years. It's unclear whether there's a permanent future for racial justice in the mainstream environmental agenda, especially among those organizations that still cling to an exclusive mission to conserve nature.

Some of these groups are signaling that they are ready. As National Audubon Society president David Yarnold [wrote for the Green 2.0 website](#):

We need to operate differently, recruit differently, and hire differently. And to make that possible, we need to become the kinds of organizations that are truly open and inclusive, organizations in which people of all backgrounds see themselves represented, welcomed, and valued. We need to aim high, have the hard conversations, and demand more from ourselves. The future of our movement depends on it.

Yarnold's words are promising, but what does the kind of shift he's talking about actually look like? For clues, it's worth looking to the Movement for Black Lives, a collective of groups that includes Black Lives Matter. The campaign is well aware of how environmental benefits are prioritized for white communities, while environmental burdens like proximity to polluting facilities are disproportionately distributed among communities of color. Among the six priority demands listed in the Movement for Black Lives policy platform is the [call for reparations](#)—financial redress paid to African Americans for all they've suffered in the United States.

Perhaps reparations in the environmental movement means mainstream organizations become completely restructured with racial justice prioritized right alongside issues like climate change and deforestation—a format that would be utterly unrecognizable to today's traditional green leaders. As it stands, there are few sectors that *don't* have to regularly account for how their work is impacting black lives. Nonprofits dealing with housing, schooling, public health, the business sector, even sports—all of these have to answer for how policy risks and benefits are distributed among African Americans and people of color.

Environmental nonprofits, meanwhile, historically have not had to account for the systemic imbalances that discrimination brings—like the fact that polluting facilities are more often located in communities of color or,

on the other side of the spectrum, the fact that “greening” spaces can also have a lot of the same effects of [gentrification](#), displacing the communities that live nearby.

The problem starts with the leadership makeup of environmental organizations themselves. Within 25 years, people of color are expected to become the majority in America. Meanwhile, stats from the [Green 2.0](#) initiative show that only 12 percent of the leadership staff and less than 5 percent of NGO boards of directors are people of color. When it comes to general staffing for these organizations, less than 13 percent of those hired between 2010 and 2014 were people of color.

As Earthjustice president Trip Van Noppen recently stated:

Our movement and indeed our own organization have a serious problem in that we don’t yet reflect the rich diversity of our nation, or even the diversity of groups we represent in our work to protect the environment for all people. Environmental burdens and benefits are not distributed equitably, and our passion for justice compels us to address these disparities in our legal work. But to fully realize justice, we must change from within.

It just might be time for an Environmental Reconstruction era.

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Many people of color who have their own passion for and definitions of nature are not waiting around to see. Groups like [Outdoor Afro](#), [Latino Outdoors](#), and the movement [Robert Bullard](#) is leading for a climate change initiative focusing on the South demonstrate an environmentalism that’s unencumbered by the racist origins of conservation. They are, in fact, nature’s most natural defenders, because they know viscerally what it means to be endangered.

Some of the people in these new groups are actually former employees of traditional environmental groups who tried to change those older institutions from within but couldn’t make much headway. Environmental consultant Rachel Langstone said in the Green 2.0 survey that the people of color who are lucky enough to land on a board are often brought in for token roles, only to “[rubber stamp what they’re saying](#).” It’s all well and good to vocally support racial justice, but green groups first need to aggressively change from the inside. Those who don’t actively address their own diversity issues are relegating their organization to future irrelevancy.

For groups like Outdoor Afro, diversity is part of their DNA, not an ad hoc committee. They’re not saying to the traditional environmental movement, “You need to include us.” They’re saying that the traditional green groups have neither a monopoly nor a copyright on what constitutes environmentalism. These populations have always been a part of nature’s narrative, whether old, white conservationists have acknowledged them or not.

“We get to write a different and new narrative about what black engagement of the outdoors looks like,” Outdoor Afro founder Rue Mapp tells me. “We can stand on that narrative to create more memories, leadership, and ways of talking about nature in terms of our healing instead of talking about nature as a tale of our terror.”

Terror is what African Americans were facing in the 1900s, while Roosevelt was making America’s outdoors great again. One hundred years later, Roosevelt’s children continue to pass land and resources among their own circles as black lives cry out in a state of emergency. At a certain point, that cycle has to end. Environmental and conservation organizations must do their part to invest as much in protecting black people as they are in protecting forests.

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