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NPQ

NONPROFIT QUARTERLY MAGAZINE

Supporting the Youth Climate Justice Movement

BEING OUTSIDE:
The Importance of Centering Black Leadership in the Climate Justice Movement

+

Stewards of the Earth: Centering Young Leaders of Color in the Face of Climate Crisis

Nature Is a Right, Not a Privilege: Environmental Education as a Catalyst for Youth-Led Climate Justice

Changemakers, Disruptors, and Protectors of Our Earth: Young Women and Girls of the Global Majority Leading Climate Justice

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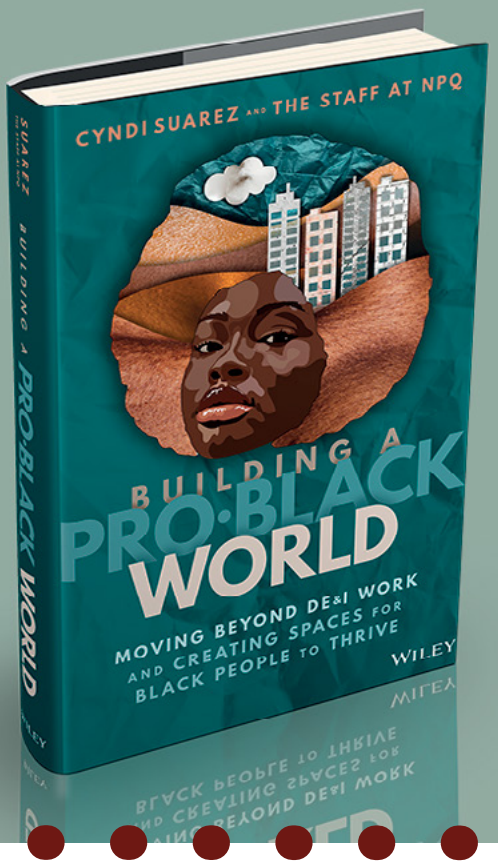

It's Here!

In *Building a Pro-Black World: Moving beyond DE&I Work and Creating Spaces for Black People to Thrive*, a team of dedicated nonprofit leaders delivers a timely roadmap to building pro-Black nonprofit organizations.

Moving the conversation beyond stale DEI cliches, Cyndi Suarez and the *NPQ* staff have included works from leading racial justice voices that demonstrate how to create an environment–and society–in which Black people can thrive.

Order yours using the QR codes!

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❝Growing up, I loved to paint, to make nothings into somethings. To sit outside and color, and reimagine a world where the sun was beaming down on my skin. Art made me feel like I could escape reality and be in my own world. I felt at peace. Not how I feel when fighting for basic human rights. That doesn't feel peaceful. That feels draining, that feels exhausting, that feels tiresome. It feels like I am fighting to be seen. Fighting for the basic necessities of life. The things that feel like they should be a given."

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www.reneelaprisearts.com

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WELCOME

Dear Readers,

As People's Climate Innovation Center's Radiah Shabazz Harold and Nyasha Harris observe, "Communities of color—Black and Indigenous communities, in particular—experience disproportionate impacts from climate change despite contributing the least to the ongoing crisis."

This issue of *Nonprofit Quarterly Magazine* brings you the voices of young climate justice leaders around the world, the majority identifying as members of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities. Conceived by *NPQ*'s senior climate justice editor, Alison Stine, this edition is written entirely by climate justice thinkers, activists, and practitioners between the ages of 21 and 34, and includes voices of youth under 18—offering new direction, vision, and hope for the climate justice movement overall.

"Black children have been brought up in a system that perpetuates a predominantly White, heteronormative narrative around who stewards and cares for outdoor spaces," writes horticulturalist and Black Liberation Collective member Gabby Treadwell. "Science and environmentalism feel like modern-day Jim Crow career fields that systematically disenfranchise the very communities these fields often claim to protect and uplift: communities affected the most by climate disaster, food insecurity, homelessness, and lack of recreational outdoor access.... Perhaps our activism can change when we think of ourselves as part of the overall ecosystem rather than separate from it."

In that spirit, young leaders are moving beyond visions and talk and into climate justice action, including at the level of policymaking across the planet. Youth are also becoming more vocal about what they need from the field in order to achieve their goals: education, mentorship, wellness support, and funding.

"Frontline communities," continue Harold and Harris, "...are inordinately burdened by the extremes of our changing climate, leading to an exacerbated threat to health, public safety, and economic stability. In addition, those on the front lines of climate change remain grossly underresourced and receive lackluster support—financial and otherwise—to implement solutions to the specific needs of their communities."

Our planet will be left in the hands of this dedicated new generation of climate leaders, who are clear about the work needing to be done. As hunter jones and Ubuntu Climate Initiative powerfully articulate, "Cultural reparations are critical for living in a restorative and balanced future. Youth climate activists are embodying the way. We understand that we can no longer view nature as a means to an end. Our natural resources must be revered as sacred—a part of us and a part of all."

Cassandra Heliczer
Magazine Editor

Being Outside

The Importance of Centering Black Leadership in the Climate Justice Movement

by Gabby Treadwell

Blackness in the climate justice movement means that we are reclaiming spaces from which we have been ostracized. Blackness in the climate justice movement means an expansion of the very definition of justice itself.

In *Parable of the Sower*, Octavia E. Butler, a personal hero of mine who is beloved and celebrated by many, wrote:

> All struggles
> Are essentially
> power struggles.
> Who will rule,
> Who will lead,
> Who will define,
> refine,
> confine,
> design,
> Who will dominate.
> All struggles
> Are essentially
> power struggles,
> And most
> are no more intellectual
> than two rams
> knocking their heads together.[1]

I have carried these words with me everywhere I go since first reading them. And as I get older, the words ring more and more true.

"I SHARE MY TRUTH" BY RENÉE LAPRISE/WWW.RENEELAPRISEARTS.COM

Our Black community is interconnected not only through our history and our visions for a better future but also through the mountain ranges, creeks, rivers, swamps, streams, and plains of our shared planet.

As a child growing up in Michigan, I attended a prestigious Catholic school on scholarship, which provided me with opportunities that were out of my parents' financial reach at the time. I vividly remember every school morning suiting up in my blue plaid skirt, collared shirt, and sweater vest, and slipping on my saddle shoes. The drive to school overlooked a lake, and if you squinted, you could see Canada across the water. As we drove by, I daydreamed about the houses that rested on the state side and faced the water. Many of them were large estates with lawns and driveways the size of a traditional home. Many of my peers lived on those estates.

We went on field trips all over the state of Michigan that I otherwise would not have had access to, which exposed me to pieces of history from which Black folks have been excluded. In the summers, the school put together various camps for students based on their age range. Older kids got to backpack part of the Appalachian Trail. I was always very envious of this. The one I begged my parents to let me go on was a five-day camping trip on Ohio's Maumee River. They said yes.

I still don't know how they scraped the money together. It was right after the 2008 recession, and gifts were strictly for Christmas and birthdays. This was my first time sleeping in a tent, horseback riding, brushing my teeth with bottled water, and seeing the stars without light pollution. And for many years, this was all I had. My outdoor experiences and education were small, and such rarified moments scattered across time were ones I have savored and carried with me through my life.

There was never an inherited belief that I could be a scientist or a person who could have an environmental impact. Maybe this alone was the inherited belief. Black children have been brought up in a system that perpetuates a predominantly White, heteronormative narrative around who stewards and cares for outdoor spaces. Science and environmentalism feel like modern-day Jim Crow career fields that systematically disenfranchise the very communities these fields often claim to protect and uplift: communities affected the most by climate disaster, food insecurity, homelessness, and lack of recreational outdoor access.

Black scientists, environmentalists, farmers, ranchers, and land stewards have inherited the additional responsibility of actively dismantling predominantly White environmental spaces; but navigating and dismantling such spaces adversely impacts our ability to do the work that we have truly envisioned for ourselves. How can we better create spaces for ourselves to do the work without White supremacy exacerbating and exhausting us to the point of burnout? Could resolving this question, alongside other questions we may feel a personal calling to answer, translate into more diverse representation for our environment, our communities, our ecosystems, and our climate?

Our Black community is interconnected not only through our history and our visions for a better future but also through the mountain ranges, creeks, rivers, swamps, streams, and plains of our shared planet. Maybe it's this interconnectedness that empowers and amplifies us: we do not stand alone as individual ecosystems; we are a part of the profound web of life that surrounds us. Perhaps our activism can change when we think of ourselves as part of the overall ecosystem rather than separate from it.

It was in my later teenage years that I got bored with the White environmentalist narrative and began to challenge it. I had just relocated to Idaho after my parents' divorce, and my mom had started a new job at a country music radio station. I'm not sure if it gets more Idaho than that. At first, I challenged the narrative in my own little personal ways. I was exploring my identity as a young person, freshly graduated from high school, who at the time was just barely beginning to grasp how vast this world is. I realized how much there was out there for me, and it didn't matter to me anymore if I existed in ways that differed from what I viewed as Blackness. That internalized White supremacy was no longer something I could convince myself to carry, and so I began to try out things that "Black folks don't do."

I learned to fish. I ran the toughest half-marathon in the Pacific Northwest. I learned about native plants and the

Black folks know sorrow. We know loss. We know how it feels to be left out, forgotten, erased. And we know what it means to hurt. Now we need to remember joy.

Indigenous relationships to them. I went on a rafting trip. I hiked. I swam. I camped solo. And I laughed and danced through all of these moments. This fostered in me not only a love for the outdoors but also a deep and emotional relationship with this planet that facilitated and hosted all of my experiences.

I grew to be defensive and protective of my greatest teacher and host in this lifetime—our planet. Being outside has taught me about our interconnectedness and the dynamic realities of how loving this planet looks different for everyone. I learned, with my hands buried in the soil, how nature recognizes our joy and our sorrow. If you look closely between the headlines and performative gestures of sustainability, you can often catch glimpses of her sorrow, too. Even the trees become silent—they understand.

It is a huge responsibility to be an advocate for the environment. This vocation becomes even more complicated when your proximity to the environment has been systemically erased and you have been historically excluded from recreation outdoors. Many Black climate activists are healing the trauma of what we and our Ancestors have had to endure, while simultaneously advocating for a better world.

The importance of centering Black leadership in the climate justice movement boils down to love and to joy.

We are fighting against grind culture, heteronormativity, transphobia, and racial injustice in nearly every corner of our existence. Activism is healing for many of us. Fighting for a better world for ourselves, our communities, and the children of the future often inadvertently heals us. At the same time, we have been brought into a world where there's either activism or complacency around a system that robs us of our joy, our brilliance, our uniqueness, and the importance of our story.

But to be complacent in the fight against climate injustice is a privilege that many of our communities do not have. Black folks know sorrow. We know loss. We know how it feels to be left out, forgotten, erased. And we know what it means to hurt.

Now we need to remember joy.

We need to think of our love.

People often protect and fight for what they love. This earth is our home, but it is also so much more. *Our earth is a love story—and redefining how we are going to love is a crucial part of our liberation.* Blackness in the climate justice movement means that we are reclaiming spaces from which we have been ostracized. Blackness in the climate justice movement means an expansion of the very definition of justice itself.

NOTE

1. Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (Hachette Book Group, 1993), 94.

GABBY TREADWELL is a horticulture student at their nearby community college, College of Western Idaho, in the Pacific Northwest. They work for Black Liberation Collective, a nonprofit that focuses on serving the Black queer and trans community in their area. This includes mutual aid programs, facilitating access to gender-affirming care, and creating outdoor access to environmental spaces that historically have been kept from the Black diaspora. In the future, Treadwell hopes to venture out and start their own urban farm that is stewarded and cared for by folks of color. Treadwell has a deep passion for amplifying Black voices and their contributions to the climate justice movement.

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DETAIL: "I SHARE MY TRUTH" BY RENÉE LAPRISE/WWW.RENEELAPRISEARTS.COM

Stewards of the Earth

Centering Young Leaders of Color in the Face of Climate Crisis

by Radiah Shabazz Harold and Nyasha Harris

"We always have been and always will be the stewards of the earth. Children and young people are filled with wonder and reverence for the natural world and are imparted with the hope of the generation that brought them here. Thus, young people who have maintained that tie to our planet are crucial for this movement."[1]

So spoke Murphy Barney, a 2023 Young Climate Leaders of Color cohort member based in Vermont. She is a Two Spirit Shoshone and Hoopa sister, doula, author, storyteller, and land steward, whose work is rooted in writing, storytelling, and organizing. Barney describes her time in the YCLC cohort as having provided her with the necessary reminder that "we are never starting over or on our own. Rather, we are a part of an infinite web of beings and people, past, present, and future, who will steward this earth and her bountiful offerings."[2] And not just part of, but central. As she observed:

> Indigenous communities alone safeguard and steward 80 percent of the planet's biodiversity. We belong in this movement because of our ways of knowing how to protect and respect the planet's brilliance, which helps us to right-size our place in our ecosystems. When we have leadership roles, we make decisions that benefit all our relations for generations to come.[3]

"FIRST AND WORST"

We are facing a climate crisis. Communities of color—Black and Indigenous communities, in particular—experience disproportionate impacts from climate change despite contributing the least to the ongoing crisis.[4] Frontline communities—those experiencing the consequences of climate change "first and worst"—are inordinately burdened by the extremes of our changing climate, leading to an exacerbated threat to health, public safety, and economic stability.[5] In addition, those on the front lines of climate change remain grossly underresourced and receive lackluster support—financial and otherwise—to implement solutions to the specific needs of their communities.

"The climate justice movement was started by Black and Brown people. We have many incredible leaders who pioneered the paths.... At some point, though, they will have to pass the baton. It is essential that we support the next generation of climate leaders of color so that they are prepared to continue leading this work for years to come."

—Jaime Love, director of programs, People's Climate Innovation Center

"LIVING THE DREAM, DREAMING THE LIFE" BY RENÉE LAPRISE/WWW.RENEELAPRISEARTS.COM

Solutions to climate chaos must be rooted in racial justice and prioritize community-driven approaches; thus, we must look to frontline communities for input and guidance.

Historically, in the United States, BIPOC communities have been disproportionately impacted by the harmful effects of climate change, due in part to long-standing systemic inequities rooted in racism that render these communities more vulnerable.[6] Solutions to climate chaos must be rooted in racial justice and prioritize community-driven approaches; thus, we must look to frontline communities for input and guidance. However, access to resources that enable solutions often requires understaffed and underresourced community-based organizations to jump through unrealistic hoops.[7]

And BIPOC communities continue to navigate the lasting effects of the triple pandemic of racialized violence, COVID-19, and climate change.[8] The federal government has lifted its COVID-19 Public Health Emergency declaration, but the declaration's rippling influence on the US economy is still heavily felt: 2023 labor force participation rates are improving, but they are yet to return to their previous levels;[9] housing instability is at a high;[10] and impacts of the triple pandemic on mental and physical health are increasing.[11] Furthermore, community-based and smaller organizations struggle to sustain themselves as they aid those on the front lines most impacted by the realities of this triple pandemic, given the increased expenses for precautionary measures to ensure safety.[12]

BIPOC communities, significantly more likely to be burdened by such economic upheavals,[13] are also, of course, getting hit hardest by the hotter days,[14] flooding,[15] fires, displacement,[16] and health impacts of climate change[17]—and all compounded by the ongoing burdens born generations in the past. Black people, for instance, are 40 percent more likely to live in areas that experience deaths related to extreme weather temperatures—a statistic that rises to 59 percent as the planet's temperature increases.[18] Status quo policymaking continues to underresource and push to the margins BIPOC and low-income communities.

PEOPLE'S CLIMATE INNOVATION CENTER

People's Climate Innovation Center (Climate Innovation) works to fundamentally shift, subvert, and transform top-down planning and systems to be more community driven, led, and stewarded. It does so in an effort to move beyond incremental mitigation and adaptation efforts to address the complex climate challenges, and drive solutions and decision-making that center these communities and their expertise.[19] Our leadership development approach recognizes that we must build transformative movement-building practices based in shared vision, deepening relationships, community power, and interconnected solutions that intervene at multiple levels. And we anchor our process in a collaboratively created framework that is rooted in essential elements of community-driven planning and its reflected principles.[20]

To counteract the negative impacts of generations of inequitable policies and practices, we not only highlight the experiences of frontline communities but also provide them with resources, funding, and support.[21] We know that the depth and breadth of communities' expertise far surpass the vulnerabilities placed on them, and we are committed, through our core programs, to intergenerational movement building that centers, amplifies, and uplifts the voices, experiences, and prowess of youth changemakers in the climate justice arena.

Our Black-led team is committed to moving resources and power to meet the needs and priorities of frontline communities, including our youth. The opportunities provided by our core youth programs—*Young Black Climate Leaders* and *Young Climate Leaders of Color*—are vital to combating the insurmountable circumstances underserved communities face, while building capacity for lasting, community-led change and setting the stage for a better, more equitable future.[22]

YBCL, our flagship program, supports a growing, vibrant ecosystem of young Black leaders between the ages of 18 and 28 who are successfully advocating for and transforming their communities toward racial and environmental justice. The program provides young Black leaders with opportunities to expand their environmental and climate leadership roles, funding community-based projects at various levels that are rooted in climate and racial justice—initiatives that run the gamut from land rematriation, food systems, and arts and culture to tracking the impacts of air pollution on different communities. In addition, cohort members receive monthly professional development trainings on conflict resolution, strategic communications, and other areas that might influence their work. The program is financed by YBCL's youth-governed Youth Futures Fund, which awards funding to young Black leaders working in racial and environmental justice.[23]

"YBCL, in its present and its future, is the manifestation of an irresistible freedom dream," says Corrine Van Hook-Turner, CEO of Climate Innovation.[24] "Centering and nurturing our young Black leaders' bold, boundless brilliance is an essential pathway to living into the Black futures we know are possible [and] building toward collective liberation intergenerationally and intersectionally."[25]

Since launching in 2020, YBCL has supported nearly 350 youth nationwide, granting nearly $400,000 in funding for climate justice projects across the United States.[26] In 2023, the program distributed $42,000 to 10 exceptional young leaders, and mentored them via monthly professional development and peer learning sessions to nurture and nourish their evolution as the next generation of leaders in our movements.[27]

"YBCL took a chance with me, which [is what] most youth of color need—just a little investment," said Kieshaun White, a 2022 YBCL cohort member.[28] White's project seeks to educate Fresno, CA, youth about environmental racism and how it shows up in their community as poor air quality—and what they can do to address it. "[My YBCL] award has helped take my work to the next level. It provided me with the opportunity to expand my project to do more in-depth work with youth to teach them about climate change, environmental justice, and environmental racism," said White.[29]

For Sarah Martin, a 2022 cohort member and former steward of the youth-governed YBCL Youth Futures Fund,

> The YBCL program has been a transformative force in my life, shaping me into an environmental and climate leader and kindling my passion for sharing the transformative stories emerging in my community. It granted me the opportunity to spotlight critical initiatives, such as Black People Who Hike—a St. Louis–based environmental justice organization committed to empowering, educating, and engaging Black people to explore the outdoors. With the support from YBCL and People's Climate Innovation Center, I had the privilege of joining BPWH's 2022 National Park Tour, capturing and sharing the inspiring narratives of Black hikers. This experience was incredibly enriching, equipping me with invaluable leadership skills in communication, conflict resolution, and deep community engagement. I am immensely grateful for the program and the boundless opportunities it has provided. Serving as a steward for the next generation of grant applicants was an honor, allowing me to give back to a program that has poured so much into me.[30]

The impact of work such as White and Martin are doing in their respective communities—as demonstrated by grant reports and other impact assessments—has enabled Climate Innovation to seek out and secure additional funding that expands the reach of our youth cohorts, ensuring that yet more youth of color have access to the support they need to sustain and scale their projects. This year, we are proud to bring 15 new members into the YBCL fold, awarding $100,000 in grants to young leaders—nearly $60,000 more than was awarded in 2023.[31]

In 2021, the success of YBCL and its positive impact on youth leaders as solution makers inspired the launch of its sibling program, YCLC, to ensure that young people of color are also resourced financially and within a national network of like-minded movement builders, so that climate justice solutions center the needs of those most impacted. Like YBCL, YCLC aims to build a national network of young leaders of color who are learning, growing, and advancing climate justice work in their own communities. The YCLC program seeks to immerse youth nationwide in climate justice, arts, story-based advocacy, cultural strategy, targeted direct action, community organizing, transformative change, ecological principles, and leadership development led by experienced strategists, leaders, and political activators, while providing space for youth to develop and shape climate justice projects into what they want to see and what they feel serves them and their communities.[32]

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In the four years since the development and launch of our youth programs, the impact has been far reaching, creating a legacy and setting the stage for communities to choose their own destinations in the face of adversity—in particular, racism and the looming climate crisis. In 2023, we expanded our youth cohort opportunities to youth of color in Puerto Rico, Guam, the United States Virgin Islands, the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa;[33] and in November 2024, 40 additional cohort members will be selected to join and contribute to the growing network of young leaders.

The programs have created a revolving door of a kind—a circular and reciprocal ecosystem that is committed to reaching back and bringing forward more youth to ensure that as many as possible feel supported and are equipped to govern and

The eagerness we have seen to reapply to, share, amplify, and support these programs is a clear indication of the current gaps in funding and support for youth of color in need and toward their leadership development.

lead amid climate chaos. The eagerness we have seen to reapply to, share, amplify, and support these programs is a clear indication of the current gaps in funding and support for youth of color in need and toward their leadership development. This is especially true for those on untraditional paths—for example, youth who do not pursue higher education; young farmers; and young people who choose to launch their own businesses. Investing in this kind of youth leadership development is what anchors us, as we look to the future.

As Van Hook-Turner described it:

> Remember the saying "Nothing about us without us"? Remember FUBU—"For Us, By Us"? That's what we're investing in. Their dreams, their vision, their design, their innovation, their solutions, their stewardship! Giving is a gift, and we set our young leaders up for success when we sustain what we invest in.[34]

And as Jaime Love, director of programs at Climate Innovation, reminds us:

> The climate justice movement was started by Black and Brown people. We have many incredible leaders who pioneered the paths and have been doing this work for decades. At some point, though, they will have to pass the baton. It is essential that we support the next generation of climate leaders of color so that they are prepared to continue leading this work for years to come. YBCL and YCLC provide a space for folks to see themselves in this work, and a national network of leaders to grow with and learn from.[35]

NOTES

1. Author interview with 2023 Young Climate Leaders of Color cohort member Murphy Barney, June 18, 2024.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Kira Sullivan-Wiley and Megan Jungwiwattanaporn, "People Who've Contributed Least to Climate Change Are Most Affected By It," The Pew Charitable Trusts, May 22, 2023, www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2023/05/22/people-whove-contributed-least-to-climate-change-are-most-affected-by-it.
5. Carolyn Holland, "Centering Frontline Communities," *Stories of Home* (blog), Ecotrust, last modified February 16, 2023, ecotrust.org/centering-frontline-communities/.
6. See Katherine G. Quinn et al., "The COVID-19, racism, and violence syndemic: Evidence from a qualitative study with Black residents of Chicago," *SSM—Qualitative Research in Health* 3 (June 2023): 1–10.
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CLIMATE JUSTICE

Navigating Climate Justice

Empowering BIPOC Youth with Geographic Information Systems and Remote Sensing

by Daja Elum

The climate crisis is an urgent and pervasive threat, and it disproportionately affects Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities.[1] These populations often face heightened exposure to environmental hazards such as rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and air pollution. According to the Environmental Protection Agency's 2021 report, *Climate Change and Social Vulnerability in the United States: A Focus on Six Impacts*:

> Black and African American individuals are 40% more likely…to currently live in areas with the highest projected increases in mortality rates due to… extreme temperatures…[and] are 34% more likely to live in areas with the highest projected increases in childhood asthma diagnoses due to climate-driven changes in particulate air pollution.... Hispanic and Latino individuals are 43% more likely…to currently live in areas with the highest projected labor hour losses in weather-exposed industries.... American Indian and Alaska Native individuals are 48% more likely…to currently live in areas where the highest percentage of land is projected to be inundated due to sea level rise.... Asian individuals are 23% more likely…to currently live in coastal areas with the highest projected increases in traffic delays from…high-tide flooding.[2]

By addressing the barriers to access and representation and promoting successful initiatives and inclusive strategies, we can ensure that BIPOC communities are equipped with the tools and knowledge to combat climate change.

Despite these risk disparities, there is a significant underrepresentation of individuals from these communities in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—fields that design and use tools to understand, predict, and mitigate the impacts of climate change. The absence of such diverse perspectives leads to biases and unrealized solutions and innovations in scientific fields.[3] BIPOC communities also possess place-based knowledge that can provide rich, detailed observations of climate impacts on local biophysical systems.[4] This knowledge, derived from communities' long-term interactions with their environments, is crucial for understanding local climate changes and developing effective adaptation strategies. Incorporating BIPOC perspectives into climate science not only addresses equity but also enhances the overall capacity to address climate challenges comprehensively.

Many factors contribute to BIPOC underrepresentation in climate-related STEM fields, including financial constraints, a lack of role models, systemic racism within educational institutions and the workforce, and limited exposure to STEM education. Integrating climate-related STEM pedagogy in K–12 school systems would support a new generation of BIPOC advocates in "the development of critical and creative thinking skills…needed to participate in resolving environmental issues."[5] Climate change education spans multiple science disciplines, including biology, Earth system science, and chemistry; however, the

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representation of these disciplines in school curricula and state standards may not be sufficient to support robust climate change education. For example, the 50-state analysis of Earth science education standards in 2007 identified a disconnect between "an Earth system literate society and the current K–12 education system that is responsible for developing this capacity."[6]

GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SYSTEMS AND REMOTE SENSING IN CLIMATE WORK

Geography and geospatial science, which are integral parts of Earth system science, use tools such as *geographic information systems* and *remote sensing* to study the physical and cultural environments on Earth.[7] Climate change analysis benefits from data generated by these tools. "[T]he sustained advancement in space and computer technology" ensures that "RS and GIS play a crucial role in tracing the trajectories of climate change and its effects for human survival."[8] These technologies enable researchers to monitor inaccessible areas in near real-time, providing comprehensive data that are critical for effective disaster management and mitigating climate change.[9] Integrating these technologies into K–12 education would enhance students' understanding of climate change and prepare them to address environmental challenges effectively.

According to NASA, the average surface temperature of Earth "was about 2.45 degrees Fahrenheit (or about 1.36 degrees Celsius) warmer in 2023 than the late 19th-century (1850–1900) preindustrial average"[10] and "2.34 degrees Fahrenheit (1.30 degrees Celsius) above the 20th century baseline (1951 to 1980)."[11] The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change attributes the rise in global temperatures to expansion of anthropogenic, or human-caused, greenhouse gases.[12] GHGs such as carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide are naturally occurring gases that absorb energy from the sun and trap heat inside the atmosphere reflected from the earth's surface.[13] Without GHGs "the average temperature of Earth would drop from 14° C (57° F) to as low as –18° C (–0.4° F)."[14] However, human activities such as burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, landfills, toxic agricultural practices, and transportation have increased the natural rate of these gases in the atmosphere. This can lead to a rise in sea levels, increased temperatures, and more frequent and severe extreme weather events. For example, May 2024 was the warmest May in history, according to NASA's records;[15] and July 2024's Hurricane Beryl became "the earliest hurricane to reach Category 5 strength on record in the Atlantic Basin."[16] Addressing these challenges requires urgent, concerted global efforts to reduce GHG emissions and mitigate climate change impacts.

As NASA outlines, climate scientists use an array "of direct and indirect measurements to thoroughly investigate Earth's climate history" and predict future trends.[17] "These measurements include data from natural sources like tree rings, ice cores, corals, and sediments from oceans and lakes."[18] Data from technological sources, including satellites and both airborne and ground-based instruments, play a critical role in analysis.[19] Scientists also use climate modeling, which implements computers to simulate the earth's climate system and predict patterns based on real-world observations.[20]

Geographic information systems is a tool that ties climate research together, allowing scientists to visualize, analyze, and interpret spatial (location-based) data, providing insights into climate patterns and aiding in the development of mitigation and adaptation strategies. GIS combines spatial data with various types of descriptive data (attributes) to create visual representations and perform advanced analyses. It provides a comprehensive platform for capturing, managing, analyzing, and visualizing geographic data from diverse sources.[21] It is used in a number of fields, including urban planning, weather forecasting, agriculture, and utilities, and has become especially useful in climate change research.[22] Moreover, GIS plays a significant role in disaster management and hazard mitigation by providing detailed data for assessing the socioeconomic impacts of natural disasters and planning effective emergency responses.[23]

Remote sensing is the process of collecting data about an object or area from a distance, usually via satellites or aircraft. It involves the use of sensors that detect and record electromagnetic radiation (such as visible light, infrared, or radar) reflected or emitted from the earth's surface or atmosphere.[24] Satellite imagery via remote sensing has been available for most of the world since 1972,[25] with data from airborne and ground-based instruments commonly used to validate satellite data and provide more localized measurements. Remote sensing can be used in the same fields as GIS: it is a data source, and GIS analyzes and visualizes the data.[26] Remote sensing has various applications, such as monitoring of land use and land changes, detection and monitoring of natural disasters, and assessment of air and water quality. Used together in the context of climate work,

GIS and remote sensing technologies are essential for documenting, analyzing, and communicating the impacts of climate change.

Because these tools enable detailed mapping and monitoring of environmental changes, they offer critical insights for policymaking and community planning. For instance, GIS can map flood-prone areas, identify communities at risk, and aid in developing targeted mitigation strategies. And remote sensing through satellite imagery provides real-time data on deforestation, glacier melt, and urban heat islands, among other phenomena.

As described by Ryan Lanclos writing for *Esri*, GIS and remote sensing were instrumental in the response and recovery efforts in the aftermath of the devastating 2019 tornadoes in Lee County, AL. The National Weather Service used GIS to map and classify the extent and path of each tornado, detailing "storm start and end points, path length and width, and wind magnitudes."[27] In an interview with Lanclos, Jared Bostic, deputy Geographic Information Officer with the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency, noted how he used GIS to record "tornado swaths" and "mapped an impact summary," calculating the affected population, households, and businesses.[28] And FEMA developed "a partially automated imagery-derived model to conduct preliminary house-by-house damage estimates," wrote Lanclos, significantly reducing assessment time "from five to six days…to less than 24 hours."[29] Also, data integration from multiple sources, including aerial imagery, enabled the creation of web services, dashboards, and StoryMaps (a mapping technology) for efficient visualization and communication; local authorities, supported by GIS, provided detailed damage information to FEMA for federal recovery assistance; and the integration of GIS and remote sensing data facilitated coordinated response efforts, efficient resource management, and timely restoration of services, enhancing overall disaster management and recovery.[30]

PERSISTENT IMPACT DISPARITIES AND BARRIERS: RECOGNIZING THE INTERSECTION OF RACIAL AND CLIMATE INJUSTICE

In "Centering Equity in the Nation's Weather, Water, and Climate Services," Aradhna Tripati et al. wrote, "*Climate injustice* refers to the role of structural discrimination in saddling communities of color and low-income communities with disproportionately high burdens of the harmful risks and impacts of climate change."[31] These communities often face greater exposure to environmental hazards and have fewer resources to adapt to or recover from climate-related disasters. This injustice is compounded by systemic inequalities that limit access to quality education and economic opportunities.

Limited access to education is also a social vulnerability: the systemic barriers further exacerbate the disproportionate impacts of climate change on marginalized communities.

As the 2021 *Climate Change and Social Vulnerability in the United States* report reminds us, "Race…plays a significant role in determining one's risk of exposure to air pollution, even after controlling for other socioeconomic and demographic factors."[32] The report notes that there are higher exposures to particulate matter ($PM_{2.5}$) and ozone "in neighborhoods with more racial minorities" and a concurrent "higher incidence of childhood asthma."[33] And according to the EPA, "Many studies show that these microscopic fine particles can penetrate deep into the lungs, and that long- and short-term exposure can lead to asthma attacks, missed days of school or work, heart attacks, expensive emergency room visits and premature death."[34]

Limited access to education is also a social vulnerability: the systemic barriers further exacerbate the disproportionate impacts of climate change on marginalized communities, making it essential to address both environmental and educational inequities to achieve true climate justice.

Many BIPOC communities lack access to quality STEM education due to underfunded schools and resource disparities, resulting in fewer opportunities down the line to engage with the complex technologies used in climate work. Higher education in STEM fields often comes with significant financial burdens, and scholarships and funding opportunities for BIPOC students are limited. The underrepresentation of BIPOC professionals in these fields means fewer role models and mentors, which can perpetuate a cycle of exclusion. According to the U.S. National Science Foundation, "Collectively, Hispanic, Black, American Indian, and Alaska Native people made up 31% percent of the U.S. population, but [only] 24% of the STEM workforce in 2021."[35]

Recognizing the intersection of racial and climate injustice requires understanding how colonization, genocide, racism, and slavery have made marginalized communities more susceptible to environmental hazards.

Systemic racism both creates and further compounds these issues, manifesting in discriminatory hiring practices, biased curricula, and a lack of supportive environments. With respect to GIS and remote sensing, the access barriers to education first reported on in the mid-1990s remain largely in place today.[36] Significant barriers include high costs of hardware and software, steep learning curves, limited access to data due to these technologies being regarded as commercial activity, and a lack of awareness or understanding of their potential applications.[37] These barriers continue to hinder the widespread and effective use of GIS in educational settings today, as confirmed by recent studies highlighting ongoing challenges such as a lack of teacher training and confidence, high workloads, complex software, insufficient hardware, inadequate curriculum integration, financial constraints, and a lack of technical support.[38]

These systemic issues are mirrored in broader STEM education disparities, where marginalized students often lack access to well-prepared or experienced teachers and advanced coursework.[39] Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveal stark differences. In 2019, 48 percent of White fourth graders performed at or above the proficient level in mathematics, compared to only 15 percent of Black students, 27 percent of Hispanic students, 6 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander students, and 1 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students. For science, the numbers are the same except for the following, including a change in racial breakdown: 5 percent of Asian, 4 percent of two or more races, and no percentage given for Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander.[40] Similar trends have been observed vis-à-vis mathematics regarding eighth graders, with 49 percent of White students, 14 percent of Black students, 26 percent of Hispanic students, 6 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander students, 1 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students, and 3 percent of two or more races reaching proficiency. And for science, the numbers are the same except for the following, including a change in racial breakdown: 6 percent of Asian, 3 percent of two or more races, and no percentage given for Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander.[41] By twelfth grade, disparities increase, with White students reaching 52 percent proficiency while BIPOC students' proficiency remains unchanged.[42] Contributing factors include socioeconomic status, access to advanced coursework, teacher quality and expectations, and school resources. Students from lower-income backgrounds, who are disproportionately BIPOC, often attend underfunded schools with fewer resources, less-experienced teachers, and larger class sizes.[43] Additionally, schools in minority communities frequently lack essential resources like updated textbooks and technology.

Recognizing the intersection of racial and climate injustice requires understanding how colonization, genocide, racism, and slavery have made marginalized communities more susceptible to environmental hazards. Colonization and genocide have violently displaced Indigenous peoples and exploited their lands, resulting in the loss of traditional ways of living that were more sustainable and resilient to environmental changes.[44] Racism and slavery established enduring systems of economic and social inequality, with discriminatory practices in housing, education, and employment, limiting access to resources and opportunities for communities of color. Consequently, these communities face greater exposure to environmental hazards and have fewer resources to adapt to climate impacts. Addressing these issues toward true climate justice necessitates an approach that prioritizes the voices and needs of marginalized communities in climate action plans and policymaking, ensuring an equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens.

BIPOC REPRESENTATION IN GIS AND REMOTE SENSING

Despite the challenges, several initiatives and programs are successfully working to increase BIPOC representation in GIS and remote sensing. These initiatives provide valuable models to create more inclusive educational and professional environments.

Earth system educators have a compelling argument for incorporating GIS and remote sensing into their curricula:

their purported ability to enhance spatial thinking skills. In the United States, the 1994 National Geography Standards explicitly encouraged the inclusion of GIS in precollegiate education, recognizing its potential to augment students' geographic skills and spatial reasoning abilities.[45]

Classroom-based GIS education in the United States often revolves around studying the local community. This approach highlights one of the perceived strengths of GIS as a powerful tool for exploring and understanding the local environment. Additionally, it reflects practical considerations such as the greater availability of local data and the development of programs that foster collaboration between classroom educators and local government or business entities that utilize GIS.

Integrating climate and racial justice into K–12 education is essential for fostering a generation of informed and empowered youth who understand the interconnected nature of these issues. Educational programs that incorporate environmental justice can help students recognize the disproportionate impact of climate change on marginalized communities and the systemic factors contributing to these disparities. This approach can also promote critical thinking and civic engagement, encouraging students to advocate for policies that address both environmental sustainability and social equity.

For instance, incorporating curriculum elements that highlight local and global examples of climate injustice can provide students with a concrete understanding of how climate change and racial injustice intersect in their communities and beyond. By embedding climate and racial justice into the educational experience, schools can equip students with the knowledge and tools needed to address these critical issues, ultimately contributing to a more just and sustainable future.

Additionally, hands-on projects can engage students in real-world applications of these concepts, fostering skills in data collection, analysis, and advocacy. In "The Pedagogical Benefits of Participatory GIS for Geographic Education," Gaurav Sinha et al. write, "Community-driven participatory mapping and participatory geographic information systems (PGIS) projects empower community residents by letting *them* (as opposed to government or corporate mapping agencies) explore and map *their* local knowledge of natural resources, community risk, and political argumentation."[46] These projects enhance community engagement and build local capacity by involving residents in the mapping process. They support effective resource management, improve environmental conservation efforts, and lead to better-informed decision-making that reflects the community's priorities and needs. For BIPOC youth, these projects provide hands-on learning experiences that integrate STEM education with real-world applications, fostering critical thinking, spatial awareness, technical skills in mapping and data analysis, and a sense of environmental stewardship and community involvement.

By embedding climate and racial justice into the educational experience, schools can equip students with the knowledge and tools needed to address the critical climate issues we are facing, ultimately contributing to a more just and sustainable future.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCREASING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

By equipping BIPOC youth with skills in these technologies, they can contribute to and lead climate action efforts in their communities, advocating for more equitable environmental policies and practices. To further increase diversity and inclusion in GIS and remote sensing, several strategies can be implemented at various levels, from educational institutions to industry leaders.

Enhance STEM education in BIPOC communities. Investing in STEM education within BIPOC communities is crucial. This includes funding for schools, access to up-to-date technology, and professional development for teachers. By ensuring that BIPOC students have early exposure to GIS and remote sensing, we can cultivate their interest and skills in these fields.

Provide financial support. Expanding scholarships, grants, and funding opportunities for BIPOC students pursuing GIS and remote sensing studies is essential. Financial support can alleviate the economic barriers that prevent many from entering these fields.

Create mentorship programs. Establishing mentorship programs that connect BIPOC youth with professionals in GIS

and remote sensing can provide guidance, inspiration, and networking opportunities. These programs can help young people navigate educational and career pathways, increasing their chances of success.

Address systemic racism. Educational institutions and industry leaders must actively work to dismantle systemic racism. This includes implementing antiracist policies, fostering inclusive environments, and promoting diversity in hiring and curricula.

Practice community engagement and outreach. Engaging with BIPOC communities through outreach programs and public awareness campaigns can raise interest in GIS and remote sensing. By demonstrating the real-world applications of these technologies in addressing local environmental issues, we can inspire more youth to pursue careers in these fields.

Notable Programs Advancing GIS and Remote Sensing Education

YouthMappers is a global network that empowers university students to create and use open geographic data to address local and global development challenges. By establishing chapters at universities worldwide, including in many BIPOC communities, YouthMappers provides training, resources, and mentorship to students, fostering their skills in GIS and remote sensing. (See www.youthmappers.org/.)

Black Girls M.A.P.P. is an initiative aimed at increasing the representation of Black women in the fields of mapping and spatial data science. The program offers workshops, mentorship, and networking opportunities, helping participants to build skills and connect with professionals in the industry. (See "Black Girls M.A.P.P.: Diversifying the face of GIS.," ArcGis StoryMaps, accessed July 8, 2024, storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/98c13248261842cbae0afc50953c2856; and "Connecting and empowering women of color in the field of GIS," Black Girls M.A.P.P., accessed July 31, 2024, bgmapp.org/about/.)

The GLOBE Program (Global Learning and Observations to Benefit the Environment) is an international science and education program under NASA that provides students and the public with the opportunity to participate in data collection and the scientific process. Through GLOBE, BIPOC students engage in hands-on learning experiences with GIS and remote sensing technologies, contributing to real-world environmental research. (See "The GLOBE Program Overview," The GLOBE Program: A Worldwide Science and Education Program, accessed July 7, 2024, www.globe.gov/about/learn/program-overview.)

trubel&co (pronounced "trouble and co") is a tech-justice nonprofit supporting underserved youth to tackle complex societal challenges using equitable data analytics, responsible technology, and inclusive design. Its flagship program, Mapping Justice, teaches high school students to design geospatial tools for social change, whereby students control their narrative and explore the intersections of race, power, and technology through digital applications. (See "Approach: Integrating STEM Education with Civic Innovation," trubel&co, accessed July 7, 2024, www.trubel.co/approach; and "Mapping Justice," trubel&co, accessed August 1, 2024, www.trubel.co/m-j.)

The Earthly Advocate is a nonprofit that promotes environmental justice through scientific research, education, and community engagement. The organization aims to provide comprehensive GIS and remote sensing research and education for communities plagued by environmental injustice. Its mission is "to provide underserved communities with the knowledge and resources to make educated decisions that benefit the environment and the people they serve." The Earthly Advocate believes in the importance of science-based decision-making and strives to provide accurate, reliable, and accessible information to support this goal. (See www.earthlyadvocate.com/home.)

Empowering BIPOC youth through GIS and remote sensing education is a crucial step toward achieving climate justice. By addressing the barriers to access and representation and promoting successful initiatives and inclusive strategies, we can ensure that BIPOC communities are equipped with the tools and knowledge to combat climate change. These efforts will not only enhance diversity in the fields of GIS and remote sensing but also strengthen the broader climate justice movement, leading to more equitable and effective solutions for climate resilience and environmental justice.

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Nature Is a Right, Not a Privilege

Environmental Education as a Catalyst for Youth-Led Climate Justice

by Amara Ifeji

For someone interested in the environment, I have killed more plants than I care to tell. Since high school, I have rooted myself (pun intended) in a curiosity of nature. Research presented an outlet through which I felt comfortable exploring my environmentalism. Admittedly, I was the basement-dwelling, science-experiment kid, tending to my plants and their fungal mutualisms every day after school. Despite killing half my sample size (over 100 plants) on two occasions, I developed a deep appreciation for this plant–fungi duo, whose symbiosis modeled mutual aid and reciprocity. My research explored their capacity to remove heavy-metal pollutants from stormwater—toxins ever more prevalent in waterbodies due to the rise in climate-change-induced storm events. In 2019, I presented my work at the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair, receiving the Best of Category award in plant sciences.[1]

As an extrovert-leaning ambivert, I recognized a need to leave my basement in order to fully explore my environmental interconnectedness. But studying these systems outdoors would significantly differ from doing so from the comfort of my home. Growing up in Prince George's County, MD, I was used to my family cautioning me, "Amarachukwu, apụna n'ìló" (Do not go outside). This guidance came despite the reciprocal relationship I had watched my grandfather cultivate with the natural world, which is what first piqued my environmental interest. Looking back, I now recognize my family's fear as that of many Black folks who view the outdoors as a place of historic and continued violence.

"SHE WILL BE YOUR TEACHER" BY RENÉE LAPRISE/WWW.RENEELAPRISEARTS.COM

The cohesion of environmentalism and White supremacy has given birth to a myriad of false narratives about people of color... one being that we do not like to engage with the environment. This, of course, could not be further from the truth.

While I had many reasons to embrace fear of the outdoors, I also embraced the outdoors as a beautiful space.

A BUDDING INTEREST IN THE OUTDOORS

I anticipated that moving to Maine, which happened when I was nine, would afford me a wealth of opportunities to nurture my budding interest in the outdoors. Maine is renowned for its beauty, and it has an abundance of diverse environmental landscapes—from forests and mountains to ocean beaches and more. Yet the interconnectedness I hoped for could not be any further from what I experienced. Attempts to engage with the outdoors left me feeling less connected to the world around me than ever before. When outdoors, I was met with stares and Confederate flags, leading me to feel ostracized in my rural Maine home. Furthermore, as a lower-income individual, exploring my interests required expensive outdoor gear, which posed a financial burden that my family simply could not shoulder. I never saw those who looked like me accessing nature, so I developed a view of the environment as a place of privilege and exclusion where I did not belong.

I now know I was mistaken: *nature is a right, not a privilege*. Everyone deserves equitable access to, and a sense of belonging in, a healthy environment. Furthermore, as a Black, Indigenous young person whose communities are among the most harmed by—yet have contributed the least to—the climate crisis, my space in the environmental sector is indispensable to achieving climate justice.

While I had many reasons to embrace fear of the outdoors, I also embraced the outdoors as a beautiful space. I started small, near the park behind my house. There, my sense of ease was nourished and grew as I listened to the sounds of nature surrounding me.

Eagerly, I brought my experiences to folks in my community, all of whom faced similar barriers to environmental access. As the president of my high school's Stormwater Management and Research Team (SMART), I coordinated community-science engagement opportunities for students of color as a pathway to diversifying environmental STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). Unbeknownst to me at the time, I was an environmental educator, practicing education as a critical tool for social transformation. The traditional education system had failed many of the students. As they built conductivity sensors, plunged knee-deep into the Penobscot River, and counted macroinvertebrate creatures that called the waterbody home, they shared an enthusiasm and curiosity that many expressed they had never felt before.

PLAYING IN THE DIRT

Research, outdoor exploration, environmental education—these activities left me beaming while healing my inner child. Admittedly, they equally enshrouded me in guilt. I am a Black, Igbo woman living in what is now the United States, far from my ancestral homelands in the southeastern part of what is now Nigeria. My communities on the continent of Africa and across the diaspora are no strangers to deep inequities: bare-to-no immigration rights, Black women's maternal mortality, gun violence, economic injustice…I could go on. Understanding what my communities face made my environmental passions feel not only trivial but also selfish. I felt that instead of working to improve these woes, I was playing in the dirt—and I compartmentalized my shame.

At age 16, my feelings surrounding my engagement with the environmental sector transformed. One day, I took a leap of faith with my best friend, and we skipped class to attend a network gathering of youth environmentalists in Maine. Beyond my high school club, I had never before witnessed other young people from diverse backgrounds eager to explore their environmental interconnectedness.

One of these young folks was Vic Barrett, who served as the convening's keynote speaker. Barrett is one of the 21 youth plaintiffs in the 2015 *Juliana v. United States* court case, suing the federal government for knowingly putting young folks in harm's way by encouraging and permitting petrochemical proliferation.[2] Barrett illustrated the challenges he faced while engaging in climate justice advocacy, particularly in seeing few people with identities similar to his. Yet he underscored that his identity as a young, Black, Indigenous person was not a hindrance but rather equipped him with the skills and knowledge he needed to strive for climate justice. In other words, his lived experiences allowed him to better advocate for his communities' environmental and social rights.

Understanding the far-reaching legacy of the environmental sector brought me to the realization that my role in these efforts is... vital to ensuring that those from communities like mine have a seat at the climate-action table.

Barrett's words echoed the reality of the environmental sector—a reality rooted in the violent legacy of the United States. The founding of this country and all the protected areas conservation holds dear are predicated on a history of genocide, colonization, and land theft perpetrated against sovereign Indigenous nations. Environmental and conservation organizations reflect this legacy and are deeply rooted in White supremacy. The racial reckoning of 2020 compelled the sector, including the so-called Big Greens,[3] to grapple with their roles in perpetuating environmental and climate injustice.[4] Many of those regarded as the foremost ecological champions overtly expressed racist sentiments. John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, who is considered the "father of our national parks," often described Black and Indigenous people as "dirty" and "savages."[5] His boys club comprised ardent eugenicists who advocated for the sterilization of people of color. Another person who shared Muir's past is Aldo Leopold, an ecologist whose environmental advocacy exuded White supremacist sentiments through his castigation of Indigenous folks.[6] Other ecological leaders upholding these racist ideals include John James Audubon (for whom the National Audubon Society is named) and former US president and conservationist Theodore Roosevelt, among others.[7] Today, Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color continue to face marginalization in environmental spaces, at least partially due to these racist legacies.

A SEAT AT THE CLIMATE-ACTION TABLE

The cohesion of environmentalism and White supremacy has given birth to a myriad of false narratives about people of color, reinforcing the historic injustices that communities of color face more broadly, and creating the systemic challenges our communities face with respect to outdoor and environmental engagement—one being that we do not like to engage with the environment. This, of course, could not be further from the truth. It dismisses my lived experience, the lived experience of Black farmers like my grandfather, and the lived experience of millions of Indigenous peoples and other people of color whose identities are inextricably tied to ecology and the land.

Furthermore, regarding communities of color as environmentally apathetic has justified overlooking us in environmental solution making at a time when climate-induced disasters are disproportionately affecting our livelihoods. In 2022 alone, severe flooding displaced 8 million people in Pakistan, droughts in the Horn of Africa impacted 36 million people, and the Philippines saw 850,000 displaced due to a tropical storm.[8] These impacts are also costly in terms of money. The cost of the ten most expensive extreme weather events in 2022 totaled $168.1 billion—funds that could have been invested instead in the communities, so that, for instance, such a critical level of damage wouldn't happen in the first place.[9]

As a microcosm of global challenges, the United States mirrors this trend of climate inequities: those most impacted are communities of color. Notably, disasters like Hurricanes Katrina and Harvey have demonstrated that flooding disproportionately affects Black neighborhoods. Moreover, Indigenous communities face similarly adverse impacts, such as the Native Alaska tribes, whose cultural practices, livelihoods, and even languages alter as the Arctic warms twice as fast as the rest of the world.[10]

As a young person involved in this work, I saw the lack of people who looked like me in the sector as a reason to disengage, and I considered my passion something to be ashamed of. However, Barrett's keynote and my understanding of the history of this sector inspired a different perspective to take shape—one that has solidified my place as a disruptor within the climate justice movement. Understanding the far-reaching legacy of the environmental sector brought me to the realization that my role in these efforts is not selfish but in fact vital to ensuring that those from communities like mine have a seat at the climate-action table.

Climate justice has never been achieved. There has been progress over the years—the Biden

When I engaged with the world around me, I was compelled to protect and preserve it from the threats it faced—*because no one wants to see that which they love destroyed.*

administration's Justice40 Initiative being a recent project that looks promising[11]—however, there is much progress still needing to be made: underserved communities across the Global South and the Global North continue to suffer from climate-induced harm. Echoing the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."[12] And who are best situated to shape solutions that will redress injustices in their corners of the world? Those actively living it—primarily, young folks of color, who are living the consequences of an existential crisis they did not create.

In my seven years of climate and environmental justice advocacy, I have coordinated grassroots movements and advanced successful legislation to ensure that all youth have access to powerful environmental-education opportunities. I have found purpose in uplifting young folks, particularly Black youth and other youth of color, in the environmental movement. My theory of change—how I lead these efforts forward—stems from the lesson I learned while leading community science initiatives at my high school all those years ago: that education is a critical tool for social transformation. Over my journey, my environmental curiosity transformed into advocacy and solution generation. When I engaged with the world around me, I was compelled to protect and preserve it from the threats it faced—*because no one wants to see that which they love destroyed*. Thus, I aim to foster robust outdoor and environmental learning opportunities for young people, so that they can be similarly impassioned to advocate for their communities, environment, and themselves.

Engaging in this work while helping to shape the movement I hope to see has often been challenging and demanding. I have faced imposter syndrome, fear of speaking about equity, and feelings of tokenism in spaces exuding the historical exclusion of diverse identities. However, centering community in these efforts means I have always had a space in which to grieve these challenges, grow from them, and celebrate successes.

• • •

My efforts in the sector have left me with many lessons learned, which I offer as advice:

Young folks, especially young folks of color who are engaged in or looking to engage in the climate movement: *I see you*. I recognize that the climate crisis is a significant, existential issue, often shrouded in academic verbiage and incomprehensible data. I remind you that your lived experiences of intergenerational injustice equip you with more than enough skills and knowledge to be a critical thought partner in building a world free of climate harm. Also, never lose sight of your relationship with the natural world and with those within your communities—these relationships will serve you well as a reminder of why you hold steadfast in these efforts.

Nonprofits, philanthropic organizations, governmental agencies, and other institutions that are joining the effort to engage young people in this work: I now turn to you. I advise you to recognize our vital contributions to this movement and act accordingly. That does not mean providing a seat at the table as an act of lip service; it means *equitably engaging young people by equally weighing our ideas and contributions as highly as you would any other person*. It also means actively working toward participatory justice by removing barriers that limit our engagement. Abolish the unpaid internship, consider changing meeting times, provide a stipend for engagement, offer transportation assistance, and ensure that participants leave meetings with full bellies. These are but a few ways to center equity in youth engagement. Similarly, I implore you to lead, fund, and promote environmental education programming as a pathway for young folks to realize their crucial place in the sector.

Building community is foundational to building a better world. As one individual hoping to address climate and social inequities in Maine, Nigeria, and beyond, I have learned that centering relationships is paramount. The relationships I've cultivated with the natural world, my kin, and

my identities have been indispensable in solidifying my role in the climate movement. By connecting young folks of color to the outdoors and reminding them that centering their communities and identities should never be done in shame, I hope they will realize that their voices hold much power in shaping a more just and sustainable world.

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Bringing Climate into the Classroom

New Hampshire Students Push for Increased Climate Literacy

by Callie Patteson

[Extreme weather events have] left classmates "scared" and "hopeless," as experts continue to warn of the dire risks climate change poses for humanity. But to one group of students in New Hampshire, the situation isn't all lost, and they want to prove that by bringing climate into the classroom.

When Taylor Barry was in the fifth grade, she and her classmates were taught about deforestation and how there wasn't enough work being done to preserve forested areas. The lesson sparked Taylor's interest in the environment, and it wasn't long before the Nashua, New Hampshire–based teenager founded a green teens club in middle school and became involved in similar clubs and organizations during high school, including 350 New Hampshire (350NH).[1]

350NH was first launched in 2012 as a grassroots movement to fight climate change and support renewable energy in the Granite State. Made up of hundreds of volunteers, including activists, students, farmers, and teachers, it has become one of the largest grassroots climate organizations in New Hampshire. One key aspect of the organization is its youth program, which empowers teens and young adults to run campaigns and develop solutions to combat the climate crisis.[2]

For over a year, beginning in 2023, the 350NH Youth Organizing Program has been spearheading an effort to increase education about climate change in public schools throughout New Hampshire. The nonprofit organization comprises, primarily, roughly a dozen high school students across the state, ranging in age from 15 to 18 years old.[3] The movement's primary goal has been to attack climate change by growing grassroots support in New Hampshire for renewable energy while fighting the expansion of fossil fuels.[4] 350NH and its Youth Team have seen success in past campaigns, such as bringing offshore wind energy to the state and halting a 27-mile fracked-gas pipeline.[5] Now, the teens are setting their sights on schools.

"TRANCE MISSION" BY RENÉE LAPRISE/WWW.RENEELAPRISEARTS.COM

"We are not taught this comprehensively in our schools. We're told maybe, at max, that it's an issue. Maybe at max we know that there's greenhouse gases. But that's a surface-level lesson."

—Sarah Weintraub, 18, 350NH Youth Team–member

SCARED AND HOPELESS

Between December 2023 and March 2024, the state of New Hampshire, along with the rest of the contiguous US states, saw its warmest winter on record.[6] From historic high temperatures to intense coastal flooding and below-average snowfall, the state is seeing extreme effects of climate change.[7] As observable as these effects may be, New Hampshire teenagers claim that their schools have left them with little to no education on climate change. In an interview with Barry, she said that this has left classmates "scared" and "hopeless," as experts continue to warn of the dire risks climate change poses for humanity.[8] But to one group of students in New Hampshire, the situation isn't all lost, and they want to prove that by bringing climate into the classroom.

Throughout high school, Sarah Weintraub, now 18 and a freshman at the University of Vermont, described her experience with climate change education as shallow. "We are not taught this comprehensively in our schools. We're told maybe, at max, that it's an issue. Maybe at max we know that there's greenhouse gases. But that's a surface-level lesson," she said.[9]

Weintraub, originally from Nashua, New Hampshire, went on to describe the lack of education as "infuriating," declaring that children as young as seven or eight years old should be exposed to information about climate change so as to be fully aware of the risks it brings. She joined 350NH's Youth Team at the beginning of her junior year in high school, on the invitation of Barry, who had been drawn to the group after participating in green clubs in middle and high school. They quickly became involved in much of the Youth Team's advocacy work, which was focused in part on lasting statewide change vis-à-vis the gap in climate education.[10]

Sponsored by State Democratic Representatives Wendy Thomas and Tony Caplan, the high schoolers with the 350NH Youth Team introduced HR30 in March 2023.[11] The House resolution specifically calls for a climate-focused curriculum—to be adopted by all high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools in the state—that touches on the health and economic impacts of climate change as well as mitigation effects, political discourse around climate change, environmental racism, and direct solutions that emerge, such as solar and wind power.[12] The resolution calls on the curriculum to provide guidance for educators on how best to incorporate a wide breadth of climate change information into their lessons as well as to inform students about jobs in the environmental space.[13] It also urges a curriculum that "empowers" students, in an effort to reduce any hopelessness students might feel in the face of climate change and its impacts.[14]

PREPARING TO ENTER ADULTHOOD

For the students behind the measure, they have already seen drastic effects of climate change on their young lives, making education about its risks and solutions even more important, as they prepare to enter adulthood.

For Barry, snow is at the heart of her favorite childhood memories. Now 18, she fondly remembers when a large bobsledding hill was built in her neighborhood for all the local kids to enjoy. Less than a decade later, that has all changed. "When we do get snow, it's only a few inches, and it only lasts for a few days," Barry said. "There's not nearly enough, ever, to build this bobsledding track, and that makes me really sad for the kids growing up now who don't get to experience the snow like I did."[15]

Sonya Witkoskie, 17, has been an avid skier throughout her childhood, competing during the winter. However, this past year her team saw races canceled due to high temperatures and their impact on the courses. "We've had more flooding and, at the same time, more drought. But to me, personally, skiing is such an important part of my life, and culturally it is an important part of New Hampshire," said Witkoskie, who attended Nashua High School North and is now a freshman at the University of New Hampshire.[16]

As of this past summer, only three states—New Jersey, Connecticut, and California—issued requirements for climate change education for schools.[17] Experts with the National Center for Science Education and the Texas Freedom Network

"I realized how much a small action like that [striking against a coal plant] could spark conversation in my school, in my community, in which there was basically none."

—Preesha Chatterjee, 17, 350NH Youth Team–member

Education Fund have recommended increasing climate literacy among students and preparing them with solutions and knowledge to combat the effects of climate change, so that young children can "flourish" as they become adults.[18] This education should be not only informative but also inspiring.

Barry's passion for environmental issues back in fifth grade snowballed into regular engagement with environmental campaigns and projects, including protesting—and defeating—plans for the construction of an asphalt plant in the state in 2022 and 2023.[19] Several current members of the 350NH Youth Team, including Weintraub and Witkoskie, have pointed to Barry as the reason why they joined the organization in the first place.[20]

Preesha Chatterjee, 17, also attributes the start of her environmental activism to older students she looked up to, at Bow High School.[21] "It started for me my freshman year. I had friends who were seniors who were really into activism in general, and I basically had zero experience with activism as a whole, let alone the climate movement," said Chatterjee, who is now a senior herself. "I really looked up to this group of seniors, so they kind of influenced me, and I joined a club at school called Teen Activist Group."[22]

It was in this group that Chatterjee learned about a coal plant located in her hometown of Bow. "I started to realize, Oh, this is a big thing that's basically not talked about, and it's important for me to get involved and do my part in combating it."[23]

Chatterjee soon became involved with the Youth Team and helped to organize a strike in the town's center, calling for the coal plant to be shut down. She noted that while the protest had only just over a dozen attendees, it gained attention on social media, particularly from her peers at school, who commended her for the strike.[24]

"I realized how much a small action like that could spark conversation in my school, in my community, in which there was basically none," she said.[25]

INSPIRING ALL AGES

Having seen the positive effects of increased conversation about and knowledge of environmental issues, these students are hoping to help start that process at a younger age for those coming up behind them, via increased climate literacy. So when Weintraub first joined the 350NH Youth Team as a junior in high school, she and Barry visited a kindergarten class to discuss the negative impacts of a proposed asphalt plant in Nashua.

"That was super impactful for me. It was just really sweet, seeing how hopeful [the kids] were—it was almost naïve! But it was inspiring that no problem was too big for them to want to fix," she said.[26]

For Weintraub, the event was evidence that spreading awareness can help make change. She believes that just as students are taught about the impacts of bullying, drug and alcohol abuse, racism, and gender violence at a young age, there would be a consequential and lasting impact if climate change were discussed in a similar way.[27]

"We acknowledge at a young age that there are all kinds of life issues, and we're told about different ways to try to help solve or mitigate those issues. And all my peers and I grow up knowing those issues. Climate change is not one of them," she said. "I think if we started learning about climate issues at a younger, pivotal age—even as early as second grade—it would be so important in terms of preparing youth."[28]

GETTING THEIR VOICES AT THE TABLE

On March 21, 2024, the New Hampshire state legislature ultimately voted to indefinitely postpone HR30—halting any progress on the climate literacy proposal for the year.[29] While the decision wasn't the win the students were hoping for, Democratic State Representative Wendy Thomas still considers the teenagers successful.[30]

"I don't think that they failed with this, because they got on the radar and they got people talking about it," Thomas said. "That was the goal, to get their voice at the table."[31]

"Unfortunately, not a lot of my peers are that engaged in climate activism.... They feel like it's hopeless, and say that they can't help. And I hope that, through my climate activism, I inspire people by showing them that it isn't hopeless."

—Taylor Barry, 18, 350NH Youth Team–member

Thomas, who was the primary sponsor of the resolution, said she was left more than impressed by the students. They not only wrote the resolution but also attended school board meetings advocating for the change and testified in front of several members of the state legislature, explaining why increased climate literacy is necessary, having themselves seen drastic effects of climate change at such a young age.[32]

"Even though the effort failed, a lot of us got hope from these youths, because they are the leaders of tomorrow, and they want change, and they're not going to sit down until they get it," Thomas said.[33]

The students aren't the only ones interested in increasing climate change literacy. Weintraub explained that she has spoken at length with her former science teachers, who say they would love to teach more on the issues.[34]

"I think some of the teachers are nervous. They have to worry about getting in trouble with some parents," she said. "I think that, collectively, they would love to teach about climate, but the preference appears to be to have training on it beforehand, because of the potential pushback."[35]

At Nashua High School North, Witkoskie has also spoken with teachers about incorporating climate change discussions into their curriculum.[36] She affirmed that while she hasn't heard from any teacher against it, many feel that they are not qualified to take it on. "I know many of my teachers would be open to teaching it but they just don't have the resources," Witkoskie said.[37]

Statewide, there also appears to be support from other New Hampshire residents regarding the initiative: data collected through the Climate Change in the American Mind project, led by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, found that in 2023, an estimated 75 percent of adults registered to vote in the United States believe that schools should be teaching about the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to the effects of climate change.[38]

BUILDING MOMENTUM TO CREATE LASTING CHANGE

In the coming year, the 350NH Youth Team plans once again to put forward legislation supporting increased climate literacy in schools.[39] Where the initiative could go will likely be determined by the outcome of the general election in November, given the polarized views on the subject.

Elisabeth Bialosky, 350NH's youth campaign organizer from June 2022 through August 2024, explained that as the group prepares to reintroduce legislation supporting climate literacy, they will also be exploring other election-related efforts to help ensure they have support in the state legislature.[40] This includes collaborating with organizations to get young voters registered, and sharing lawmakers' public comments on social media, so that voters are fully aware of their platforms as they relate to climate change.[41]

The students have also been discussing contacting teachers' unions, boards of education, and PTA groups in order to further boost their campaign for climate literacy and gather support from educators and parents.[42]

Despite the state legislature decision this spring, members of the 350NH Youth Team believe that they are building momentum to create lasting change in New Hampshire and, hopefully, beyond. Through this work, many of the students hope to inspire their peers at high schools and on college campuses countrywide—and across the world—as they enter the next phase of their life.[43]

"Unfortunately, not a lot of my peers are that engaged in climate activism," Barry said. "I think that they're scared of climate change, because they think it's this huge doomsday situation. They feel like it's hopeless, and say that they can't help. And I hope that, through my climate activism, I inspire people by showing them that it isn't hopeless and that there are people out there making positive developments in the field—and that they, too, can make a difference if they raise their voice."[44]

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About the Artist: Renée Laprise

Renée Laprise has a BFA from the University of Toronto, and has lived and created on Prince Edward Island, on the east coast of Canada, for almost two decades. Laprise's unique stylistic voice was developed from an intermingling of a variety of inspirations, including art historical movements and her French and Indigenous ancestry.

The stories told in each painting are inspired by Laprise's past and present-day experiences mixed with the magic of nature—and underlying all of her work is a deep reverence for the mystical interconnectedness of the physical and nonphysical realms.

Each artwork is created in ceremony and in communion with her parents, ancestors, guides, Gaia, other mystical entities, and the higher self—with the intention of triggering light-filled healing to all who encounter her art.

Imagine a City in Which Youth Are Accounting for Youth!

Power Mapping the Possibilities

by j. nyla ink mcneill

In the City of Long Beach, youth are possibility models for movements demanding to be a part of the *now*. There is no future without us.

First, I want to honor the work of the people who came before me—work that led to the movements that support the current special projects I have the opportunity to work on as a health disparities researcher, neighbor, and community member in the City of Long Beach, CA.

I also want to note that what follows is a personal account. In my day to day as a health researcher, I am usually expected to write scientifically for a specialized audience or in a broad, general way for a public audience—I rarely get to share *my experience* of the city. In doing so, I want to pay homage to the peoples from whom I descend, who were falsely named as chattel and never consented to such, and to my people still affected by failing systems today.

"I DREAMED I WAS THE WHALE AND THE WOLF" BY RENÉE LAPRISE/WWW.RENEELAPRISEARTS.COM

My teens and early twenties were defined by my fiery will to join solidarity movements working toward systemic change and liberation, not by community care—or care for myself, even.... I ended up burned out by the age of 22.

Finally, I want to honor the Tongva-San Gabrielino people for the ongoing stewardship of the lands on which I serve my community. May this (being only one account of the experience of working movements of solidarity) be a testament to the power of our communities and people when we come together to hold big systems accountable. Let it be an example of what it looks like when we listen to and trust youth.

BECOMING A YOUTH COUNCIL MEMBER

In early 2021, at the height of the pandemic, I found myself responding to a call to apply to sit on the City of Long Beach's inaugural Youth Advisory Council.[1] The form to apply was nestled in a newsletter by Dr. Suely Saro, our city's first Cambodian American councilwoman—one of the first councilors I would come to trust.[2]

Some weeks later, I was in a Zoom interview like no other I had ever experienced. Looking around the screen, I was surprised by the three very young faces that greeted me and asked pointed questions, and the older Black woman with a warm comportment—all of whom made me feel welcomed and comfortable in the virtual space. They introduced themselves as interns and staff at the Office of Youth Development, which I learned was only in its second year at the time of my interview.[3] The culture of the office became evident to me during that interview, as two teenage girls and one young person in his twenties asked about the contributions I believed I could make toward advancing positive youth development. The office was straightforward in its purpose: to empower young people, and to strengthen the reach of their voices in citywide decision-making.

I was invited to become an at-large member of the City of Long Beach Youth Advisory Council soon thereafter, and I contributed to building the wheel of the office through its "terrible twos." I was 26 years old and jaded by the state of the city during my time as a health disparities researcher. The non-community-based efforts toward improving the quality of life for my people (Black, Asian, LGBTQIA2SP+)[4] were weak, difficult to access, too corporate or clinical, lacking in culture, or nonexistent. As the eldest member of our council of 12, I had already experienced activist and academic burnout for some years, and felt less spritely than our 11 younger members. I entered with the intention of pacing myself—wanting to listen, suggest, and make space, rather than toil, fight, and campaign to no end by taking up as much space as possible as a radical act of resistance. My teens and early twenties were defined by my fiery will to join solidarity movements working toward systemic change and liberation, not by community care—or care for myself, even. As I write this, I reflect on how odd that sounds in the context of where I am now. Nonetheless, I ended up burned out by the age of 22 from my past life as an advocate for historically marginalized peoples. One of the reasons I wanted to sit on the Youth Advisory Council was to carry my story forward as a cautionary tale: our movements and systems-change work do not need any more burned-out flames.

I felt deserving of the role but incredibly cloudy in it. It was a feeling I would become used to in the work. As I continued to take several steps back, my eyes, ears, and heart became open to the fact that the cloudiness—which all of us would come to feel at some point in our work—was a gift, in that it pushed us to create our own path as an emergent council. It was also an opportunity for me to learn how to better communicate and bridge across generations in the work.

How would we know what our fellow youth wanted? was the overall question in our first year. After some weeks of bonding as fellow council members, we got to work tapping into this question. We went through a difficult brainstorming cycle for weeks, with the overall goal of becoming aligned with what young people actually want from our city and learning more about what each department in our city does. Eventually, we garnered enough consistent cross-departmental guest presentations at our meetings to learn about the many efforts happening across—but not always between or among—departments. Our mapping and tracking of these efforts helped us to assess the state of youth-focused community resources and align more with youths' collective goals, as illustrated in our guiding document: the *Strategic Plan for Youth and Emerging Adults* (also known as the Youth Strategic Plan, YSP, or simply, the Plan), which the Long Beach City Council adopted in February 2021.[5]

After such a long time of feeling like I had seen little impact from my own activism... I could now see community impact.

Our second order of action was to familiarize ourselves with the Plan, which helped to answer a majority of our questions and outlined the emerging youth power movements that felt accurate to my experience as a young person previously deeply involved in community work. Reviewing it was a grounding experience: it showed me what community participatory research done well could look like. The Plan, which seeks to be a vision of a healthy, resourced, people-powered foundation to come, is a guide to our city for anyone looking to improve the quality of life of young people and their families. It was developed via the combined efforts of 200 engaged community members, the Office of Youth Development, community-based organizations and nonprofit partnerships, a think tank of 757 youth participants, and researchers and writers, who identified and set forward six major focus areas:[6]

1. Youth development
2. Physical health, mental health, and emotional wellness
3. Planning for the future
4. Community care
5. Housing
6. Transportation

The Youth Strategic Plan ultimately led to the formation of the Youth Advisory Board, which was eventually renamed the Youth Advisory Council, reflecting the collaborative, circle-based nature of our meetings.

I became very interested in power mapping during this time, as we worked on building out a living map of the connections we were developing as a council.[7] We met in small action teams to integrate the Plan's activities into our day-to-day awareness of the inner workings of our communities and our actions within them—actions whose progress we were then able to track over time. This quickly became a passion project of mine—it felt like the opposite of what I had been doing in my early adulthood. After such a long time of feeling like I had seen little impact from my own activism (which I now believe should *not* be the core goal of one's commitment at this stage in one's life, and which is one of the things that contributed to my early burnout), I could now *see* community impact. I started to celebrate research efforts like this one as the process that comes from the protests: the walk to the talk.

WALKING WITH THE PLAN

As someone who came to know the majority of my neighbors through the pandemic, I found the 62-page Plan to be a helpful companion to conversations with the community members who stopped by my porch. In the slowing down of life's pace during the pandemic, we took time as neighbors to share our everyday struggles. The space that we would come to cocreate through swapping clothes and plants and offering advice on how to stay housed became a demonstration of what it looks like to organize around shared struggles, and how it could continue beyond the pandemic.

During this time, I found myself counting on the Plan quite often as a talking point of encouragement. I remember an elderly neighbor, a White woman with a mixed-race family who identified as a hippie sun worshipper, stopping by on a beautiful, still, bright day. Approaching her eighties, she is a veteran of her times, having lived through the Vietnam War drafts and all subsequent systemic failures. She expressed the lack of hope and the despair she had felt throughout the years while trying her hardest to fight to do what was right. I felt called to review parts of the Plan with her, describing the work that I—gratefully—get to do. I reminded her that she is not alone in how she feels society can be—that it can function more intergenerationally and provide far more positive resources to young people, for instance, than it does currently.

She often talked about how easy it was for her daughters to turn to substances when they were growing up, feeling bored and not seen at school, and I invited her to imagine with me how things could have been different in her and her children's lives. These were data that I could bring to my department—I believe imagination is the best tool we have in the work of positive youth development. I reminded her that young people are still stepping out to change what it means to be young, to empower themselves and their communities, and to make lasting, sustainable social change against classism, racism, and cisheterosexism in our communities.

Throughout the process, the youngest of our council members and volunteers for the steering committee dealt with quite a few instances of adultism. They felt as though some adults in the nonprofits were overpowering their voices and trying to sway decisions.

The two of us came to meet up often after that, sharing snacks and tales—and during these times I did my best to reframe *what could have been* to *what's happening right now*.

YOUTH POWER PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

One of the most groundbreaking systems of solidarity to come from the legacy of youth movement work in Long Beach is the development of our Youth Power PB (Participatory Budgeting) process. Like the Strategic Plan for Youth and Emerging Adults, Youth Power PB emerged through a young-people-powered, cross-departmental, grassroots-led effort that traces back to 2004. After more than a decade of advocacy for a People's Budget, community members and our local Invest in Youth Coalition youth members surveyed residents, asking how they would prioritize city spending if they had a choice. The demographics of the response to the survey accurately reflected who I knew to be in my community. Most interesting to me: 61 percent of the people who responded were renters, who have historically had a difficult time achieving any upward mobility in our neighborhoods. Out of the 757 responses to the surveys, 7 out of 10 individuals indicated that they wanted to see increased support for youth-focused programming, with the top 3 areas of focus being supplemental academic programs, job training and youth jobs, and youth leadership and development. Of all the participants, 80 percent wanted to see thriving, community-based youth development programs in order to create stronger, safer communities.[8]

The release of the results of this survey in 2018, coupled with the strong presence of community members and young people on the ground where it counted, led to actual, actionable change within our local government: the people won a part of the budget, and the data collected would inform how it would be spent![9]

The pilot year of the Youth Power PB process was a difficult one. As a Youth Advisory Council member, I served on the system's steering committee. The key responsibilities of the steering committee were to write the rules of the process and to get to know over a dozen community-based organizations as they familiarized themselves with the Youth Power PB process; and to support community partners, the city, and our local college's evaluation staff in connecting with the community-based organizations around their youth programming ideas that young people would get to vote on. In the four phases of the system—the planning phase, the idea-collecting phase, the budgeting phase, and the voting phase—our role as steering committee would drive the process. After the youth vote during the spring, youth programs, all chosen by youth who live, work, or play in Long Beach, continue to get launch-ready for the summer. The workload can feel like a lot, but seeing so many community organizations that have made a great impact on community members (and on me, personally) all in one place each week was energizing. I loved witnessing the many moving parts come together to support the goals that residents and youth requested, through the data-collection efforts that young people fostered. The first year of the process felt like a marathon for the bulk of us, but programs were successfully chosen and delivered.[10] Within a few months, we had geared up for our first official year, or cycle 2.

Throughout the process, the youngest of our council members and volunteers for the steering committee dealt with quite a few instances of adultism. They felt as though some adults in the nonprofits were overpowering their voices and trying to sway decisions when they could, even though they knew that Youth Power PB was an entirely youth-held system. It became a topic of discussion during the cycle 2 process that year. It inspired the young people who had been in the process since its beginning to speak up more often about the need for folks to check adultism at the door.

Otherwise, it has been rewarding to witness how our Youth Power PB system has grown in just a year. In 2024, our public Voter Fair was held on my birthday, April 24. This year's cycle was marked by one stark difference in the rule book that young people had written: organizations were responsible for sponsoring youth ideas rather than for

In an article in **Everyday Feminism** *on addressing adultism, fellow youth worker Kel Kray wrote that "youth aren't* **just** *the future—they're actually the* **now.**"

bringing their own ideas. It was fulfilling to witness youth getting to enjoy the fruits of their labor as organizations presented on the programs they had cocreated with their young representatives and our Youth Power PB volunteers.

THERE IS NO FUTURE WITHOUT US

Of course, we have a very long way to go.

The actions in the Youth Strategic Plan were designed to be completed in five years, which in my opinion is not enough time; however, it is the practice that counts. I am curious to see how we will move forward. I am incredibly proud to be part of a community that has continued to organize in an inclusive, solutions-oriented way. I know that we will continue to move with intentionality toward dismantling the root causes and resulting upstream issues of the health disparity fissures in our communities. As health professionals, activists, grassroots organizers, and nonprofits, we comprise a powerful force when we acknowledge and act in the interests of the will of young people locally—and this is likely the case everywhere.

In an article in *Everyday Feminism* on addressing adultism, fellow youth worker Kel Kray wrote that "youth aren't *just* the future—they're actually the *now*."[11] It is a quote that stuck with me throughout my early years in the work, and it's a quote that I shared with an incredible turnout of nearly 70 young people and allies, during our orientation to the second cycle of the Youth Power PB process—which I had the pleasure of cofacilitating. In the City of Long Beach, youth are possibility models for movements demanding to be a part of the *now.* There is no future without us.

• • •

These days, when my hippie neighbor and I cross paths, she tells me that she has been a lot more hopeful since our many talks. Over the years, she has gotten to hear about all the various activities laid out in the Plan—now completed or in progress—and the programs and efforts that dozens of local nonprofits are implementing and offering with the support of our youth-driven movement. When I am doing the (sometimes tedious) work of building matrices and number-coding systems to track the Plan, and sending and answering cross-departmental emails and creating weekly PowerPoints, I think about our conversations on the porch. I remind myself that what I am doing is creating paths for hyperlocal work that will change the fabric of how we move together across generations, fields, neighborhoods, and goals.

I would like to thank Sherlyn Beatty, formerly of the Office of Youth Development, and David McGill Soriano, of the Office of Youth Development, for embracing my eagerness to begin massive projects very early on in my involvement. I would also like to thank Joy Yanga and Pouelinna Po, of Khmer Girls in Action, and their incredible support of my development throughout the Youth Power PB process. I want to thank every member of our first and second inaugural Youth Advisory Councils, including Maleka "Worldwide" Lassiter and Kimberly Lim, both of whom have served two terms. Finally, I thank the Office of Youth Development overall and our core team, who led us to two years of success and ongoing improvement of Youth Power PB. The commitment that each and every one of you have given to our city is precisely why we will continue to move toward a better Long Beach, and it is why I will continue to advocate for "thrival" for us all.

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Bridging for Environmental Justice across Space and Time

Cambodia and the US South

by Mazzi Ingram

When communities and movements talk about climate and environmental justice, solidarity is often at the center of the conversation. But the question becomes: How do we achieve global solidarity when the scales are so unbalanced, the challenges are separated by so much space and time, and time seems so fleeting?

I believe it starts with seeking to bridge the gaps of space and time through community building across geographic boundaries. If we do this, we can identify patterns of injustice and intervene before decades pass and the problem grows.

In 2024, while in Cambodia on a semester-long study abroad program with a cohort of 18 other American students, my colleagues and I had the opportunity to tour the Lower Sesan II Dam—the largest dam in Cambodia, accounting for nearly 20 percent of Cambodia's national grid.[1] The project, which was in development from the 1990s on, has been operational since 2017.[2] Building the dam took a little over four years and cost two multinational companies (China Huaneng Group and Royal Group of Cambodia) roughly 781 million USD.[3] Built on the Sesan River, the dam was part of the Chinese government's "Belt and Road Initiative," which sought to expand its "foreign policy interests."[4] The Cambodian government's stated aim is for the dam to provide enough energy to stop power outages and further develop the country.[5]

"SISTER SECRETS" BY RENÉE LAPRISE/WWW.RENEELAPRISEARTS.COM

[If] we are intentional about building models of restorative justice through authentic community and government partnerships...we could explore what is possible with respect to compensation and other reparations for the harms that communities like the Kbal Romeas are facing. To bring us back from the brink, we must pull from the margins—and be mindful that these margins naturally extend beyond our borders.

Most people left, and some people cried at having to leave behind the lives they had built for themselves and their families. The river was more than just a natural resource—it held spiritual meaning, as well.

Unfortunately, but as one might expect, the consequences of an immense project of this sort on the people and the environment have been devastating.[6] And it got me thinking about how the construction of this dam reflects a broad and long pattern of environmental injustice globally.

DISPLACEMENT, LOSS OF NATURAL RESOURCES, EROSION OF CULTURAL CONNECTION

When we inquired about the Lower Sesan II Dam's environmental impact, a representative from China Huaneng Group, the company that cobuilt and operates the dam, confidently praised the project's positive impact on infrastructure development and "negligible" impact on the environment. This has been highly contested; in fact, the project failed several environmental impact assessments,[7] and the only "mitigation" effort the dam representative could cite was a fish ladder—a means of enabling fish to migrate despite the obstruction of the dam. When we asked the representative about the project's impact on the communities living there, his only response was, "I think it was good."

A quick Google search on "community impacts of the Lower Sesan II Dam" shows that the impact on the community has been anything but good. In a video posted by Human Rights Watch in 2021, villagers describe the displacement, loss of natural resources, and erosion of cultural connection that they faced after being moved to resettlements when the dam was constructed.[8] They describe their lives as having been ideal before the dam was built. They grew bountiful rice crops, mango and coconut trees, and other farm goods that they could subsist on and sell. They also had access to forests where they could collect timber and non-timber forest products such as mushrooms. Many people grazed cows and water buffalo, as well, and almost everyone relied on the river for fish, snails, and bivalves. The villagers were moved to a resettlement miles away that lacked clean water and fertile soil for crops.[9] And with the addition of climate change leading to intensive drought across the country, their lives have clearly not changed for the better.

After touring the dam, we traveled just over 30 miles south to meet with four community members and activists impacted by the development. These villagers were part of what we came to call the "hopeful holdouts"—a small but mighty group who have managed to remain on their native land. They shared with us a glimpse of their lives prior to the dam, how their lives have changed, and the scrutiny they currently face.

WHEN THE *NEAK TA* CRIES

Our interviewees were from Srekor and Kbal Romeas—ethnically mixed communities, according to our interviewees, comprising roughly 500 families of marginalized groups, notably ethnic Lao and ethnic Bunong people, who settled on the land bordering the Sesan River after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, in 1979.[10] Now, only 38 families remain, we were told, and they struggle daily to maintain what little sense of stability they have left. Our conversation with these community activists reflects the true meaning of solidarity within the environmental and climate justice movements. What follows is based on their accounts.

When rumors of the Lower Sesan II Dam began swarming the riverside community of Kbal Romeas in 2008, the people were in a state of disbelief. In 2010, however, according to our interviewees, China Huaneng Group "presented" the villagers with the plan. Despite the community's disapproval, government officials had apparently already approved and funded the plan.[11] Contractors started in 2013 by clearing the forest; over 100 yards of land was cleared, with claims that the timber would be used to build the existing community's new homes in their resettlements. This turned out not to be the case. All of our interviewees suspected that the timber was sold. A year later, most of the community was forced to leave.[12]

Our interviewees recounted the day the flooding began—how when they realized that the water was starting to pour in, they rushed to warn everyone to get out of their homes, screaming, "They will flood to the roof!" Most people left, and some people cried at having to leave behind the lives they had built for themselves and their families. The river was more than just a natural resource—it held spiritual meaning, as well. It is a shared belief that by revering the river they were honoring the *neak ta*, an ancestral deity believed to watch over the

Before the development of the TVA, the communities in the South, like those living along the Sesan River, contentedly lived in the valley as farmers. The valley was a place where Black Americans found themselves better off than in other areas.

community. One interviewee said that what took place was so devastating that "even the *neak ta* cried."

Since the dam's construction and operation, the holdouts have faced pressures from the dam company, which has offered them inadequate compensation and the threat of law enforcement.[13] One interviewee spoke about being summoned to court for remaining on the land and refusing to go.

WIPING THE TEARS OF OUR ANCESTORS

When we asked what was needed to make amends for what was clearly an environmental injustice, our interviewees asked us to spread awareness about what had happened. They hope for international intervention, since they feel their government is not helping them, and they prompted us to imagine this scenario unfolding in America. I didn't need to imagine it—such injustices have historically been the reality for Black Americans during times of infrastructure development and expansion in places that disenfranchised communities call out as sites of environmental injustice.

I shared with them the unremarkably (given the cyclical and systematic nature of injustice) similar stories of my ancestors, describing the dams that emerged in the US South in the name of "modernity"—accounts that highlighted the stark disparities and injustices for Black and Indigenous communities.[14]

A poignant example is the Tennessee Valley Authority Project, which was introduced by then-President Franklin Roosevelt in 1933, to develop and raise the area out of poverty through the implementation of dams.[15] The project was largely successful in expanding access to electricity and improving infrastructure, but it left the most vulnerable populations without land and livelihoods. Ironically, this project later became the model for the first dams along the Mekong River Basin, built by the French occupation in the late 1950s.[16] The modeling was not just of the construction of dams but also of the displacement of people.

Before the development of the TVA, the communities in the South, like those living along the Sesan River, contentedly lived in the valley as farmers. The valley was a place where Black Americans found themselves better off than in other areas, working on average 20 more acres of land than other Black farmers working in the South. They grew tobacco as a cash crop, as well as corn, wheat, and hay. They established schools and churches, and made a good living from the crops they grew.[17]

This all changed when the relocation began. It was done with the blatantly racist assumption that Black farmers were desperate to leave farming and were too uneducated to even understand what was going on. As Melissa Walker recounts in "African Americans and TVA Reservoir Property Removal: Race in a New Deal Program," unlike White farmers, Black farmers were not offered financial compensation for their losses and instead were given land elsewhere that was often much less valuable than the land they owned.[18] Similar to the Cambodian communities, these farmers were offered relocation to areas that lacked their land's natural resources—and because the farmers were now unable to make a living through farming, they kept having to relocate, often finding temporary "refuge" with White landlords. Then, when their options ran out, they were referred to public welfare. Their White counterparts who faced displacement, on the other hand, were offered subsistence homesteads.[19]

Walker's is one of very few accounts of the displacement that dams caused for Black Americans, with others being more loosely recorded—many via oral history—such as the stories of Black people living In Oscarville, GA, whose town was intentionally flooded in 1950 for the construction of Lake Lanier and the Buford Dam in order to provide water to surrounding cities. Decades earlier, according to a 2021 article by Bilal G. Morris,

> a white group of terrorists known as the "Night Riders" would make it their mission to run every black person they came across out of town.
>
> Oscarville would end up being one of their main targets, and over the short period of just a few years, 98% of its black residents would end up either leaving

While it may be overwhelming to think about all the environmental and climate struggles happening around the world, it is important to consider the range of impacts that our actions in the West can have on the rest of the world. The TVA did much good for some, but it also became a symbol of destruction for many in the Global South.

> their homes or being murdered for refusal to move. Black property deeds found their way into the hands of white neighbors without any bill of sale or transfer. This effectively allowed many whites to steal the land once owned by their black counterparts when they were driven out by the "Night Riders." More than 1,100 [Black people] would lose their livelihood, and in little time, the once functioning African-American town of Oscarville would be a ghost town.
>
> Over time, pieces of the land would be sold to the government, and by 1950 a plan to build Lake Lanier was in full effect. Soon the entire town of Oscarville would be underwater, intentionally flooded in conjunction with the Buford Dam to support the growing demand for a water supply to the nearby cities. The resulting reservoir was named after Sidney Lanier, a poet and musician (who was also a Confederate private). In the end, construction would destroy more than 50,000 acres of farmland and displace more than 250 families. It would also relocate 20 cemeteries (and their corpses) in what some may see as an attempt to erase the sins of its past.[20]

Dam projects such as the TVA and Buford have historically provided water and energy to large cities in the South, such as Knoxville, TN, and Atlanta, GA—locations that themselves have long felt the impact of the environmental racism that occurred at the time of their development, and continue to do so today.[21] Now, decades later, communities are being encouraged to use the EPA's community change grants to support them in meeting the environmental and climate justice goals for which these communities have long advocated.[22] This is just a small step toward repairing the decades of severe environmental injustices Black communities have faced due to infrastructure development, but I am hopeful that putting these grants to work will result in some level of restorative justice.

• • •

While it may be overwhelming to think about all the environmental and climate struggles happening around the world, it is important to consider the range of impacts that our actions in the West can have on the rest of the world. The TVA did much good for some, but it also became a symbol of destruction for many in the Global South. And if we are intentional about building models of restorative justice through authentic community and government partnerships—with such dam projects in mind as cautionary tales—we could explore what is possible with respect to compensation and other reparations for the harms that communities like the Srekor and the Kbal Romeas are facing. To bring us back from the brink, we must pull from the margins—and be mindful that these margins naturally extend beyond our borders.

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11. According to interviewees from February 28, 2024; but see also Sifton with Wang, "Underwater."
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15. See Melissa Walker, "African Americans and TVA Reservoir Property Removal: Race in a New Deal Program," *Agricultural History* 72, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 417–28.
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MAZZI INGRAM is a dynamic force in the realm of environmental justice advocacy. Ingram's journey into activism is marked by a fervent dedication to addressing the pressing issues of our time. Her recent immersion in Cambodia, where she visited Indigenous communities to understand their environmental justice struggles, has deeply impacted her perspective. Witnessing firsthand the challenges these communities have faced has fueled her resolve to effect tangible change. Ingram's work focuses on the interconnectedness of environmental justice with other social issues. Her journey has led her to understand how environmental degradation intersects with racial, health, and economic disparities. Currently in her senior year at Brandeis University, Ingram is working toward a degree in environmental studies, and she aspires to leverage her experiences and expertise to work in environmental justice policy.

Changemakers, Disruptors, and Protectors of Our Earth

Young Women and Girls of the Global Majority Leading Climate Justice

by Yasmina Benslimane

The climate crisis is taking a huge toll everywhere and on everyone—but particularly on communities considered more vulnerable. Among these are women and girls in the Global South, who face unique challenges due to intersecting oppressions—in this case, those having to do with gender, age, location, and socioeconomic status. Intersectionality is crucial to understanding how different forms of inequality interact to make some communities more vulnerable than others. Global Majority women and girls face significant and multifaceted climate challenges that amplify—and are amplified by—already existing gender inequalities.[1] This is especially true for marginalized groups like women and girls who are Indigenous, Afro-descendent, of the LGBTQIA+ community, differently abled, and/or on the move.[2]

KEY IMPACTS OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS ON WOMEN AND GIRLS

Climate disasters disproportionately affect women and girls, due to disparities in information, mobility, decision-making power, and access to resources. According to the United Nations Development Programme, women and children are 14 times more likely to die during a disaster compared to men.[3] During and after climate disasters, access to such essential services as women's and girls' mental and physical healthcare overall is often severely constrained,[4] and access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, including maternal care, becomes limited or stops altogether.[5]

Advancing the rights of young women and girls is a moral imperative. It is also an effective climate action strategy.... Integrating gender equity and meaningful youth engagement in climate policy is essential for a just and effective response to the climate crisis.

"IN COMMUNICATION WITH THE SUN" BY RENÉE LAPRISE/WWW.RENEELAPRISEARTS.COM

Although women and girls experience the greatest impacts of climate change, national climate policies rarely consider their unique needs.

Furthermore, as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has highlighted, displacement, such as that resulting from climate disasters, often forces women and girls into precarious situations in which they are at greater risk of various forms of violence, including sexual abuse and human trafficking.[6] Camps for internally displaced persons and refugees are prone to becoming hot spots for sexual and gender-based violence.[7]

And the disruption to education due to climate disasters only compounds the problems. Often, when families face climate-related challenges, girls' education is the first thing to be sacrificed. Girls get taken out of school to care for siblings and/or help with locating food and water, disrupting their education and future opportunities.[8] According to the Malala Fund, by 2025, "climate change will be a contributing factor in preventing at least 12.5 million girls from completing their education each year."[9] Furthermore, the impacts of climate change on food security, such as higher rates of anemia, disproportionately affect adolescent girls, further exacerbating educational disruptions.[10] For countries in Africa that are vulnerable to climate change, girls' education is directly affected, as families already often prioritize the education of boys, which of course is compounded when resources become scarce.[11]

Disruption to education has long-term effects, as it not only limits girls' future economic opportunities but also increases their vulnerability to child marriage and early pregnancy.[12] Child marriage rates increase, as families use it as a coping mechanism for economic hardships caused by climate change, putting "millions of girls at risk of sexual and physical abuse, early pregnancy and maternal death."[13] A report by Save the Children highlights this relationship between climate change and the rise in child marriage rates.[14] In regions of Africa and South Asia, climate disasters such as floods and droughts increase poverty and food insecurity, prompting families to marry off their daughters at a young age as a survival strategy. In Bangladesh, for instance, climate disasters have led to a 39 percent increase in child marriages, as families struggle to cope with the economic fallout of these events.[15] UNICEF also underscores that climate change impacts adolescent girls by limiting their access to vital social services, which further entrenches cycles of poverty and vulnerability.[16]

Although women and girls experience the greatest impacts of climate change, national climate policies rarely consider their unique needs. For instance, only a small percentage of Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Agreement explicitly mention gender equality.[17] Women and girls from Global Majority countries face significant barriers to participating in such high-level international events as Conference of the Parties (COP), including lack of funding and visa restrictions—often referred to as visa apartheid—which prevent many from attending crucial discussions and decision-making forums. Despite women's and girls' critical role in climate action and the innovative solutions they bring, their work often does not receive sustainable or core funding. This exclusion of women and girls not only undermines the effectiveness of climate policies but also perpetuates the cycle of inequality, as their perspectives and needs get continually overlooked in global climate strategies.

And while the precise amount of funding allocated specifically to young women and girls globally with respect to climate action is difficult to determine, due to the lack of comprehensive data and transparency in funding mechanisms, it is widely acknowledged that women-led climate initiatives are significantly underfunded compared to those led by their male counterparts. According to various reports, only a small fraction of global climate finance directly targets gender equality. In fact, it is estimated that less than 1 percent of international climate finance gets directed toward environmental projects with a primary focus on gender equality.[18] And funding for youth-led climate action overall is also insufficient, despite the critical role that young people play in driving innovative and effective climate solutions. The lack of dedicated financial resources and institutional support for youth-led climate action remains a significant barrier to their full participation and impact in the climate space.

WHAT GLOBAL MAJORITY WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE CLIMATE SPACE NEED

Young women and girls in the Global South are massively underrepresented in climate decision-making processes.

Investing in gender-transformative education and policies is essential. It empowers women and girls to become leaders.

This lack of representation means that their voices are excluded. It's all about them without them. In Sudan, for example, the marginalization is acute. **"One of the biggest challenges is the lack of access for the voice of the Sudanese to most programs,"** noted Leena Eissa, a passionate climate advocate. **"We [are] really marginalized."**[19]

Access to Education and Mentorship

Access to education is key where representation is concerned. Education has been a cornerstone for many young climate activists. Alejandra Gonzales Rocabado, an environmental economist from Bolivia, described how scholarships enabled her to pursue advanced studies in economics and environmental economics: **"Through significant effort, I was fortunate to access quality education, earning full scholarships for both my undergraduate degree in Bolivia and my masters at the London School of Economics,"** she said.[20] However, she noted that such opportunities are not common in Bolivia, especially for women—highlighting the need for more educational programs and scholarships. And in Egypt, where Eissa relocated from Sudan, Eissa emphasized the importance of continuous learning: **"I participated in many climate programs and competitions, such as the Arab Youth Hackathon and Climatic Peace competition, and I continue to educate others,"** she explained.[21] This proactive approach to education has been crucial in empowering her to engage effectively in climate action.

Investing in gender-transformative education and policies is essential. It empowers women and girls to become leaders. Gonzales Rocabado emphasized, **"Education opens doors and empowers girls to take on leadership roles in climate justice. However, this education must be inclusive and transformative, targeting not only women but also addressing the cultural and stereotypical ideas that men may have about women's capabilities and roles."**[22]

While education provides knowledge, mentorship offers guidance and support, which are vital for navigating the complexities of climate activism. However, many activists report a lack of adequate mentorship. Meghna Chakkraborty, a dedicated water professional from India, highlighted this deficiency by saying, **"Mentorship remains a gap, as many water professionals in the region lack local or region-specific knowledge and hands-on training."**[23] While some activists have had access to valuable resources, many others struggle to find support that meets their needs. Rania Harrara, a human rights defender and environmentalist from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, described the challenges she faced in accessing relevant education and mentorship: **"Before college, climate change wasn't even on our curriculum. That's why I'm working with UNICEF Morocco to push for environmental education that speaks to our realities,"** she said.[24] She also emphasized the lack of mentors who understand the cultural and political challenges faced by young women in the region. For some other activists, personal experiences have been a powerful fount of education and motivation. Tanuja Pandey described how witnessing the environmental destruction of her homeland inspired her to become an intersectional climate activist. **"My childhood was spent in the Terai region [Nepal], where I witnessed the complete destruction of once-green landscapes due to floods. This experience became my primary source of education on climate change,"** she noted.[25]

Safe Environments and Trauma Care

Systemic issues further exacerbate the challenges faced by women activists. The safety of climate activists is a significant concern, particularly in politically unstable regions. In El Salvador, activists face a very hostile environment. The government either ignores or actively opposes environmental efforts. As Andrea Valeria Rivera Velado, a human rights activist and lawyer from El Salvador, described it, **"The government is corrupt, authoritarian, and predatory of the environment. It attacks, blocks, and criminalizes dissenting voices."**[26] In Nepal, the patriarchal society similarly compounds these challenges. Pandey recounted: **"Being a female in a patriarchal country like Nepal inherently comes with challenges. If you are young and female, you get a double whammy. I've encountered character assassination and distrust in my leadership just because of my gender."**[27] In Nepal, activists protesting against environmentally destructive projects have faced severe reprisals. Pandey shared her experience: **"We were labeled**

The emotional toll for young women on the front lines is compounded by experiences of displacement, abuse, and various forms of violence that intersect with their activism.

'anti-development' not just by the general public but also by the government. We faced death threats, rape threats, and character assassination."[28]

Indeed, said Harrara, **"The lack of safety for organizers in our region is a constant threat, yet we persist. We're done being token representatives or case studies. We are the leaders this movement needs, and it's time for the world to recognize that."**[29]

Adding to this, activists often experience mental health repercussions. As Pandey noted, **"The emotional toll [on me] of witnessing environmental degradation and constant resistance has led to burnout and mental health issues."**[30] The emotional toll for young women on the front lines is compounded by experiences of displacement, abuse, and various forms of violence that intersect with their activism. Many face forced migration, losing their homes and communities, which disrupts their sense of belonging and safety. Such displacement and abuses can result in deep psychological burdens as young women navigate the traumas of both systemic oppression and the impacts of the climate crisis.

Gender-Responsive Climate Policies and Investment

Young women climate activists from the Global Majority frequently encounter difficulties in securing the necessary funds to sustain and scale their projects. **"We're left scraping for resources to protect our communities from climate disasters. It's time for allies and supporters to put their money where their mouth is and prioritize funding for Global South activists who are on the front lines of this crisis,"** said Harrara.[31] In the same region, in Sudan, on top of experiencing so much war, the lack of funding severely limits climate efforts. Eissa shared: **"We were working with a group of young people without funding to support our projects, and we were just 17 and 18 years old. This made all awareness programs challenging due to the lack of resources."**[32]

These challenges know no borders. Gonzales Rocabado also spoke about the difficulties: **"Coming from the Global South, one of the main challenges I face in addressing the climate crisis is the difficulty in securing funding for climate projects."**[33] She also explained how young women often face cultural biases that undermine their leadership: **"In meetings, my capabilities are often underestimated, and I am not always taken seriously."**[34] Young women often find themselves in leadership roles without genuine authority. This lack of decision-making power hinders their ability to effect meaningful change. **"There's a tendency to appoint youth to leadership roles in name only, without providing them with genuine decision-making power and support,"** Pandey said.[35]

Political contexts can also impede climate action. In Bolivia, the intersection of politics and climate change presents significant challenges. The government is often reluctant to adopt market mechanisms to reduce carbon emissions due to ideological stances, which deters philanthropy. Gonzales Rocabado noted, **"Bolivia's current and prospective political and economic instability discourages external funding, given our low investment confidence ratings."**[36]

Clearly, there is a critical need for investment in gender-responsive climate policies and investments that address the specific needs and priorities of women and girls. Climate policy must be equitable, intersectional, multisectoral, intergenerational, decolonial, and feminist to address the climate crisis effectively. However, national climate policies rarely consider the needs and rights of women and girls, often viewing them just as vulnerable groups rather than agents of change. We must implement gender-responsive policies that recognize and mitigate gender inequalities exacerbated by climate change. This includes investing in initiatives that support women and girls economically, socially, and politically—ensuring their voices are heard and their leadership roles are supported.

According to Gonzales Rocabado,

> **Policies should include components that address gender disparities arising from climate impacts and climate action. For instance, the implementation of Nationally Determined Contributions can significantly affect the labor market, often disproportionately impacting women. Many women work in sectors**

Promoting gender equality within climate action initiatives and ensuring that women and girls have equal access to resources, decision-making processes, and leadership roles will create a more sustainable and impactful movement for climate justice.

> **like agriculture that require less formal education and are particularly sensitive to climate change. Gender-responsive policies should consider these nuances to mitigate adverse impacts on women and girls and promote equitable opportunities in emerging green sectors.**[37]

Investing in women's and girls' leadership is essential. Eissa highlighted the need to **"allocate resources to support their participation in climate justice movements, including training, mentorship, and networking opportunities. Recognize the intersectionality of gender issues, acknowledging that these are intertwined with other factors such as race, class, and ethnicity. Incorporate intersectional approaches in climate justice movements to address the specific needs of women and girls."**[38]

Promoting gender equality within climate action initiatives and ensuring that women and girls have equal access to resources, decision-making processes, and leadership roles will create a more sustainable and impactful movement for climate justice. Prioritizing their needs and perspectives will build a more resilient and inclusive society better equipped to address the urgent challenges of climate change.

To truly address climate justice, we must meet the needs of women and girls, especially those from the MENA region, who are at the forefront of this fight yet often overlooked. Harrara observed,

> **The devastating earthquake in Morocco [in 2023] starkly highlighted how climate disasters disproportionately impact girls, disrupting their education, compromising their health, and increasing their vulnerability. We need a radical shift in our approach: implementing gender-responsive policies, investing in girls' education and leadership, and providing targeted funding and resources for young female activists in MENA. It's crucial to create safe spaces for girls to develop their capacities and lead climate initiatives. Moreover, we must decolonize our strategies, challenging Western-centric narratives and empowering local, Indigenous perspectives.**[39]

Ensuring equal resources and opportunities for capacity building, mentorship, and leadership training specifically tailored to women and girls involved in climate justice movements is crucial. This, according to Pandey, includes **"providing funding for women-led organizations, offering skills-development trainings, facilitating networking opportunities, and providing a space for their initiatives. It's also important to recognize intersectionality, ensuring equity in access to resources, not only in funding but also in technology and information."**[40] While many have spoken about the lack of funding, it is clear that nonfinancial resources are equally crucial. By providing the necessary tools and support, these resources enable women and girls to lead effective climate actions, advocate for their communities, and contribute to a more sustainable future. We must invest in climate activists beyond the financial aspect. Intergenerational mentorship and dialogue are essential, allowing us to learn from one another and build a more inclusive and resilient movement. Expanding access to these opportunities, particularly in regions where they are scarce, is a pressing need that must be addressed to support this generation of women climate leaders.

Their Vital Leadership Recognized and Supported

Ensuring that young women and girls have a space to raise their voices and showcase their agency in shaping their future is crucial for driving transformative change. By amplifying the voices of young women and girls, we allow them to unlock their immense potential. Their experiences and insights lead to more inclusive and effective climate action. **"Young women and girls, especially those from the Global South, are often on the front lines of climate impacts, facing the direct consequences of environmental degradation, like water scarcity and food insecurity. Their firsthand knowledge and innovative approaches to climate action can drive more resilient and sustainable outcomes. Moreover, amplifying their voices helps to address systemic gender**

inequalities,"[41] said Gonzales Rocabado. Involving young women and girls in climate policies also fosters intergenerational equity. Their insights and concerns are vital for long-term planning, as they will inherit the future shaped by today's decisions. **"By including them in the conversation, we ensure that climate policies are more representative, comprehensive, and effective in tackling the multifaceted challenges of climate change,"**[42] she added.

Because governments, societies, and industries continue to operate in a patriarchal, colonial, and capitalistic way, we must confront these systems and ensure that young women and girls have the right to be heard in climate decisions. Rivera Velado highlighted the need to recognize their specific needs, declaring, **"We must acknowledge and address the unique challenges young women face due to climate change."**[43] The climate crisis is a reflection of the deep-rooted inequalities in our world, and young women and girls are among those most severely affected, and should be supported to lead the movement. As Harrara passionately explained,

> **Climate change in MENA doesn't just mean rising temperatures; it means increased violence against women, forced child marriages as families struggle with climate-induced poverty, and girls dropping out of school to fetch water from distant sources. This isn't just an environmental issue; it's about our lives and futures. We need our rightful place at the helm of climate policy and action.**[44]

Women and girls frequently lead community-based climate initiatives, driving innovative solutions and fostering resilience at the grassroots level. Their leadership is pivotal in implementing practical responses to climate impacts. When women constitute more than 50 percent of the population, neglecting their voices in a democratic context undermines the credibility of the system itself. **"Including diverse voices, especially those of affected populations, in climate policy ensures decisions are grounded in varied perspectives and experiences,"**[45] explained Pandey. **"This enhances policy legitimacy and effectiveness."**[46] Amplifying voices isn't about speaking for the voiceless but rather being supportive and being an ally. Young women and girls have been leading the way, and it is our duty to provide a platform for them rather than tokenizing their efforts to make ourselves look good.

Advancing the rights of young women and girls is a moral imperative. It is also an effective climate action strategy. Educating, funding, and including women and girls in climate decision-making improves community resilience. Research clearly shows that educated women are better equipped to adapt to climate change impacts and participate in decision-making processes, leading to more effective climate strategies.[47] Young women in Global Majority countries have found education, mentorship, and capacity building to be critical. Despite the fact that young women and girls face significant barriers, these resources have empowered them to lead effective climate actions and initiatives.

And integrating gender equity and meaningful youth engagement in climate policy is essential for a just and effective response to the climate crisis. We must advocate for policies that incorporate gender and youth perspectives, so that we can address the specific vulnerabilities of young women and girls while leveraging their critical contributions. In that sense, education, mentorship, and capacity-building programs are vital. They provide the foundational knowledge, skills, and networks necessary for young women and girls to continue being influential climate leaders.

The negligence of young women's needs isn't just an oversight; it's a form of violence that perpetuates cycles of oppression. As noted earlier, when climate disasters strike, young women are often left without menstrual products, made vulnerable to sexual predators in unsecured refugee camps, and expected to shoulder the burden of care work. **"It's time to put us in leadership positions,"** said Harrara. **"We're not just victims—we're the visionaries and changemakers the world desperately needs."**[48]

DETAIL: "IN COMMUNICATION WITH THE SUN" BY RENÉE LAPRISE/WWW.RENEELAPRISEARTS.COM

Innovative Ways Young Women and Girls Are Tackling the Climate Crisis in Their Communities

As the climate crisis continues to intensify, young women and girls around the world are stepping up with innovative solutions tailored to their unique local contexts. Three examples of how they are making a significant impact in their communities, follow.

Fostering Environmental Education and Action in Zambia

In Zambia, Dalitso Mvula, a passionate climate advocate, is educating and mobilizing her community. Her multifaceted approach includes organizing educational campaigns and hands-on activities to raise awareness about climate change and promote environmental stewardship:

> **I have created and conducted a "think environment" campaign in three schools that targeted over 1,500 school-going children with the aim of training them on how to think about the environment. I have trained over 50 girls from seven different wards on climate change, its effects, and solutions. Additionally, I have trained 80 students on climate change and opportunities in the green space.**
>
> **I [also] participated in the review and validation of the first-ever Zambian National Adaptation Plan. My long-term goals are to spread awareness about climate change and help people in rural areas adapt.**
>
> **I want to be part of the decision-makers who advocate for proper policies that are favorable for vulnerable communities' livelihoods. My motivation is my drive to see people's livelihoods improve and see the planet be a better place.**
>
> (Dalitso Mvula, interview with the author, June 26, 2024)

Empowering Women in Water Management in South Asia

South Asia Young Women in Water, cofounded by Meghna Chakkraborty, Monisha Tasnim, Humnah Fayyaz, Tabeer Riaz, and Sabina Khatri, is dedicated to helping cultivate a new generation of female leaders in the field.

> **One innovative way we address the climate crisis in our community is through South Asia Young Women in Water—the first-ever platform exclusively for women water professionals in the region. SAYWiW focuses on capacity building, knowledge sharing, and collaborative projects that empower women to lead sustainable water management and climate resilience initiatives. We also facilitate mentorship programs, conduct research on local water issues, and organize workshops and training sessions to enhance skills and foster leadership.**
>
> **By creating a supportive network, we enable women to tackle climate challenges effectively and drive positive change in their communities.**
>
> (Meghna Chakkraborty, interview with the author, June 26, 2024)

Decolonizing the Climate Space for the SWANA Region

SWANA Climate Sirens is a crucial response to the enduring marginalization and colonial legacies pervasive in the South West Asia and North Africa region. Cofounded by Rania Harrara, the movement is driven by a passionate commitment to centering decolonial and Indigenous perspectives within the discourse of climate justice. By acknowledging and addressing the historical injustices exacerbated by colonialism, SWANA Climate Sirens seeks to elevate the voices, wisdom, and leadership of young women and girls from the region.

> **Central to its mission is the integration of traditional ecological knowledge and sustainable practices rooted in Indigenous communities across the SWANA region. This approach not only fosters more equitable climate action but also empowers young women to participate actively in global forums such as COP. Climate Sirens envisions a future where young SWANA women lead resilient communities through grassroots activism and innovative solutions.**
>
> (Rania Harrara, interview with the author, June 28, 2024)

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Legislating the Future

European Youth Climate Activists at the Policy Table

by Talía Jiménez Romero

The year 2024 may seem like a very unpromising one for the environment; upon closer inspection, however, there are small yet resilient seeds of hope. This year, I've met people from all around Europe who are concerned to the point of fear about their local climate realities. But they have not lost hope—and neither should we.

For our generation—those of us born in the 1990s, who have grown up amid an increasingly concerning discourse on climate change—the environmental future appears bleak and uncertain. The climate crisis, as the Swiss ecotheologist Michel Maxime Egger has noted, is also an internal crisis—impacting, as it does, our mental and spiritual wellbeing.[1] Many young people are suffering the effects of the ever-rising environmental degradation, not only in their communities but also on a psychological level: around the world, eco-anxiety is emerging as a primary cause of mental health concerns.[2] According to a 2021 study published by the *Lancet*, "children and young people in countries around the world report climate anxiety and other distressing emotions and thoughts about climate change that impact their daily lives."[3] The study also notes the following:

> This distress was associated with beliefs about inadequate governmental response and feelings of betrayal. A large proportion of children and young people around the world report emotional distress and a wide range of painful, complex emotions (sad, afraid, angry, powerless, helpless, guilty, ashamed, despair, hurt, grief, and depressed). Similarly, large numbers report experiencing some functional impact and have pessimistic beliefs about the future (people have failed to care for the planet; the future is frightening; humanity is doomed; they won't have access to the same opportunities their parents had; things they value will be destroyed; security is threatened; and they are hesitant to have children).[4]

"SMOKE SPIRITS" BY RENÉE LAPRISE/WWW.RENEELAPRISEARTS.COM

In the past months, Europe has witnessed devastating floods, brutal wildfires, deadly cyclones, severe droughts, and blistering heat waves, among a long list of unprecedented climate incidents across the globe. This has been a particularly harsh year for damaged ecosystems, endangered species, and vulnerable populations worldwide.

And young people are unequivocal about who is to blame:

> By endangering and harming fundamental human needs, the climate crisis is also a human rights issue. Legal bodies recognise an intersection between human rights, climate change, and climate anxiety. Subjecting young people to climate anxiety and moral injury can be regarded as cruel, inhuman, degrading, or even torturous. This provides further understanding for the current phenomenon of climate criminology, in which children and young people are voicing their concerns through legal cases as an attempt to have their distress legitimised and validated legally in the face of government inaction.[5]

ELECTION IMPLICATIONS FOR CLIMATE POLICY

In Europe, 2024 has been a decisive year for climate activism. The future of the region's environmental policies is being shaped, with youth climate activists playing a vital role. The European elections have determined the composition of the Parliament for the next five years, directly impacting the region's climate agenda. It is also a crucial year for policies like the European Green Deal,[6] the Fit for 55 package,[7] and the European Climate Law,[8] among others, that are critical for mitigating global warming. This year has been especially important because, in February 2024, the European Commission presented its assessment for a 2040 climate target for the EU, recommending a reduction of net greenhouse gas emissions by 90 percent by 2040 compared to 1990 levels.[9] So, 2024 will serve as a key checkpoint for assessing progress and making necessary adjustments to meet the EU's climate goals.

Moreover, extreme weather events in 2024 are highlighting the gravity, extent, and complexity of climate change. In the past months, Europe has witnessed devastating floods, brutal wildfires, deadly cyclones, severe droughts, and blistering heat waves, among a long list of unprecedented climate incidents across the globe.[10] This has been a particularly harsh year for damaged ecosystems, endangered species, and vulnerable populations worldwide.[11]

The year 2024 is also one filled with concerns about a far-right resurgence in Europe. Although the European Parliament elections resulted in a composition that prevented the far-right from gaining a majority, the overall landscape remains worrying. Far-right politicians are now occupying just 49 shy of a quarter (131) of the 720 seats.[12] Countries like France and Germany—two major European Union states—are currently facing a concerning panorama, with their respective Alternative for Germany (AfD) and National Rally (RN) parties gaining prominence.[13] This raises the possibility of a far-right influence spreading across the continent. And the pressing question arises: What implications does this have for climate policy?

THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD OF THE NATURE RESTORATION LAW

In June 2022, the European Commission proposed a Nature Restoration Law,[14] designed to help achieve the EU's climate and biodiversity targets in the coming decades. A key objective of this law is "to restore at least 20% of the EU's land and sea by 2030," with the broader aim of rehabilitating "all ecosystems 'in need of restoration' by 2050."[15]

The Nature Restoration Law is considered a rare piece of legislation in the context of EU policy, due to its ambitious approach to environmental restoration. "This law is not about restoring nature for the sake of nature. It is about ensuring a habitable environment where the wellbeing of current and future generations is ensured," said the EU environment, oceans, and fisheries commissioner, Virginijus Sinkevičius.[16]

The legislation requires "EU countries…to restore at least 30% of habitats…[currently] in poor condition by 2030…60% by 2040 and 90% by 2050."[17] The proposal is intended to complement existing environmental policies, aligning with EU environmental laws across a wide range of ecosystems, including terrestrial, marine, freshwater, and urban areas.[18]

Bleak as it may seem, 2024 also brings hope for environmental initiatives, fresh projects for climate restoration, and novel opportunities for young people.

Moreover, it aligns with the EU Forest Strategy for 2030, which emphasizes strengthening the protection and sustainable management of EU forests.

On February 27, 2024, the European Parliament approved the Nature Restoration Law, "with 329 votes in favour, 275 against and 24 abstentions."[19] The final step for passing the law was a vote by the European Council, scheduled for late March. However, the vote was postponed indefinitely by the Belgian presidency of the Council of the EU "after eight member states, including Hungary and Italy, withdrew support for the legislation."[20]

Despite the broad support this law gathered from a diverse range of groups since it was first proposed—including associations, scientists, major companies, and nongovernmental organizations like the World Wildlife Fund, BirdLife International, and Greenpeace—it also faced strong opposition. The detractors primarily came from two key sources: "the major agricultural lobby group Copa-Cogeca and the EPP [center-right European People's Party]."[21] Copa-Cogeca, along with a number of additional lobby groups, strongly opposed the legislation from the beginning. Their criticism centers on the claim that green legislation will impose obligations on farmers that could threaten their ability to remain on their lands and sustain their businesses.[22] The EPP raised concerns that the law could lead to "global famine" and "increased food prices."[23]

These assertions were countered by an open letter signed by 3,000 scientists, published in June 2023. Although the letter did not directly mention any group or organization, it responded to the arguments, declaring that they "not only lack scientific evidence, but even contradict it."[24]

After a long and winding road, the Nature Restoration Law was finally approved on June 17, 2024. As reported by the Council of the European Union, "The regulation will now be published in the EU's Official Journal and enter into force. It will become directly applicable in all member states."[25]

The case of the Nature Restoration Law is one of many that illustrates how conservative and far-right parties, along with powerful lobby groups and populist movements, are becoming significant threats to Europe's climate-change efforts. The fact that it was ultimately approved should not prevent us from recognizing the dangers the continent faces.

RESISTING THE CLIMATE BACKLASH

During the European elections campaign, far-right parties declared their intention to block the execution of the Green Deal;[26] the center-right European People's Party, which secured a majority of seats in the European elections, announced plans to review the 2035 ban on the sale of combustion engine cars—a key component of the European Green Deal; [27] and the European Conservatives and Reformists Party has strongly opposed the European Commission's proposal, unveiled in February 2024, for a carbon reduction target of 90 percent by 2040.[28]

At the same time, green parties saw a decline in influence during the elections. Five years after expanding from 52 to 74 seats[29]—largely driven by mass rallies that sparked what was once called a "quiet revolution"[30]—they fell back to 53.[31] Consequently, the media is now discussing a "green backlash."[32]

Bleak as it may seem, 2024 also brings hope for environmental initiatives, fresh projects for climate restoration, and novel opportunities for young people. And the best thing is this: no matter where you come from or how many resources or how much knowledge you have, there is always something you can do from your own context and capabilities.

A PANORAMA OF EUROPE'S YOUTH-LED CLIMATE ORGANIZATIONS

European youth organizations are at the forefront of advocating for climate policies, demonstrating that a greener future is attainable. As young people, we have the opportunity to engage with and contribute to shaping our future. Initiatives such as Generation Climate Europe, ClimaTalk, and Youth and Environment Europe are working tirelessly to amplify our voices in environmental policy shaping.

Generation Climate Europe

Generation Climate Europe is the "[l]argest coalition of youth-led networks on climate and environmental issues at the European level."[33] At present, it is uniting 381 national organizations from 46 countries in Europe.[34] Through its various

YEE's board, staff, and volunteers are all under 35, thus empowering young people to engage in environmental activism and be recognized as distinct stakeholders in international climate negotiations.

working groups, GCE offers individuals under the age of 35 the chance to participate in Europe's decision-making processes on environmental matters, covering topics such as clean mobility, circular economy, biodiversity, and energy and climate justice.

In the weeks leading up to the European elections, GCE organized an online empowerment program titled "From Action to Elections: Sparking Youth Mobilisation in Europe."[35] Supported by the European Parliament, this program provided participants with insights into the European Parliament elections, the various parties and their manifestos, and the parties' pivotal roles in shaping the EU's environmental policies. It also equipped young people with the tools and knowledge necessary to actively engage in climate activism, whether through in-person or online initiatives.

GCE offers various volunteering positions, including the opportunity to join one of its working groups as a project officer, project lead, or coordinator, or to contribute to its internal functioning through its communications, operations, or institutional relations teams.

ClimaTalk

ClimaTalk is a youth-led nongovernmental organization with more than 100 volunteers from over 30 countries. ClimaTalk regularly publishes articles aimed at demystifying climate policies, making them accessible and understandable for everyone.[36] Additionally, it runs five different projects: three focused on climate and policy law and two addressing climate education and careers.[37]

The organization offers volunteering positions for people between 18 and 30 years old, whether they are university students, graduates, young professionals, or climate activists. It is currently looking for new volunteer writers to join its author team, and also offers the possibility to submit an open application for other volunteer positions.[38]

ClimaTalk has been particularly focused on the European Parliament's elections, analyzing the seven different groups and their climate policies. It created a PDF resource that, through infographics and comprehensive data, allowed people to understand the composition of each bloc and their environmental priorities.[39]

Youth and Environment Europe

Youth and Environment Europe is a youth-led and youth-centered organization that aims to "empower young people by providing them with skills, resources, and opportunities to participate actively and responsibly in society."[40] With its extensive network of local and grassroots organizations across Europe, it represents the voices of European youth. Its actions aim to support young people to become environmental leaders and make positive, long-lasting changes in their communities.

YEE's board, staff, and volunteers are all under 35, thus empowering young people to engage in environmental activism and be recognized as distinct stakeholders in international climate negotiations. YEE's main activities include volunteering experiences, workshops, and content creation, all with a strong focus on advocacy. YEE equips youth "to raise awareness" about pressing societal issues, and provides a comprehensive understanding of environmental justice and principles such as intersectionality—enabling active participation in international decision-making processes.[41]

The organization works on a broad spectrum of topics, ranging from environmental law and policy to climate justice, green finance, biodiversity, and ocean conservation, among others. Recent activities include a workshop on the future of the Green Deal following the European Elections,[42] a webinar discussing the impacts of European climate lawsuits,[43] and a "Training of Trainers" focused on managing eco-anxiety.[44]

Furthermore, between May 26, 2024, and June 2, 2024, YEE organized a study session at the European Youth Center in Budapest focused on the right to a healthy environment.[45] This program equipped young participants with knowledge and tools to enhance their influence and amplify their voices in European legislation concerning environmental issues, so that they can actively contribute to shaping policy recommendations and address climate challenges from diverse perspectives.

FINDING HOPE AMID THE CHALLENGES

Understanding how European environmental activism operates, as well as its trends and interests, is crucial for gaining insight into how people in the EU perceive ecological challenges. Surveys such as the Eurobarometer indicate that Europeans demonstrate high levels of concern regarding environmental issues.[46] And the figures are quite encouraging: "More than three-quarters of Europeans (78%)" believe that ecological challenges "have a direct effect on their daily life and their health." Moreover, "(84%) agree that EU environmental legislation is necessary for protecting the environment in their country."[47]

The Eurobarometer also indicates that many European countries, including Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Spain, demonstrate strong concern regarding the climate crisis.[48] Additionally, the Eurobarometer shows that Europeans consider a circular economy to be the most effective approach to combating environmental problems,[49] followed by efforts to restore nature.[50] Generally, Europeans are increasingly interested in adopting more responsible consumer behaviors, such as purchasing sustainable products and reducing waste.[51]

And this should be a barometer for the world. I'm writing this article at the midpoint of the year, just a few days after the summer solstice. After being at the European Youth Centre in Budapest with YEE, learning about European green policies, and participating in GCE's online empowerment program about the European elections, I can say there's still hope. The year 2024 may seem like a very unpromising one for the environment; upon closer inspection, however, there are small yet resilient seeds of hope. This year, I've met people from all around Europe who are concerned to the point of fear about their local climate realities. But they have not lost hope—and neither should we.

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A Letter to Philanthropy

Saviorism Will Not Save Our Ecosystems

by Senowa Mize-Fox

On June 11, 1992, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 12-year-old Canadian youth organizer Severn Cullis-Suzuki addressed the United Nations:

> I am here to speak for the countless animals dying across this planet, because they have nowhere left to go. I am afraid to go out in the sun now, because of the holes in our ozone. I am afraid to breathe the air, because I don't know what chemicals are in it.... You teach us to not to fight with others, to work things out, to respect others, to clean up our mess, not to hurt other creatures, to share, not be greedy. Then, why do you go out and...do the things you tell us not to do? Do not forget why you are attending these conferences—who you're doing this for. We are your own children. You are deciding what kind of a world we are growing up in.[1]

Cullis-Suzuki became known as "the girl who silenced the world for five minutes."[2] She has gone on to inspire countless youth activists and organizers fighting for climate and environmental justice—the issues raised in her speech 32 years ago being as critical now as they were back then, if not more so.[3]

A FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP

The Rio Earth Summit had some limited successes, namely, the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC),[4] whose decision-making body, the Conference of Parties (COP), meets annually to discuss and act on global climate treaties such as the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and the Paris

"DOWNSIDE UP" BY RENÉE LAPRISE/WWW.RENEELAPRISEARTS.COM

Do not platform yourselves as experts just because you are wealthy. That money does not belong to you; it was extracted from those who should have a say in their own futures. Fund international solidarity; join the calls from those on the ground who are fighting development-aid schemes; and heed the calls of youth organizers who will inherit these ecosystems.

Philanthropy has added fuel to the fire that is saviorism disguised as progress. The billionaires and multimillionaires starting foundations and funds and pledging to save the planet are using money taken off the backs of those on the front lines.

Agreement (2015). The thirtieth session—COP 30—will convene in Belém do Pará, a city in northern Brazil at the base of the Amazon, in 2025.[5] Many of the pledges that were made at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 have still not been realized, such as the next steps from Agenda 21, a nonbinding treaty that initially aimed to achieve global sustainable development by the beginning of the 21st century. As of 2012, out of the 40 sectoral issues addressed in the treaty, 34 had made little to no progress on their goals.[6] By 2010, the Convention on Biological Diversity, which was established at the Earth Summit, had failed to reach its goal of significantly reducing species extinction—with "30% of amphibians, 21% of birds and 25% of mammal species" at risk of annihilation.[7] In 2023, those numbers had jumped significantly to 26 percent of mammals and 41 percent of amphibians—but with the positive news of a decreased risk for birds, now at 12 percent.[8]

More broadly, heads of state across the Global South decried the prevalence of "green imperialism," accusing Northern countries of imposing their influence in the name of environmentalism.[9]

The 1992 Earth Summit was followed by several conferences at regular intervals, most notably—in 2012—Rio+20, which over 130 youth organizers and activists walked out of, proclaiming that the summit's slogan should be changed from "The Future We Want" to "The Future We Bought"—and formed their own conference, the People's Summit.[10]

In the 32 years since the Rio Earth Summit, the climate crisis has become ever more dire—and yet every year there are global conferences, meetings, and summits, all in the name of *climate progress*. At each of these gatherings, world leaders debate what needs to be done to mitigate the worst effects of the crisis, and every year treaties are presented and promises are made, only to fall short of the significant change that is needed[11]—the level of change that will yank us out of our comfort zones and denounce a business-as-usual approach.

PHILANTHROPY FUELS THE FIRE

Meanwhile, youth activists and organizers continue to be outspoken, recognizing that the climate crisis continues to worsen, exacerbated by such concurring injustices as poverty and wealth inequality, authoritarianism, and genocide.[12] This polycrisis[13] is magnified by a deep-seated culture of individualism and saviorism, especially in the Global North.[14] As heads of state continue to make speeches and wealthy donors continue to make multimillion-dollar pledges, youth are refusing to settle for the grandstanding diplomacy disguised as cooperation, and instead are organizing to build a future of deep solidarity and coconspiratorship.[15]

Philanthropy has added fuel to the fire that is saviorism disguised as progress. The billionaires and multimillionaires starting foundations and funds and pledging to save the planet are using money taken off the backs of those on the front lines.[16] They pledge to curtail illegal logging, save endangered species, and invest in sustainable development—but on their terms. They platform themselves as having the solutions to mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis while still maintaining calls for economic growth and prosperity. Yet much of the money does not reach the populations on the ground;[17] local populations are often not consulted properly or trained in these development schemes;[18] and the development is thus incongruous with stewardship.

As the world looks toward yet another UNFCCC meeting (COP 29 will be held in November 2024, in Baku, Azerbaijan),[19] and the planet continues to break global temperature records, I wonder what it would look like for philanthropy to help fund the solutions instead of reinforcing the problems. What would it look like for funders and donors to heed Cullis-Suzuki's words, "You are deciding what kind of a world we are growing up in," and fund without a profit-motivated trade-off? What would it look like to redistribute wealth in the name of solidarity instead of charity, recognizing that wealth does not give funders, donors, and other development actors the right to control the solutions of those on the front lines?

"THE LUNGS OF THE WORLD"

Listening to Cullis-Suzuki's speech again, in 2024, brought me back to my own origin story. In 2000, when I was 10 and in the fourth grade, my science teacher, Mrs. Mason, taught a unit on the Amazon Rainforest and its importance as "the lungs of the world." One day, she announced to the class that

It feels impossible even now to describe the sheer enormity of the awe-inspiring flora and fauna that awaited me down the river. I befriended a capybara and saw a fireball comet burn brightly through the sky, as our guide Ari invited us to revel in the stillness of a night in the rainforest.

she had received a grant to take four students to Iquitos, a town that is the gateway to the Peruvian Amazon, for a week. She held a letter-writing contest for interested fourth and fifth graders: *Write a letter detailing the importance of protecting/conserving the rainforest.* Mrs. Mason chose three fifth-graders and me. Four months later, my mom and I were on a plane to Lima, and shortly after, we were on a boat on the Amazon River, heading straight into the jungle.

It feels impossible even now to describe the sheer enormity of the awe-inspiring flora and fauna that awaited me down the river. I befriended a capybara and saw a fireball comet burn brightly through the sky, as our guide Ari invited us to revel in the stillness of a night in the rainforest. I remember shaking while standing on a *completely structurally sound and safe* canopy walkway,115 feet off the ground—terrified and yet completely enamored with the tops of kapok, lupuna, and ojé trees at eye level.[20]

I was overwhelmed by the diversity of the new things I was seeing, smelling, and hearing. Everything felt so much bigger than me. Everything there suddenly felt so important. I remember thinking that it was one thing to write abstractly about the importance of the rainforest and quite another to experience it. I did not understand at the time the complicated systems at play that led and continue to lead to the deforestation of the Amazon;[21] but I knew that I wanted a hand in stopping it.

How does a 10-year-old even begin to try to save the rainforest?

The problem(s) felt too grand for my still-developing brain to grasp. Back home, I continued to deepen my love of nature, of being outside, of local wildlife (catching frogs found in my backyard, only to be told to release them back outside). I did not know about Cullis-Suzuki then. I did not know the history of youth organizing for environmental justice.[22]

As I got older, I started calling myself an environmentalist, and I went to the University of Vermont for natural resources planning. Around this time, the messaging in many of my environmental classes was focused on "green consumerism" paired with individual action: take shorter showers, drive a Prius, wash out your recyclables, reuse your Ziploc bags. We could continue down this path of exponential growth and development if we were mindful of how we proceeded with our daily lives. Global warming was a slow-moving baseball, miles in front of us, that could be halted with a properly fitted catcher's mitt. I continued to question, But how? How was it my responsibility as an individual to even make a dent in this crisis? How was my $50 recycled glass water bottle supposed to end deforestation?

In 2011, during my junior year of college, I returned to the Amazon—this time to Brazil. I was accepted and enrolled in a program, at the (now defunct) School for International Training, titled Amazon Resource Management and Human Ecology. I applied because I still often thought of my time in Peru, and I wanted to learn more about how, as an individual, I could make a difference thousands of miles away. At the time, I wanted desperately to work for an international aid agency such as the World Bank or USAID (United States Agency for International Development). I wanted to lead a sustainable development project, *educate the local population on what the West had discovered about forest management and renewable energy*. (Yes—I thought I was there to save these wise and deeply experienced land stewards from their misguided ways.)

The pace of my days during my four-month stay in Pará, Brazil, became rhythmic. Most days were spent in class learning about the communities that have called the Amazon home for hundreds and sometimes thousands of years, and how intertwined they are with the ecosystem. We often had class in the jungle itself, guided by our professor Gustavo, a local resident who walked with confidence, machete in hand, effortlessly naming every single plant and insect we came across.

We traveled through dusty, arid land that was once forest, visiting AgTech corporations, listening to engineers from Europe and the United States explain how they were conserving the land "somewhere over there," as they promised. We shuffled our feet in the iron-dense clay soil, faces red from the dust. We visited a massive hydroelectric plant that was

I share these experiences because they bring together the inner workings of the jungle with the people who call it home, forever intertwined. If I wanted to have a hand in conserving the rainforest, I needed to understand its people—the stewards of the Amazon.

sucking local rivers dry and sending the energy produced to the south of Brazil, to the detriment of local fishing-reliant communities. We stood in the middle of an aluminum bauxite mining pit managed by an American mining company, and I could not hear the birds. It was just silence and sweltering heat.

We traveled by boat for two weeks, sleeping in hammocks, looking up at the Milky Way at night, and picturing ourselves pedaling through the stars. I had only experienced darkness so bright once before, in Peru, eleven years prior. I remember seeing the smoke rising from the trees every thousand feet or so during the day—illegal logging followed by slash-and-burn agriculture. It was sobering.

We stayed three nights in a Quilombola village,[23] where I was nearly swept down a waterfall and was bitten by a piranha two days later (yes, it hurt; a lot). I learned how to play soccer (poorly) and listened to stories of liberation through songs. The African-descended Quilombola population live in tight-knit communities surrounding the Tocantins River, and rely on fishing and agriculture to survive. The arrival of palm oil plantations and the nearby hydroelectric plant has threatened to erase their way of life. Quilombolas could still live in their homes, but some of that land now belongs to the palm oil companies, which stake the population's continued residency on working for them.[24] This is an incredibly common arrangement that I saw from many extractive companies—entire towns built/transformed around an industry: barely legal indentured servitude.

A few weeks later, we stayed with communities that were part of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra (MST)—in English, the Landless Workers' Movement.[25] We talked to people who were on the run from private security forces hired to protect agricultural land from MST settlers—and on the same afternoon, we learned how to manually dry cacao seeds for export, part of a sustainable development project financed by one international aid organization or another. We stayed in abandoned concrete houses that the World Bank had built in the 1990s for the communities, to "modernize" them. They were hot, poorly ventilated, and surrounded by mosquitoes. I could not help but smile with pleasure at this small form of resistance from the communities, who traditionally live in houses made from naturally cooling local plant and wood materials.

I spent two weeks on Ilha do Marajó, a small island in the Amazon River, writing my independent study project on another cacao processing project taking place there. I stayed with a local researcher who was writing her PhD thesis on the project. She took me into her "backyard" to forage for wild herbs and greens for dinner, complete with freshly baked bread and butter from local water buffalo (who were transported to the island via ship hundreds of years ago and now call the island home).[26] I handwrote most of my study sitting on the beach, hoping to catch glimpses of pink river dolphins swimming by.

STEWARDS OF THE AMAZON

I share these experiences because they bring together the inner workings of the jungle with the people who call it home, forever intertwined. If I wanted to have a hand in conserving the rainforest, I needed to understand its people—the stewards of the Amazon. At the time, I still thought sustainable development was the answer, and that the solutions came from a "nicer" version of capitalism. There was/is a myth that development can be sustainable; that transforming the topography and functioning of one of the most diverse ecosystems on the planet can be done on a grand scale and still do minimal harm. But I've seen what development is doing to the region and have spent time with people whose only option is to fight it, no matter the cost.

What became clear during my time in the Amazon was that forest conservation and stewardship was necessarily political and an act of resistance. Many of the community members we talked to were young and energized. They knew the ins and outs of the rainforest, how to take only what was needed and leave the rest. Their ways of life were dotted with comforts of modernity, but their connection to the land was undeniable. They were dependent on it and on each other to protect it. We cannot talk about protecting the rainforest without also considering the people who are already doing just that. Especially the youth. This is their home too, and their future.

As more promises and pledges for legislation and funding fall short of monumental change, I see more young folks rising up and reminding those of us who have become disillusioned that we cannot surrender. These days, when I talk about my experiences in the Amazon rainforest, I am solemn: "I hope to go back and visit while it is still there."

My outlook changed. Though I had yet to be fully radicalized as an organizer (it would be a few more years before I became fully immersed in that world), I had a much deeper understanding of how neocolonialism, disguised as development and aid, has created and exacerbated the dire situation the region is in today.[27] We should not get to sit in comfortable air-conditioned rooms at climate conferences discussing how to protect a crucial ecosystem and the continued overextraction of the resources that are needed for that ecosystem's functioning.

When I hear people in Western nations talk about the Amazon in relation to the climate crisis, I often hear the term "carbon sink."[28] There are pledges from wealthy donors such as Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, who in 2023 granted $50 million via 10 grants to the Brazilian Amazon in the name of conservation.[29] But conservation for whom? One of these grants is called "Carbon Market Training for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in the Brazilian Amazon,"[30] the purpose being to train Indigenous and traditional communities on how to benefit from carbon market schemes. Trees as dollar signs—capitalism at its finest.

The Amazon is a resource state for wealthier nations:[31] a place to exploit via extractive mining, cattle ranching, hydroelectric dams, palm oil, crude oil, sugarcane harvesting, logging, poaching, and various other monoculture crops such as soybeans and corn for animal feed and food-additive production.[32] In 2019, when Jair Bolsonaro became president, deforestation for these activities skyrocketed.[33] The region is also one of the most dangerous places to be an environmental activist, with at least 342 activists murdered in the Brazilian Amazon between 2012 and 2021, a figure that is likely underreported.[34]

The Amazon does not need "saviors": wealthy donors platforming themselves as experts. It needs organizers and activists. It needs people whose livelihoods are connected to the land to decide how to protect it for generations to come. That land belongs to them, not us. Philanthropy can be in solidarity with Amazonians on the front lines by funding land stewardship, food sovereignty, just transitions, and resistance to development and deforestation. Funders can do this without attaching their own agendas to that money. And there are funders already doing this work: CLIMA Fund; Grassroots International; CS Fund; and Rainforest Action Network, to name a few.

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As individualism and saviorism become further entrenched in society, so does the resistance.[35] As more promises and pledges for legislation and funding fall short of monumental change, I see more young folks rising up and reminding those of us who have become disillusioned that we cannot surrender. These days, when I talk about my experiences in the Amazon rainforest, I am solemn: "I hope to go back and visit while it is still there"; "I wish my future children could have the experiences that I had." As someone aging out of youth, I find solace and hope in how naturally it comes to younger organizers today to organize collectively and reject the notion of individualism. The future of the Amazon Rainforest is connected to the fights for clean air and water, arable land, food sovereignty, fair housing, antimilitarism, and antiauthoritarianism around the world. The issue of resource extraction for the benefit of wealthier nations is a systemic problem that cannot be solved without wealth redistribution and collective organizing and solidarity with those who are on the front lines of the crisis.

As we look toward COP 30 in the Brazilian Amazon, **I call out to funders, nonprofit leaders, and state negotiators: direct your energy and your grant-making to those on the ground, not to Western organizations acting as saviors.** Do not platform yourselves as experts just because you are wealthy. That money does not belong to you; it was extracted from those who should have a say in their own futures. Fund international solidarity; join the calls from those on the ground who are fighting development-aid schemes; and heed the calls of youth organizers who will inherit these ecosystems.

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Ancient, Powerful, and Particularly Feminine

Righting Our Relationship with Mama Earth

by hunter jones and Ubuntu Climate Initiative

We are living in a patriarchal system that prioritizes power, profit, and a hypercompetitive culture that overvalues individualism. We can bring back balance by leaning into feminine ways of organizing, building, and creating space for the reality we want to build.

"RE-CONNECTION" BY RENÉE LAPRISE/WWW.RENEELAPRISEARTS.COM

Nature teaches me about abundance and resilience, even in the midst of a seemingly hopeless time (as the media, with its tendency to glorify scarcity, would have us believe). We are witnessing a shift toward something ancient, powerful, and particularly feminine. This evolution is possible because we are becoming conscious and adapting—learning to hold space in which more expansive relationships can be generated and we can act from shared awareness. We are in a time of deep remembrance, a time when we can cocreate in harmony with nature, hold reverence for spirit, and address the challenges of our rapidly changing world.

In the summer of 2022, the core of the Ubuntu Climate Initiative, an intergenerational group of Black women from diverse backgrounds, gathered in a quiet town outside of Point Reyes, CA—a scenic place where forests and ocean converge. Mama Earth had called each of us, urging a return to ways of being that foster harmony, balance, and interdependence.

We embraced the word *ubuntu*—an Nguni Bantu term often translated as "I am because we are"—which conveys the interrelatedness of humans and the cosmos, creator, ancestors, and ecosystems. As our project took shape, rooted in the *ubuntu* philosophy, it became evident that *ubuntu* was already deeply embedded in our work and the futures we envisioned.

The concept of *ubuntu* may seem straightforward—one exists and thrives due to an existing and thriving human and more-than-human ecosystem. Yet in systems built to isolate and decimate our biodiversity for profit, examples of healthy community provisioning, collaboration, and innovative system building are becoming rare. On an individual scale, it can feel daunting to challenge entrenched systems. Collectively, more and more of us are turning for guidance to the wisdom of systems that existed long before Western industrial civilizations. We are taking the time to listen and see our truths reflected in the mirror.

UBUNTU AS ART

Nearly two years later, on Earth Day 2024, our Cultural Arts Circle excitedly announced 40 winners for the Ubuntu Climate Initiative's inaugural Climate Arts and Storytelling Showcase. The showcase was a collaborative project organized by the Ubuntu Climate Initiative in partnership with the media arts center Open Signal. Its purpose was to highlight the artistic expressions of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people across the nation, who are bringing forward cultural practices from the past to sow seeds of climate action in their communities—addressing environmental challenges and promoting collective action for a sustainable future in alignment with the principles of *ubuntu*. Broadcast on YouTube, the showcase amplified stories of individuals across the United States who are practicing *ubuntu* in their communities, with special categories for women, returning citizens, elders, and youth.[1] Witnessing so many profound and expansive narratives was incredible; yet I was most inspired by how many young people are fostering solidarity to confront the climate crisis and transform our future.

First place went to Jendaiya Hill, a member of Philly Thrive and an apprentice to the earth, who presented "Right to Thrive."[2] Marielle O'Neill, our second-place recipient, used origami and her love of flowers to illustrate the concept of *ubuntu* in "Ubuntu as Folding Art."[3] Tiaret Aryanna Renee Mitchell, who was awarded our third-place prize, described *oneness* in a raw spoken-word performance.[4] Honorable mentions in the youth category include Jai Bazawule, with "Bring Back Ubuntu";[5] Gabriela Garcia, who shared her story "I Am Because We Are Community";[6] Norah Dunlap, who accompanied her story of our interconnectedness with a time-lapse documentation of her painting, in "Painting Ubuntu";[7] Chloe Rockmore and Jordyn Hanes, who partnered in "Ubuntu as Dance";[8] and Bobby Baker, who, in "Ubuntu—The Spirit of Milwaukee," used drone shots to capture the oneness of our urban ecosystems.[9]

On an individual scale, it can feel daunting to challenge entrenched systems. Collectively, more and more of us are turning for guidance to the wisdom of systems that existed long before Western industrial civilizations.

DETAIL: "RE-CONNECTION" BY RENÉE LAPRISE/WWW.RENEELAPRISEARTS.COM

"There are so many tales and origin stories. These stories help us see plants as living things we are in relationships with, relationships we have cultivated for years."

—Anbiya Oshun Smith, honorable mention,
Ubuntu Climate Initiative's Climate Arts and Storytelling Showcase

Each creation is evidence of us moving toward a healed future in which compassion, joy, and interdependence are celebrated. By being rooted in *ubuntu* values, we exist in balance with our earth systems in a way that still makes space for our differences and generates an abundance of biodiversity.

OUR STORIES CARRY WISDOM ACROSS GENERATIONS

The rich stories that emerged from our showcase confirmed the deep and intentional listening required if we want to right our relationship with Mama Earth. These stories prompted me to reach out to a few of the youth who received prizes from the showcase to better understand if and how they were weaving Afro-Indigenous values into their day-to-day practices as change agents. I had insightful conversations with Hill, based in Philadelphia, PA; Mitchell, based in Silver Spring, MD, and New York City, NY; Baker, a high school student in Milwaukee, WI; and Anbiya Oshun Smith, a Los Angeles, CA, native (and an honorable mention in the women's category, with "Answering the Call: Stories and Creations Inspired by Mama Nature"[10]) —giving a diverse range of perspectives from folks under 30 across the country.

The need to prioritize making space for stillness in order to receive wisdoms from our elders and ancestors who have been drowned out by dominant harmful narratives, came up over and over again in the conversations. "We should lean into practices like praying and meditation to receive guidance from our ancestors on how to tend to ourselves and the land," said Smith, when asked how ancestral practices can inform climate activism.[11] She also emphasized the importance of stories in our relationship with nature:

> There are so many tales and origin stories. These stories help us see plants as living things we are in relationships with, relationships we have cultivated for years. As we implement our Indigenous and African roots and ways of connecting with nature, we bring as much guidance from our elders and as much collaboration as possible as we grow.[12]

These stories resonate with us even when we are not immediately conscious of the ways in which we are developing our awareness. I connected with Mitchell, who emphasized the value of elders' roles in teaching more sustainable ways of being. "I would always listen to my elders. My parents were surrounded by their peers, who were Black elders from the South, who have rich stories of nature, ancestry, and resilience."[13] The elders in her life passed on their respect for Mama Earth and her lessons: "In nature, when I wasn't surrounded by elders, I would be outside in my backyard—there's a stream, creeks, animals, an entire ecosystem. So I'd always just be outside, listening."[14]

Being young can be challenging when there is so much to learn in life, but it's a gift to view age-old challenges with a fresh perspective. "If we're really going to move through this period of time with grace," said Hill, "we need to weave the wisdom of the elders and children and the youth and all middle-aged adults together. That's what we offer as young people, a very unfiltered relationship with the earth and ourselves and with each other."[15]

LEARNING TO LISTEN

We can't change systems without changing our consciousness. This will require the slow and intentional work of listening to our spirits, to each other, and most important, to Mama Earth, who calls us to open our hearts. Mitchell shared her perspective on why listening is necessary for us to grow: "The first step of understanding is always to deeply listen. Listening is like letting go of ego and seeing what is calling and what there is to learn."[16]

Mitchell continued with a story of a friend who expressed feeling like a visitor in nature. "How can you feel like a visitor in your own home?" Mitchell asked her friend, and explained to me that the biggest disconnect for most is that we don't know how to listen to and sit with Mama Earth.[17]

This isn't surprising, given how our cities are intentionally structured (politically, economically, and physically) to disconnect us from each other and nature. Hill shared her

"When we zoom out [from] our planet, many cancerous cells are contributing to the state of things; but there are also many ways to show up as one individual, one cell within the body that reverberates healing and alignment with the greater body we're part of."

—Jendaiya Hill, first place, Ubuntu Climate Initiative's Climate Arts and Storytelling Showcase

perspective that "*ubuntu* is the truth that we are all cells of the same earth body. A cell that is cancerous is one that is not maturing—maturity means the cell understands its best purpose within the body."[18] She continued:

> When we zoom out [from] our planet, many cancerous cells are contributing to the state of things; but there are also many ways to show up as one individual, one cell within the body that reverberates healing and alignment with the greater body we're part of. When I think of *ubuntu*, it's the recognition that my heart beating is part of the same heart we all share. I might forget that, but that's the truth.[19]

And Smith asked, "We have so many options to expand, but are we listening to what the planet wants, what our souls want?"[20] For Smith, it means "slowing down and working at a pace that feels true to who we are and reflects how we connect to nature and how we are listening to our ancestors and working in a way that is easeful."[21]

Metamorphosis occurs when we are able to shed old layers and attachments to ways of being that no longer serve us. Mama Earth's voice must have a seat at the table when making decisions that will serve everyone in the long term.

BUILDING THE COMMONS

Commoning enables lifeways and collective action that are in alignment with African Indigenous worldviews and cultural beliefs, such as an emphasis on communal use of resources, interdependence among people, reverence for nature, and an ethics of collective responsibility that actions be in accordance with the planet's wellbeing.[22] Historically, humans fostered collectiveness as a means of survival and to generate joy. Although there are still communities around the world that practice commoning on a similar scale as in the past, smaller scale commoning such as community gardens, craft circles, swaps, potlucks, and block parties are some of the more usual forms that we see today.

Baker shared how his family has practiced commoning in Milwaukee since he was a kid—from community gardens to community safety. "My mom and dad were both active in the community. They ran a big campaign against violence, especially in the early 2000s."[23] Baker also recalled other forms of organizing:

> I have an aunt who ran a community garden, so I've always been outside doing things like that. When I was younger, it was like every day we were going to the garden or knocking on doors, telling people about "Stop the Violence." Those are some of my best memories—making new friends, being outside in my community, and growing as a person.[24]

Commoning can also look different on a more personal level. Smith shared how curating space is an important part of her practice of commoning:

> As someone who has a lot of different interests and is a multidimensional creator, creating spaces is an integral part of my purpose. I utilize my heart, expansiveness, resources, and connections to build upon who we already are. This supports existing connections and community building, so the tribe can have an easier time locating and building with each other.[25]

That perspective highlights the core of why we common—to create spaces that allow each community member to actualize their purpose and strengths and be in constant communication with the overall group to see where these different skills generate synergy.

Mitchell shared a saying with me: "Reconnect to your body, reconnect to your mind, reconnect to your spirit."[26] Regarding her practice of commoning, she explained how her art has always focused on "having a sacred, safe, healing, and meditative space for Black and Brown folks to come in and reclaim their body on their own terms in order to reconnect to it."[27]

There is a connection between curating space for healing and curating space for building. In order to grow sustainably,

we must take the time to weed out areas that are constricting resources. If a plant is not maintained, it will eventually stop fruiting. In our current climate movement, scaling and generating a unified voice has been particularly challenging. I believe that is because even in progressive spaces, we are still moving in a patriarchal fashion that prioritizes productivity and a hyper focus on time-oriented goals, which has led to many of us feeling burned out.

We are living in a patriarchal system that prioritizes power, profit, and a hypercompetitive culture that overvalues individualism. We can bring back balance by leaning into feminine ways of organizing, building, and creating space for the reality we want to build. This looks like going from individualism, which leaves us little space to build relationships, to communal societies that recognize our interdependence.

And we cannot simply say we must address climate change by some arbitrary date; we must explicitly craft a plan of action that addresses how we will hold space for healing on the individual scale, so we can move from a place of trust when creating alternatives to the existing systems.

IT STARTS WITH US

Being 26, I'm considered part of the generation known for things like silent quitting, setting boundaries, and refusing to accept cultural practices that no longer serve the needs of rapidly developing communities. There was a time when I found great solace in being outside and in water; but the need to sustain in a fast-paced society meant less and less time outside and more time trying to fit myself into the box of a perfect activist—one who, at the core, further perpetuated patriarchal and colonial ways of living. There were times when I leaned heavily into my masculine energy in order to grind, opting for long hours at my computer doing tasks that left me drained and devoid of hope instead of connecting to the creative outlets that make me who I am.

In 2020, when COVID-19 forced the world to pause, many of us had time to reconsider our priorities. My journey began to bend and wind when I decided it was essential to work in an environment that would allow me to uplift and focus on using my gifts as a creative to bring light to the issues in my community. I was just a small node in the greater mycelium, shifting from a time- and number-obsessed culture to one that desired space and breath. So, while moving through the constructs of Father Time, I decided to also prioritize levity with Mama Earth and step into the feminine embodiment of creativity and nurturing ideas to fruition. While this could be chalked up to just the typical rebellious nature of youth, I'm not alone in believing that we are generating radical shifts in the world. While every generation has its crises, ours and future generations are facing higher stakes.

Our world exists in a delicate balance, and Mama Earth will restore balance by any means necessary. We must work together with awareness and love to create a new song that will tell our story of adaptation, transformation, and how we righted our relationship with Mama Earth to the generations that follow.

• • •

Through the Ubuntu Climate Initiative, young people are catalyzing cultural shifts and fostering solidarity in the fight against climate change. Our stories, actions, and creativity are illuminating a path forward—a path that centers on the power of community, deep listening, and embracing our interconnectedness. As with mycelium in nature, the diversity we bring to our environment ultimately harmonizes us as a collective.

Cultural reparations are critical for living in a restorative and balanced future. Youth climate activists are embodying the way. We understand that we can no longer view nature as a means to an end. Our natural resources must be revered as sacred—a part of us and a part of all. Our world exists in a delicate balance, and Mama Earth will restore balance by any means necessary. We must work together with awareness and love to create a new song that will tell our story of adaptation, transformation, and how we righted our relationship with Mama Earth to the generations that follow.

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HUNTER JONES is a multidisciplinary creative and storyteller, an advisor on Ubuntu's Cultural Arts Circle, and an eco-communicator at Emerald Cities Collaborative. jones uses communication and culture to build lasting strategies that embed narrative change and storytelling in environmental justice work and communicate the collective vision for a society built from love that is in harmony with the natural world. They are mostly known for their ability to bring diverse perspectives and mediums together, leading to creative solutions for improving the connection between humans and Mama Earth. Their creations can be found both within the digital space and the community, from canvas paintings, digital images, animations, music, and activated jewelry to public murals throughout the DMV area. **UBUNTU CLIMATE INITIATIVE** is a US-based global network of African and Pan Indigenous creatives, community leaders and organizations, academics, and allies working to rebuild our relationships with each other and nature to mitigate and adapt to climate change by advancing eco-centered versus ego-centered cultures, knowledge, policies, and practices.

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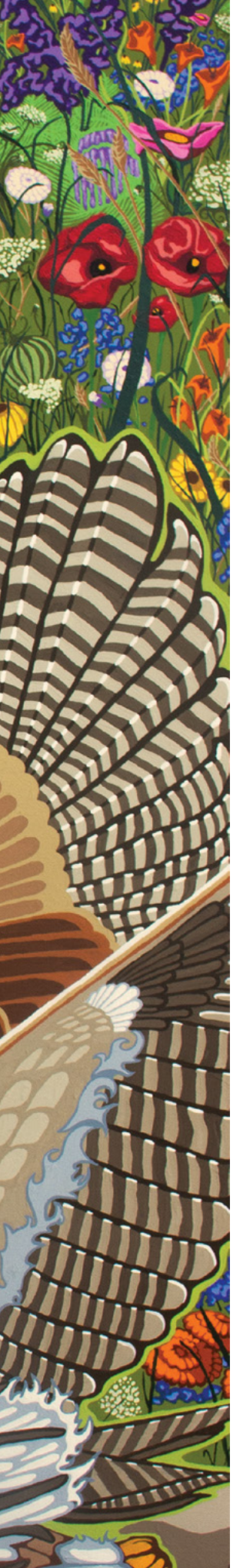

If I Weren't an Activist

by Diamond Spratling-McGinley

If I weren't an activist, I would be an artist. Growing up, I loved to paint, to make nothings into somethings. To sit outside and color, and reimagine a world where the sun was beaming down on my skin. Art made me feel like I could escape reality and be in my own world. I felt at peace. Not how I feel when fighting for basic human rights. That doesn't feel peaceful. That feels draining, that feels exhausting, that feels tiresome. It feels like I am fighting to be seen. Fighting for the basic necessities of life. The things that feel like they should be a given. Have human rights really become a privilege? Maybe they always were a privilege. Maybe human rights are just abstract, a figment of my imagination, sort of like the artwork I did as a kid.

If I weren't an activist, I would also be an architect. I love houses. When I was a kid, I used to sit in my room and draw pictures of houses. Every New Year, my mom would help us make vision boards, and mine was filled only with big beautiful houses. Access to shelter is a basic human right, though I'm not sure I thought of it that way when I was a kid. I think I just simply loved houses. I organize rallies and protests advocating for safe, healthy communities, speak in front of thousands of people stressing the urgency behind equitable community engagement, beg my utility company to stop raising our energy rates, but really, I can't help but think about how I would rather just be in my room drawing pictures of big beautiful houses. Does this make me sound selfish?

I never planned on being an activist. I wanted to be an artist, or even an architect, or maybe a chef. But would I have truly been fulfilled in those roles? Would I have wound up calling those exhausting and tiring too? I don't think I'll ever get to find out. But my point here is that *people should not have to work so hard, fight so hard, beg so hard, for basic human rights*. In a perfect world, human rights activists wouldn't exist.

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I think the thing we forget about most as activists is that we're not just fighting for our communities, we're fighting for ourselves, too. We too are a part of our community. We too are energy burdened. We too are struggling to pay our rent. We too are suffering from the job market and dirty drinking water.

If I weren't an activist, I would have more time to spend with friends. They wouldn't refrain from calling me, because they would know I have time to talk. I've lost a lot of friends in this movement. I've dedicated over a decade now to this work, and of course everything comes with sacrifice, but everyone needs friends. I had a friend contact me once and tell me that she doesn't call me because she knows how busy I am. I'll never forget that she said that to me. Activism is lonely. You guilt yourself because there's always something that needs to get done, so you push everything else to the side… and sometimes that means friends, too. I think the thing we forget about most as activists is that we're not just fighting for our communities, we're fighting for ourselves, too. We too are a part of our community. We too are energy burdened. We too are struggling to pay our rent. We too are suffering from the job market and dirty drinking water. We too need a support system.

If I weren't an activist, I'd probably have weekends that were filled with joy. I'd go to festivals, go on weekend trips to visit friends, and just spend time doing things that I love. Activism doesn't bring me joy—at least, not anymore. I feel anxious, exhausted, frustrated, and burned out. This is because activism doesn't have boundaries. The movement doesn't care if it's after five o'clock in the evening, or if it's the weekend, or that you booked a vacation four months ahead. Activists are expected to give our all every day no matter what, because we are fighting for something that means so much to us. I think one might argue that activism lives rent-free in the back of our heads. The work is never done, no matter how simple the ask, even if it's "basic" human rights. Why do we have to fight so hard for human rights? It seems so simple, but it's really not.

If I weren't an activist, I'd probably be a really good cook. I love to cook. It takes the stress away. I'd probably host dinner parties with friends on random Tuesday nights, everything color coded, bringing out my best dinner plates. I'd probably pick my own fresh herbs in my backyard garden, too, and make the most complicated bread dishes from scratch. Even writing about this possibility feels peaceful. But I'm no chef, I am an activist. I pledged to be an activist. No one forced me to do it, but would they still look at me the same if I stopped being an activist? Would they say I gave up on my community, on myself, on the fight for human rights? I'm not sure I could take that sort of criticism.

If I weren't an activist, I'd be healthier. I wouldn't be as stressed, overworked, burned out, or experiencing physical ill health from sitting at a desk all day. It's true: two years ago, I developed a cyst from sitting at my desk for 10 or more hours a day. And that's not to say that people who aren't activists don't endure hardships in life. Activism is definitely not the most labor-intensive pathway, so forgive me if it sounds like I'm being facetious or complaining a lot. It's just that I don't know if I knew what I was getting myself into. I never planned on being an activist. I wanted to be an artist, or even an architect, or maybe a chef. But would I have truly been fulfilled in those roles? Would I have wound up calling those exhausting and tiring too? I don't think I'll ever get to find out. But my point here is that *people should not have to work so hard, fight so hard, beg so hard, for basic human rights*. In a perfect world, human rights activists wouldn't exist.

But the world ain't perfect, and I too still exist.

So, I suppose the question you have for me is, If you wanted to be an artist, and if you wanted to be an architect, or if you wanted to be a chef, then why are you an activist?

Growing up on the west side of Detroit gave me a lot of insight into life. I vividly remember spending my summers outdoors, running up and down the streets of my neighborhood with all the other kids on the block. This was my first exposure to the environment, and I think it is what most contributed to my love for the outdoors. I remember capturing lightning bugs

and playing with pill bugs, aka roly-polies, which we referred to as rollie-pollie-ollies. These outdoor experiences metamorphosed into my love for animals. In fact, I remember watching an old television show, when the Save The Polar Bears commercial came on. This was a commercial well known by us millennials. I would argue that this commercial was my generation's first exposure to the concept of climate change—aside from Al Gore, of course. The commercial taught me two major things: 1. that polar bears were at risk because the ice caps were melting; and 2. that you could adopt a polar bear. I never learned who was behind that commercial strategy, but I've never felt more persuaded in my life. This commercial inspired my whole life's trajectory.

I thought to myself, How can I stick up for the parts of our earth that can't stick up for themselves? The plants, the trees, the insects, the polar bears. They had no way of communicating with us humans. This was the day that I set out to speak up for the ones who were unheard. Little did I know that my path would shift even further. I would soon come to find out that the same outdoors that brought me so much joy as a little girl—the same outdoors where I played with all the other kids on my block—was actually killing us. We were being exposed to toxic chemicals in the air from our proximity to automotive plants and incinerators. We were consuming water pumped through pipes full of lead. We were surrounded by trash and liquor stores, and robbed of green spaces and farmers markets full of fresh fruit and vegetables. I didn't want to be an activist—my lived experiences made me one.

After discovering these things, I couldn't imagine going on with life as I had been. I just couldn't. It wasn't right, and I had learned too much. Who else was going to do it, and who was I to sit on information like this? I felt a sense of responsibility to myself, my family, my community, and the generations to come.

I could have been an artist, I could have been an architect, I could have hosted dinner parties on Tuesday nights or even become a chef—but I became an activist.

DIAMOND SPRATLING-MCGINLEY, MPH, is an acclaimed environmental health and justice activist, storyteller, and international public speaker. In 2019, Spratling-McGinley founded Girl Plus Environment, a national nonprofit dedicated to empowering Black and Brown women and nonbinary individuals to champion climate and environmental justice within their communities. Spratling-McGinley's leadership is deeply rooted in her personal experiences growing up in Detroit, which have propelled her mission to dismantle health, racial, and environmental inequities in communities of color. She serves on the City of Atlanta Clean Energy's advisory board, and in 2024 was a Tom's of Maine Incubator awardee, an NRDC E2 1Hotels fellow, and an Aspen Institute Future Leader Climate Fellow.

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