

Counting Heads Is Not Enough To Address Environmental Justice

Center for Health, Environment & Justice

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Today in the [Washington Post](#) was a front page news story that talks about how the large environmental organizations are not diverse enough.

This is the same story written many times beginning in the late 1980's. It sparked a national conversation and action that lead to the first Environmental Justice Summit in 1991 and in 1994 Bill Clinton signed an executive order Environmental Justice Act. The story talked about counting heads (non-white) on staff, in decision making positions and members of the Board. That story is not new and I believe is way too narrow of a focus.

The large environmental organizations have brought more diversity to their staff and their board, then was the case in 1990, but they are still a far cry from being diverse. However, I think just counting people of color within an organization is not the only or even the best measurement of their efforts to address the multitude of issues within the context of environmental justice.

One point that the Washington Post article raised, I think is at the heart of the issues. "Today, minority communities — black, Latino and Native American — along with low-income white neighborhoods still bear a disproportionate burden of the nation's toxic pollution. They are in the shadows of petrochemical plants and coal-fired power plants, the nation's greatest source of stationary pollution, according to the Congressional Research Service." A diverse group of staff and board members will not change anything unless the large green organizations decide to makes a radical shift in their missions, goals and resource allocation.

It is a fact, detailed in a NCRP report that, environmental funders mainly support large, professionalized environmental organizations instead of the grassroots community-based groups that are most heavily impacted by environmental harms. Organizations with annual budgets greater than \$5 million make up only 2% of all environmental groups, yet receive more than 50% of all environmental grants and donations. This makes it even more imperative that large organizations need to not only change the ethnic makeup of staff and board but also move significant resources to reflect their commitment to the field. The report makes the simple but profound argument that the current environmental funding strategy is not working and that,

without targeting philanthropy at communities most impacted by environmental harms, the movement will continue to fail.

[Read the full article](#) .