

Environmentalism's Racist Undertones



With February's release of the Green New Deal (GND), an ambitious plan to address climate change and transform the American economy, environmental organizations have overwhelmingly offered their endorsement. The GND proposes investing in clean-energy jobs and infrastructure to decarbonize the economy and make it more equitable (Roberts n.p.). Because of its immense potential and supporter enthusiasm, GND exhibits a progressivism that has only recently emerged in the modern environmental movement.

It wasn't so long ago that environmentalism was led by wealthy, white members of American society. These early environmentalists sought to protect the planet, but did so at the cost of the nonwhite individuals living and relying on this land. While this is still mostly the case, this mentality is slowly starting to change. Within the past few decades, the connection between race and environmental degradation has entered the mainstream conversations and consciousness of the modern environmental movement. Understanding environmentalism's racist past is essential in moving forward with fair policies and creating more inclusive environmental movements.

But before we take a look at environmentalism's troubling past, we must first understand how it began.

How did environmentalism begin?

Like many movements, environmental awareness began with the long-overlooked recognition of a problem. In this case, that problem was deforestation, a phenomenon documented by empirical knowledge about the world's size and the observation that humans could actually change the natural world on a global scale (Grove 50). The introduction of a capitalist economy spurred resource exploitation, which produced significant environmental destruction by promoting colonialism and maritime trading companies like the British East India Company (Grove 50). As early as the 1670s, the detrimental impact of the European trading companies in the Caribbean, the East Indies, and India was obvious as island colonies began suffering from soil erosion, dust storms, the disappearance of plant and animal species, and the drying up of perennial streams (Grove 50).

As these developments began stifling island survival, they raised questions regarding sustainability and encouraged measures to limit resource consumption to sustain their populations. One such measure was the Tobago ordinance. Passed in 1764, the Tobago ordinance acknowledged the need for profit restriction to sustain the environment for the long term by designating a protected forest on the mountainous part of Tobago, a forest that still exists today in its original boundaries (Grove 51-52). While this ordinance was merely one form of early environmental legislation, it marked a shifting attitude toward preservation that was slowly gaining support.

The industrial revolution in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth century served to further emphasize the need for environmental protection, but failed to yield a truly global response. It wasn't until the publication of Rachel Carson's seminal work *Silent Spring*, a documentation of the adverse effects of pesticides and the disinformation facilitated by the chemical industry, that the modern environmental movement reached a transnational audience. With global attention, environmentalism expanded but still remained limiting, especially for nonwhite individuals.

How was environmentalism associated with racism?

As previously noted, large-scale environmental destruction took off with globalization and colonialism. However, as environmental degradation began to reduce potential profits and negatively impact returns on global colonies, laws began to emerge as early as the seventeenth century that acknowledged the potential for humans to drastically change the natural landscape of the environment. Yet, it wasn't until the early twentieth century, that these laws began to gain traction and spur the modern environmental movement.

In the United States, environmentally-related laws largely focused on the preservation of land and were led by white males. Early environmental pioneers sought to promote the preservation of the environment and a rugged masculinity that they felt was being lost to urbanization. Nature was romanticized by these early environmentalists along with the desire to return to the beauty and solitude of wilderness. However, these idealized sentiments tended to overlook the indigenous populations living in these landscapes.

Despite being praised for their environmental activism, advocates like Gifford Pinchot, John Muir, and Henry David Thoreau held environmental views with ominous implications for nonwhite individuals. For instance, the conservation pioneer Gifford Pinchot was a delegate to the International Eugenics Congress and a member of the advisory council of the American Eugenics Society, an “unsettlingly short step” from the management of the human gene pool (Purdy, n.p.).

Likewise, despite advocating for the preservation of wild spaces for plants and animals, Muir, an early leader of the Sierra Club, expressed ambivalence towards the indigenous populations living on these preserved lands (Purdys n.p.). Muir seemed more keen to help nonhuman species over nonwhite groups of people. Thoreau held a similar opinion and sought to escape non-white immigration to cities, viewing it as “unnatural” and threatening” (Krumrey 27). These environmentalists were motivated by a desire to preserve lands specifically for their use and gratification, but at the exclusion of nonwhite individuals in society.

How can environmentalism be racist? I thought it was beneficial for everyone?

In recent decades, researchers have concretely shown the connection between the environment and racism through the concept of environmental racism, which asserts nonwhites are disproportionately impacted by negative environmental effects, such as pollution. This term first appeared in the 1980s from the work of Robert Bullard, a researcher who found that in Houston, Texas, black neighborhoods had become the “dumping ground” for the area’s solid waste (Bullard 273).

A decade later, a study found that in Los Angeles County, two of the most polluted communities, Torrance and East Los Angeles/Vernon were negatively racialized, resulting in the pollution of these neighborhoods (Pulido et al. 419). Both areas in this study had a concentrated Latino population at the time. While Torrance’s early development among its Latino population was met with a deliberate set of racist practices by city planners to control a racialized division of labor, East Los Angeles/Vernon’s minority population developed slightly less insidiously but was heavily dependent on the industries in the area for work (Pulido et al. 419). Though differing in their labor histories, both communities faced similarly negative health impacts from air pollution. The study found that these communities experienced 10% and 12% respectively of the total county emissions, providing concrete proof and data of the environmental racism that inhabitants of these communities had been experiencing for decades (Pulido et al. 426).

Sadly, environmental racism is increasingly prevalent today. The water crisis in Flint, Michigan is one of many recent examples. In the case of Flint, health concerns arose after the city switched its water supply from Lake Huron to the Flint River. Because the river was untreated with anti-corrosion chemicals, lead was being released into the water and poisoning residents. A study by a local pediatrician found that Flint children had elevated blood lead levels that were three times higher than before their water source was diverted (Campbell et al. 2). The city’s slow response further exacerbated conditions. For over 20 months, residents were exposed to water contamination and lead (Campbell et al. 1). An article from *The New York Times* analyzed emails sent from Governor Rick Snyder’s office and similarly evoked the term environmental racism to describe the situation in Flint because Flint has high levels of poverty and a predominantly African American community (Eligon, n.p.). Cases like the waste pollution in Houston, the air pollution in Los Angeles County and the water pollution in Flint highlight the need to include race in issues of environmentalism, particularly with environmental health.

How did environmentalism become attached to wealth?

Wealth also plays a significant role in environmentalism. In more recent years, environmentalism has shifted to accommodate and prioritize the wealthy. Beaches, coastal lakes, and other resources formerly open to public use have been privately taken by national and transnational elites under the justification of conservation (Ávila-García and Sánchez 51). While ecotourism, a form of tourism directed toward visitation of pristine and relatively undisturbed natural areas on a lower-impact and smaller scale than commercial mass tourism, has emerged as a more equitable form of environmental exploration, it has been misused by high-end tourism. The rise of high-end tourism reminiscent of ecotourism has resulted in disputes between elites and local stakeholders over control of resources (Ávila-García and Sánchez 55). For instance, with the privatization of the Jalisco coast in Mexico by both national and transnational business elites for ecotourism, local inhabitants and land owners have been displaced in their own communities (Ávila-García and Sánchez 61).

Additionally, the environmental activities suggested today like changing household items (high-efficiency appliances and fluorescent light bulbs) and food (buying organic and local) may not be

universally accessible because of financial or cultural reasons (Gibson-Wood and Wakefield 644). Rigidly defining what constitutes as “pro-environment” behavior limits the conception of what it means to be an environmentalist.

The environmental movement also has a tendency to separate “environmental” and “social” issues, which are integrally connected. Moving beyond these typically western categorical distinctions allows greater opportunities for involvement and collaboration in the environmental movement. Over the past few decades, environmental activists have struggled to represent the urgency of their mission to a larger audience, intersectionality is the key.

Why should we care about race in environmentalism?

Environmentalism isn't simply about preserving the environment and saving the bees. It also involves giving a voice to the populations most vulnerable to the negative impacts of pollution, deforestation, and other environmental disasters. These populations are often the first people impacted by negative environmental effects and possess the fewest resources. Environmentalism is no longer just about protecting the land. It entails protecting the people on that land—all people, regardless of race, class, or gender.

The power of the environmental movement of today lies in its growing intersectionality and definition of what it means to be an environmentalist. In addition to the emergence of environmental racism, ecofeminism is another example of the expanding influence of intersectionality. The idea of ecofeminism emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s and combines ecological and feminist concerns (“Feminist Environmental Philosophy” n.p.). It led to connections between diverse issues including social injustices based on race, sexuality, gender, and class with ecological interconnectedness, the domestic violence and abuse of nature, the control of women's bodies, and the ‘control of nature’ (Di Chiro 282). Similar to environmental racism, ecofeminism connects environmentalism to the feminist movement, which expands the cause, audience, and supporter-base of the movement.

As environmentalism has grown, it has started to move beyond the traditional notions of environmentalism towards a larger idea of environmental justice, a movement that seeks to incorporate racial equity into environmental decision making processes. Environmental justice redefines and expands the past mindset of environmentalism by shifting the focus from preservation of habitats to a strategy that incorporates the environmental health and quality of the homes of impacted residents. Looking at the intersections of problems of racial, gender, and economic injustices allow for the creation of collective solutions with equitable outcomes (Malin and Ryder 1). These issues do not exist in a vacuum. They are interconnected and require solutions that understand these linkages.

Where do we go from here?

Acknowledging the intersections between environmental and social issues like race is the first major step towards creating a stronger and more inclusive environmental movement. Recognition and understanding of the social connections with the environment is needed to find equitable solutions. Next, actions must be taken that incorporate these ideas. In addition to grassroots organizing, top-down legislation needs to be created.

The GND is an exciting prospect for environmentalists as it seeks to not only regulate air and climate pollution, but also recognize tribal sovereignty of natural resources and land as well as protect those most impacted by historical discrimination and the effects of climate change (Roberts, n.p.). While the GND has been criticized as being more of a list of ideas and beliefs rather than a concrete proposal, it reflects an optimism and energy that the modern environmental movement needs. By acknowledging the reality of environmental racism and seeking to incorporate more intersectional ideals into the movement, progress has been made in environmentalism. However, if the movement is to continue growing, it will require tangible and binding legislation to reinforce and enact the change it is seeking. The GND may be a bit idealistic, but it is a promising resolution that reflects an inclusivity and shift in environmentalism that is desperately needed.

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