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# Seizing opportunities to diversify conservation

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## Abstract

This article identifies, and offers several ways to address, a serious, persistent issue in conservation: low levels of diversity in thought and action. We first describe the lack of diversity and highlight the continued separation of the environmental conservation and environmental justice movements. We then offer—based on previous research and our collective experience—two suggestions for how to increase inclusivity (a step farther than increasing diversity) in holistic ways. We suggest that embracing narrative, including historical narrative that can be profound and painful, may be essential to addressing this deeply rooted issue. We also suggest the need to redefine “environment” to more closely align with the diversity of perspectives that different people and disciplines bring to the topic. We support our suggestions with selected data from empirical research and provide examples of initiatives that embody them.

## KEYWORDS

critical race and ethnic studies, environmental justice, environmental movement, ethnicity, equity, historical analysis, narrative, participation, race, representation

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The conservation movement has a problem in addition to the biodiversity “crisis” that undergirds the field (Soule, 1985). Although many of those within the movement see protecting species and land as urgent, and critical to the future of the planet and humankind, not all people share this sense of urgency. The conservation movement needs to address this lack of commonality in concern and purpose; one of the most powerful ways to do so is to address the inclusion of individuals from diverse backgrounds. In many contexts, people and organizations in the conservation movement do not represent the broader population or its concerns, needs, and aspirations (Bullard & Wright, 2009). Exceptions exist, certainly, but their rarity speaks to the need for fundamental shifts.

In the United States, employees of environmental non-governmental organizations and public agencies are predominantly white (Enderle, 2007; Taylor, 2014). Relatedly, minorities are underrepresented in pipeline fields for conservation-related careers (Valdez, 1995). Those phenomena constitute a feedback cycle, responding to and creating sociocultural perceptions of “environmentalists” as white, upper-middle class, politically liberal, and college-educated (Mock, 2014). In an illustration of this cycle, the relative rarity of minorities in conservation-pipeline careers discourages some minorities from entering those careers, which perpetuates and exacerbates underrepresentation, further discouraging entry. Although our examples primarily address ethnicity, the principles apply to scores of other dimensions (e.g., socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, political orientation).

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This lack of diversity is problematic for several reasons. First, it is unethical: environmental action in its current and historical manifestations can be exclusionary, which is particularly inappropriate because communities that are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation are often less included in environmental decision-making. Next, it is illogical: if environmental policies aim to have impact at multiple scales, how can they succeed when a only subset of the population designs most conservation policies? Finally, it is limiting: the movement misses opportunities to leverage valuable perspectives and pertinent experiences of a wider constituency.

Research increasingly demonstrates the importance of diversity: diverse teams enhance creativity and innovation (Milliken, Bartel, & Kurtzberg, 2003). More specifically, different perspectives inform the conceptualization of the human–nature relationship in important ways (Medin & Bang, 2014). Below, we explain our focus for this piece, describe potential causes of the lack of diversity, and suggest several paths toward more inclusive, and ultimately more effective, environmental policymaking.

## 2 | OUR FOCUS

Our discussion, while rooted in U.S. experiences, explores and offers suggestions for conservation globally. We pursue a U.S. focus for two reasons: the country's increasingly ignominious role as an exemplar of racial tension, and its ideological influence and global reach in conservation.

Racial tension still permeates the U.S. context, and the environmental sphere is no exception. The challenge created by this tension can be reframed as an opportunity to explore and address how that tension relates to the environment, with implications for policy changes.

Ideas and practices generated in the U.S. environmental community (e.g., federally protected public lands, water quality regulations) ripple through institutions and practices worldwide (West, 2006). Scholars have explored conservation's colonialist roots for decades (Igoe, 2006); critiques focus on international projects, traditional knowledge (Sutherland, Gardner, Haider, & Dicks, 2014), and, in the United States, Native American issues (Spence, 1999). Those issues can be seen as manifestations of deeper, enduring issues that conservation has been less willing to confront: issues of race and class. Given its role as a conservation thought leader, the United States can provide an example of how to courageously and thoughtfully address these interrelated issues. We focus nominally on conservation, following fairly widespread perceptions that the conservation and environmental movements are closely linked. Diversifying conservation may require a deeper examination of what protecting and stewarding (i.e., conserving) the environment

means to people. To conserve something requires clarity on what one is conserving (Allison, 2007). We connect to this aged discussion in the conservation field to suggest that, to honor diverse spaces (both physical and ideological) and ways of conserving them, we must embrace narrative (i.e., honor historical and current-day experiences of diverse peoples) and consider broader interpretations of “environment.”

## 3 | ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the mainstream conservation movement's homogeneity, great diversity exists among populations who care deeply about environmental issues. This array of environmental concern is evident in academic research (Macias, 2016), public polls (Baldassare, Bonner, Petek, & Shrestha, 2011), and thousands of environmental justice organizations and initiatives (Gottlieb, 2005). The juxtaposition of these phenomena—a paucity of people of color in conservation and mainstream environmental organizations alongside a blossoming of environmental justice-related organizations—reinvigorates an enduring question: why are these movements so separate, and how might we dissolve, or narrow, the divide (Mendoza, 2016)? Although some believe that the movements have different goals and are rightly separate, we, like many others, see the movements as unavoidably linked and believe that considering them jointly will facilitate more powerful results (Gottlieb, 2005).

Recent developments, both scholarly and in practice, address the divide. One common approach, for example, aims to increase access to “natural” areas. This approach assumes that increased access supports development of connection with nature and, subsequently, interest in proenvironmental behavior (e.g., supporting conservation); it also reflects a desire to integrate diverse populations into the existing conservation movement. Examples of this approach include free bus services that alleviate potential transportation barriers to park visitation, mobile trailhead programs that share park-related information in communities where residents might not be aware of local parks, and initiatives that engage cohorts of underrepresented youth in outdoor education and leadership training to diversify the conservation leadership pipeline.

Such efforts can be helpful, even transformative, due to their treatment of physical, political, economic, and educational barriers (Peterson, 2014). We in no way suggest replacing such initiatives, which can be deeply powerful in process and outcome; we do suggest, though, that they might be supplemented by initiatives that further address underlying social, cultural, and historical obstacles. Many of these efforts are built on an assumption of some level of homogeneity (e.g., shared enjoyment of hiking and camping), which can be linked with perceptions of the outdoors as a place of

upper-class (and mostly white) leisure. This framing may not resonate universally. For an agricultural worker who spends his or her days engaging intimately with nature in the fields, for instance, the environment may be primarily associated with work, as a place of production that requires intimate knowledge of and relationships with plants, pests, and climate. For a variety of reasons, this person may not wish to spend nonwork hours walking uphill, or even outdoors. Although this person may have other preferences for off-work time, they clearly may have a deeply meaningful connection with nature and passionately desire to protect it.

#### 4 | ADDRESSING OBSTACLES TO INCLUSIVITY: EMBRACE NARRATIVE

Resolving conservation's diversity problems requires addressing its social, cultural, and historical roots. At times, this process may be painful. Numerous initiatives implemented by actors across the globe demonstrate the power of narrative to confront and erode divisive stereotypes. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission offers one highly visible example. This national-scale initiative encouraged confronting past injustices by listening to the stories of those involved, then using deliberation, discussion, and policy to seek reconciliation. Other jurisdictions, including Canada, have followed this model.

One pathway forward may be to embrace and examine narrative related to environmental history. The environmental protection narrative has a problematic past; it is rooted in settler-colonial traditions, which include notions of some cultures dominating others. Conservation historically drew from and created systems of social exclusion (Ray, 2013). The forcible removal of Native Americans (and others) from U.S. National Parklands provides one example (Spence, 1999). The conservation movement, overall, provides additional examples through a storied history of European colonization, masculinity, and intolerance (e.g., John Muir and contemporaries had eugenicist tendencies; Brechin, 1996).

The exclusionary narrative of U.S. environmental politics extended beyond strictly conservation-related policies, to movements intertwined with the environment in complex ways. The rise of Social Darwinism (in the late 1800s) and new understandings of germ theory, for example, led some scientists active during those times to argue for stricter immigration laws and the practice of eugenics, in the name of “public health” or “environmental protection,” two separate but related issues. Stopping germs on immigrants' bodies, they argued, would protect Americans from diseases (Mendoza, 2015; Stern, 1999); a byproduct of this was the preservation of American whiteness. Another harrowing example is particularly relevant to conservation: in the late 1800s, few

judicial repercussions existed for perpetrators of lynching. Although the U.S. government passed antilynching legislation in 1918, the practice continued. This tragic past may have influenced profoundly negative feelings, transgenerationally, among some African Americans toward trees and forested areas, where lynchings most often occurred (Dungy, 2009; Peterson, 2014; White, 1996).

Relatedly, past and current prevalence of hate crimes and profiling has led to some people of color feeling unsafe in some outdoor spaces, places where they may be warily watched, profiled, and potentially harmed (O'Kane, 2016). As a final example, the conservation movement has traditionally deprioritized issues related to human health and toxic-chemical exposure (Gottlieb, 2005)—issues that are, tragically, pervasively, and enduringly, often of greater concern in communities of color (Bullard, Mohai, Saha, & Wright, 2008).

In short, the practice of preserving and protecting nature, and its relation to the dominant, white American national identity, has often created and reified social hierarchies. This has frequently disenfranchised people of color, thereby discounting their many different perspectives on the nonhuman world (Ray, 2013). The perceived resistance of people of color to participate in the conservation movement may relate to historical trauma: the idea that generations of individuals from a particular background continue to be affected by past trauma (Eyerman, 2001; Nascimento, 2013). Embracing marginalized narratives related to these pasts is vital. Understanding past injustices suggests that addressing those deep-seated issues requires not just metaphorically opening doors, but also making fundamental changes.

Emerging research, including our own, indicates that a strategy of increasing outdoor access for marginalized groups and recruiting people of color into mainstream environmental organizations can assume alignment with a dominant U.S. environmental narrative. Those in power have shaped that narrative, imposing a particular concept of environment (Tuck, McKenzie, & McCoy, 2014). The aforementioned strategies address primarily physical components of access and inclusion. They may be most successful when they also address historical, nuanced, and often sensitive sociocultural considerations that may underlie the perceived lack of engagement among minority populations.

Engaging with historical narrative to understand diverse environmental experiences and relationships (Ladson-Billings, 1998) may help address these issues holistically. The national-scale, narrative-based conversations described above are constructive, albeit painful, ways to address historical trauma. At a site-specific scale, the U.S. National Park Service embraces narrative in multiple ways: working with Native communities to memorialize places of violence and loss (e.g., the Colorado site of the Sand Creek Massacre); creating sites to recognize historical injustice (e.g., Birmingham

**TABLE 1** Defining environment in many ways

Source	Conceptualization of “environment”
<i>Fields of study</i>	
Environmental health	“...all the external (or non genetic) factors—physical, nutritional, social, behavioral, and others—that act on humans.” (Frumkin, 2016, p. 4)
Environmental history	The changing relationship between people and nature. Environmental history looks at how people have lived in the natural systems of the planet and changed them to suit their own ideas of what will bring them a good life. Then, it looks at how nature, once changed, requires people to reshape their cultures, economies, and politics to meet new realities. (Warren, 2003)
Environmental education	“... a rapidly changing world. [Environmental education] should prepare the individual for life through an understanding of the major problems of the contemporary world .... It ... acknowledges the fact that natural environment and man-made environment are profoundly interdependent. It helps reveal the enduring continuity which links the acts of today to the consequences for tomorrow. It demonstrates the interdependencies among national communities and the need for solidarity among all mankind.” (UNESCO, 1977)
Ecosystem services	The nexus of ecosystems and human well-being. If implemented with attention to justice and representation, this framework makes space for diverse conceptualizations of environment. (Marshall & Gonzalez-Meler, 2016)
<i>Legislation</i>	
National Environmental Education Act (1990; U.S. Federal Legislation)	Attention to diverse experiences of environment; calls for “programs and curriculum to meet the needs of diverse ethnic and cultural groups.”
<i>Types of organization</i>	
Urban biking programs	Infrastructure and social context that impact desire to bike and feasibility of biking
Urban community gardening initiatives	Equitable food systems; systems of food provision and options for nutritious food that is connected to place
Air quality monitoring through citizen science	The chemical composition of air (i.e., air quality) and the structures and practices that contribute to it.

Note: These examples demonstrate the varied ways in which different fields and initiatives conceptualize “environment,” focusing on those with which the authors have experience. For the fields of study and legislation, we provide specific citations; for the organizations, we leave descriptions general as each category encompasses multiple organizations. These are provided as examples; more exist (Frumkin, 2016; Marshall & Gonzalez-Meler, 2016; UNESCO, U., 1977; Warren, 2003).

Civil Rights National Monument); and highlighting marginalized narratives (e.g., Yosemite ranger Shelton Johnson's historical reenactment of the park's Buffalo soldiers (Johnson, 2010)). Although such conversations are often challenging, they create space for diverse peoples to acknowledge their experiences (Kelman, 2013). The Doris Duke Conservation Scholars’ “Conservation Stories” offer another model: student fellows from various backgrounds share their stories, including perspectives on conservation, using online platforms (see <https://vimeo.com/channels/ddcsp2015>; Rowell & Kumanyika, 2016). These examples demonstrate how a handful of institutions have approached division and discord in ways that may be of value to community members and policymakers alike.

## 5 | BROADENING THE MEANING OF “ENVIRONMENT”

Our second suggestion is to consider multiple meanings of “environment.” Exploring what environment means to different people is a logical place to start, as environmen-

tal, and specifically conservation, movements increasingly embrace bottom-up, community-minded action. This entails being open to historical context as well as multiple meanings of environment. Drawing on others’ work, we suggest that definitions of environment recognize the interwoven complexity of interaction between people, place, and the nonhuman world (Kassam, 2009).

Despite studies indicating a range of value perspectives among conservation professionals (Berry et al., 2016; Sandbrook, Scales, Vira, & Adams, 2010), most findings follow a somewhat dichotomized spectrum of anthropocentrism versus ecocentrism (Tallis & Lubchenco, 2014). We argue that the needed diversity of perspectives is instead multidimensional. Today's world is seeped in multifaceted human perspectives and identities; conservation must respond to that kaleidoscope. The many forms of diversity include, but are not limited to, socioeconomic status; gender; race and ethnicity; worldview; and, for researchers, epistemological orientation. Recognizing that different people, based on their identities and experiences, may construct different definitions of environment is a critical step toward deep listening (Hurley, 1993), which is a crucial component embracing narrative.



Some “environmental people” are looking for “an easy solution about why we’re having a hard time making low-income and people of color feel included, or why there’s this huge divide, when we talk about sustainable communities. ... The solution is probably something that no one really wants to deal with because it’s kind of messy. Because that’s when we have to unpack all of this baggage around class disparity, racism, access to education, economic disparities, just things that, for example, at an [environmental] conference nobody really wanted to talk about ... When you think about all of these underlying issues that have been fracturing our communities for generations, throughout the history of the United States, that’s why people of color aren’t [engaged].”

**FIGURE 1** This interview comment from a San Francisco Bay Area environmental leader draws on years of personal and professional experience and study. It emphasizes the importance of dealing with and honoring complex layers of power and privilege, both historically and in the present

Acknowledging and comprehending historical trauma is just as important as recognizing that many communities—in both industrialized and nonindustrialized countries—may engage with nature in ways that do not resemble dominant (European-American, capitalist) notions of preservation, conservation, and leisure time (Taylor, 2016; Tuck et al. 2014). In many of these communities, this engagement is intertwined with centuries-old cultural practices, and can include spiritual relationships to landscape, working the land, and taking pride in one's outdoor labor (McGregor, 2007). Expanded definitions of environment should encompass these (and other) forms of engagement.

Varied definitions of environment are evident in our San Francisco Bay Area (USA) research (Ardoin, Gould, Kelsey, & Fielding-Singh, 2015). In focus groups among culturally and socioeconomically diverse populations (14 groups, >140 participants), we received varied responses to the prompt, “Describe what environment means to you.” Participants in nearly all groups mentioned that “environment” can, in practice, mean two different things: “nature” or “your surroundings.” Many participants indicated that there is “nature,” as in “plants, animals,” and then there is the environment: “what you are doing every day, [what] you see, you touch,” “the things that are around you.”

In some groups, participants collapsed the dual definition, discussing “environment” as seamlessly including human and nonhuman components. This holistic view was more common in, although not exclusive to, lower-income, traditionally marginalized, non-white communities. “Environment to me,” said a participant in one such community, “could be something green and lush to something that’s grey and black and brown and city brick. I think that is beautiful because it’s just a cityscape and that’s needed, too. I know, it’s a deep question, ‘environment.’” In one community, participants discussed environment as including a nearby estuary, a recently gentrified downtown area, and the border between the participants’ lower-income community and an adjacent higher-income community. In another group, participants discussed

the environment as including small urban parks, litter on city streets, and discrimination on public transportation.

In situations where participants focused more on human aspects of environment, some described the environment as related to social surroundings (e.g., a street seen as dividing wealth and poverty). Others described the environment as a dynamic concept dependent on actions. Some spoke about how gentrification entrenches physical boundaries. Others spoke about how individuals define and change their environment, as in: “I do something different everyday ... One day my nephew may be here. The next day my cousins will be over. Or one day I’ll go running, and one day I’ll go walking...your environment, it changes [depending] on what you do on a daily basis.”

A theme emerged: Many people define “environment” by where and how they spend their time; in this conceptualization, environment is fluid, dynamic, socially constructed, and mediated by lived experiences. All these definitions exemplify a narrow, permeable line of division between the environment and self—air and the person breathing it are so closely tied, for instance, that they can hardly be separated. This core commonality is often lost when we define “environment” as solely the nonhuman world, emphasizing “wild nature” or the environment “out there” (Haluza-Delay, 2001). This issue addresses a fundamental aspect of our argument: we see that an important way forward for conservation is to recognize and incorporate every day, lived-experience aspects of environment. These varying definitions reflect the multifaceted, dynamic ways that people interact with place and the nonhuman world.

Numerous initiatives and institutions reflect diverse definitions of environment. These entities include fields of study, environmental legislation, and NGOs that conceptualize and codify environment in various ways (Table 1). At the core of defining “environment” are simple, essential questions: Who is defining environment, in what ways, and for what purposes? Moving forward, the answers should involve public engagement from diverse groups and communities.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Working toward a more inclusive environmental movement may be difficult and, at times, painful. But embracing diverse narratives and conceptualizations is critical for understanding why certain practices, approaches, and actions may be more appealing to some individuals and communities than others (Figure 1). Although we have largely focused on the United States, the story seems much the same in Europe and many less-developed countries, where unrepresentative cohorts often guide conservation policy. (Although we are unaware of comparable data from other countries, acquiring such data could be illuminating.)

We argue that a primary reason underlying the homogeneity of participants and leaders in conservation is that mainstream constructions of environment historically have been bound up in intersectional tensions among race, class, gender, and power (Taylor, 2016). A narrow definition of environment aligns with a worldview that compartmentalizes issues; this is an increasingly unrealistic and unhelpful perspective (Lewontin & Levins, 2007). Recently, multiple theories exploring unity and connectedness, such as integrated social-ecological systems, systems thinking more generally, and “one health,” have emerged (CDC, 2013; Folke, Hahn, Olsson, & Norberg, 2005). Such perspectives emphasize inextricable links among human, nonhuman, and ecosystem elements.

We suggest that holistic approaches, and the broadening of definitions they entail, are critical to engaging a wider range of actors in the movement. Although we advocate for expanding actions that reflect those approaches, we also know that they are not immediate solutions; institutional and other structural characteristics play enormous roles in perpetuating unequal participation in decision-making. We offer two suggestions for conservation professionals wishing to address diversity-related issues:

1. Unearth and respect diverse lived experience. Create space for sharing complex narratives and definitions of the environment and environmental issues. Be creative: Stories can be told, recorded, and disseminated via a variety of media, including film, audio, prose, poetry, physical artwork, and live performance.
2. Facilitate reconciliation: Develop mutually respectful, constructive ways to respond to narrative. Pay particular attention to ways that help reconcile emotion and historical trauma.

Today's environmental challenges are immensely complex and permeate all aspects of life. We see promise in a future that emphasizes that definitions of environment are as diverse as the people who create and use those definitions. Honoring the interdependencies and validity of different definitions, guided by historical context and narrative, may help advance a more effective conservation movement. We suggest ways to change

course for the better, while welcoming that others with different backgrounds and perspectives will suggest additional approaches. We look forward to further discussion of both specific practices for moving forward, and, crucially, who is involved in making these changes.

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