

In Oregon and U.S., green groups are mostly white

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SUMMARY: Ethnicity | Environmental leadership across the nation has little diversity, which two Portlanders work to change

In the mainstream green movement, being any color but white can be a little lonely.

Take it from Marcelo Bonta, who's half Filipino. He got a job with the Portland office of a wildlife nonprofit, then began going to national environmental conferences.

"I'd see only one or two or three people of color out of 100 to 200 people in the room," he says. "I felt like I'd stepped back a few decades, if not more, in terms of race and ethnicity."

Despite decades of hand-wringing by the typically liberal organizations, more than one-third of mainstream green groups and one-fifth of green government agencies in the United States don't have a single nonwhite person on their staff, according to a 2004-06 University of Michigan survey.

And about 90 percent of the staff and board members for groups belonging to the Natural Resources Council of America are white, according to a 2002 survey for the group.

Oregon is no exception. The 115 staff members for the Oregon League of Conservation Voters, Oregon Environmental Council, Ecotrust, Oregon Wild and the Audubon Society of Portland include two Latinos, two Asian Americans, one Native American and no African Americans, their leaders say.

Ecotrust has two Native Americans on its board. Of the 56 board members for the four other groups, 55 are white and one is Asian American.

Bonta, 34, now a Portland-based green consultant, is teaming with Charles Jordan, 70, a former Portland city commissioner and parks director, to help mainstream green groups walk their progressive talk.

The two co-wrote the keystone chapter for a just-released Yale School of Forestry book on diversifying the green movement. Bonta advises environmental groups on how to diversify, and he started a center for diversity and a group for young environmental professionals of color in Portland. Jordan, the first African American board chairman of a national group, The Conservation Fund, has emphasized the importance of green diversity for years.

The clubbiness of mainstream environmental groups threatens to leave out the fastest-growing portion of the population. That limits outreach to nonwhites and contributes to a segregated green movement, with more minorities heading to grass-roots environmental justice groups.

It also helps opponents cast the powerful mainstream groups and their causes as elitist, even though surveys indicate that nonwhites care about environmental issues at least as much as whites.

Monoculture

With one-third of the United States nonwhite, the monoculture in the mainstream green movement "is obvious to anybody involved," Bonta says.

Environmentalists haven't ignored the problem. In the 1990s, after being berated by civil rights leaders, the Sierra Club and others tuned in to environmental justice issues, such as inner-city asthma and pollution in poor neighborhoods.

In Oregon, leaders of environmental groups say they want more racial diversity. Many are building relationships in minority communities and tweaking recruiting practices.

That's true for Meryl Redisch, director of the Audubon Society of Portland. But the group's 15-member board remains all white, and it has one nonwhite, an Asian American, out of 22 staff members.

"We could do better," she said. "We are so not there."

Part of the challenge is the lack of diversity in Portland and Oregon --with 26 percent nonwhites and Hispanics in the city and 19 percent statewide in a 2006 Census Bureau survey. But the numbers among the environmental groups and agencies are considerably lower than the population at large.

One example: At last count, Portland's Office of Sustainable Development had no minorities among 17 community relations positions, though a city analysis indicated that minorities made up nearly 20 percent of the qualified job pool.

Elitist beginnings

The environmental movement began with an elitist tinge, says Matthew Klinge, an environmental historian at Bowdoin College in Maine. At the beginning of the 20th century, its leaders were white and its interests were protecting wildlife and wilderness from the masses.

Bonta and Jordan say the most common explanation for the continuing lack of diversity has been that minorities care less about the environment than whites. They're poorer, the theory goes, and have more concrete things to worry about.

But hang on. Surveys indicate that nonwhites care at least as much as whites about environmental issues, including climate change, preservation of open space and tropical deforestation.

African Americans interviewed for a 2002 Detroit area survey were more likely than whites to see the loss of natural places as "very serious," University of Michigan researcher Paul Mohai found. Ditto air pollution, pesticides in food and the loss of rain forests.

Nationwide, those patterns held true, according to Mohai's analysis of the University of Chicago's social surveys. By 2000, larger percentages of African Americans than whites surveyed viewed the greenhouse effect and air pollution from cars and industry as "very" or "extremely" dangerous.

Latino numbers are harder to find. But a 2004 opinion poll of likely voters found Latinos more likely to support a \$50 annual tax to buy open lands, and two-thirds said they considered themselves environmentalists. Exit polls for Los Angeles-area environmental measures found similar results.

Dorceta Taylor, a University of Michigan professor, recently surveyed college students in the science and engineering pipeline. Nonwhite students are as willing as whites to work for the lower pay of the nonprofit groups, she says.

"Students of color are in the majors, they're getting advanced degrees, and they don't want too much money," Taylor says. "So something else must be going on."

Many nonwhites choose to work for environmental justice groups over mainstream groups. Bonta says the explanation lies partly in the homogenous culture of the mainstream green movement.

The groupthink extends beyond race. Environmental groups, long focused on regulations and lawsuits, often have a wonky orientation, Bonta says, valuing PowerPoint presentations over conversations.

Taylor's research also indicates that minority candidates are much more likely than whites to value multicultural workplaces. Leaders need to go beyond just recruiting nonwhites and set aside time to openly discuss racial issues, Bonta says, from comments seen as racist to good-old-boy hiring practices to concerns about plum assignments going to whites.

"A lot of people of color are tired of the pressure of always being the educator and checking someone," he says.

Push for diversity

Three of the Portland Office of Sustainable Development's past five hires have been nonwhite, bringing its unofficial totals to six nonwhites out of 43 employees. In part that's because of a leadership push for racial and economic diversity.

"We don't want to be a bunch of greenies all just talking to each other," director Susan Anderson says. "We need real people."

The city's human resources office requires a formal hiring process and bird-dogs bureau diversity numbers. Taylor's surveys indicate that most green groups rely on informal personal networks and word of mouth --a problem because people tend to refer candidates of their own race and class.

Late last year, the Oregon Environmental Council brought on Lily Guajardo, a 25-year-old biology graduate from Texas, an AmeriCorps member and the organization's second nonwhite worker.

Environmental groups need to realize that the messenger matters, Guajardo says. "For the Hispanic community, the information will be more trusted if it comes from someone of their background."

The messenger is important for African Americans, too, says Jordan. In 1992, Jordan warned about the mainstream environmental

movement's "increasing isolation from the grass roots."

Now, Jordan says, mainstream groups are improving, and concern about global warming is spreading among all races.

"Once society sees this is really going to be color-coordinated, I think we're going to perform miracles," he says.

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