

Bitesized Belonging: What does environmental sustainability have to do with DEIB?

The first time someone told me that environmental sustainability was more than a cousin to DEIB but a necessary and vital intersectional pillar, I'll admit I was confused. I've always supported conservation and sustainability efforts but I've never seen them as connected to the social and identity based work of DEIB. That was, until someone explained the "Three E's" of sustainability: equity, environment, and economy.

In years past, many of the proffered solutions for sustainability have posed key issues for different communities because they're often created in a silo. That's to say, a homogenous population of scientists often creates the solutions and then find themselves surprised when those solutions fail because they didn't take into account socioeconomic and cultural factors. That's not even mentioning how prohibitive financially certain sustainability efforts can be currently.

It wasn't until I started digging into the "equity" of environmental sustainability that I was stunned to learn that "BIPOC and low-socioeconomic status communities are disproportionately impacted by climate change and environmental harm" and that "environmentalism...has a history of exclusion and racism which needs to be intentionally dismantled".

Focusing a moment on how BIPOC and low-socioeconomic status communities are disproportionately impacted by climate change, let me draw your attention to some startling statistics:

Households where People of Color reside breathe in more pollution than they cause. Black Americans and Latinos breathe in 56% and 63%, respectively, more pollution than they cause, while white Americans breathe 17% percent less air pollution than they cause.

A 2022 report from the National Institute of Health's National Library of Medicine stated that "multiple studies of heat, extreme cold, hurricanes, flooding, and wildfires as evidence that people of color...were at a higher risk of climate-related health impacts than Whites" that included "evidence of racial disparities related to climate changes with respect to mortality, respiratory and cardiovascular disease, mental health, and heat-related illness."

Less than 2% of all environmental and climate change funding goes to environmental justice and BIPOC-led organizations.

Due to uneven distribution patterns, BIPOC and low income communities have far less access to green spaces—which improve the physical, social, and economic well-being of a community through exercise, socialization, and organization—than white, affluent communities, and limited resources to maintain the spaces they do have.

Understanding the impacts of climate change and environmental sustainability is crucial to all people, but especially to historically resilient and underrepresented communities. As we move into Earth Day on April 22nd, take this time to reassess areas where you can

improve your and/or your-household's sustainability efforts.

Resources:

- <https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/news/bipoc-environmental-justice-leaders-call-for-more-resources-agency#:~:text=People%20of%20color%20households%20breathe,air%20pollution%20than%20they%20cause.%E2%80%9D>
- <https://www.sustain.ucla.edu/equity-diversity-and-inclusion-in-sustainability/>
- <https://greenly.earth/en-us/blog/greenly/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-dei-why-environment-matters-too>
- <https://css.umich.edu/publications/factsheets/sustainability-indicators/environmental-justice-factsheet>