Speaking as White: learning about equity in conservation practice

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Abstract
I have seen a lot of changes during more than 30 years as a public servant managing natural resources, but our field continues to lack racial and ethnic diversity. My past work has become impotent, spurring me to learn more about this persistent deficit and work to change it. This is a personal journey, but themes and tools gleaned from experts may help all of us in this important work. Part of a broader understanding of history and part in moving outside our comfort zones to actively disrupt institutionalized racism. In order to create welcoming environments and foster candid conversations, it is incumbent on White to become more literate in the history and systems that support inequity. I will discuss how institutionalized racism creates skepticism and suspicion of conservation in the U.S., ways to change our habits and welcome equity into our work, and roles and responsibilities of White people in this effort. It is critical for White people to educate ourselves and to not expect help from people of color. As beneficiaries of the status quo, it is our job to disrupt it. As a shrinking majority that will be outnumbered by people of color in the next 20 years, our legacy is tied to our ability to diversify our ranks and avoid the mistakes of the past. Useful strategies in advancing equity include seeking out voices of color and accessing available opportunities for training. A few of the many resources are provided.

Introduction
First, let me identify myself. I am:
• White, female, cis, well-educated.
• Born and raised in Oregon in the middle class where everyone looked like me.
• One of 3 women that graduated in my class in Fisheries at OSU in the mid-70s.
• A feminist, bleeding heart liberal.
• A scientist and Quaker.

I am proud of the work accomplished by the people in my field to:
• Protect nature.
• Stop extinctions.
• Prevent over-harvest of resources.
• Restore habitats.

Despite increasing racial diversity in the United States, the racial composition in environmental organizations and agencies has not broken the 12% to 16% “green ceiling” that has been in place for decades. (Taylor, 2014)

Why do diversity, equity and inclusion matter?
It’s good business: if we don’t change, our work won’t survive.

We are missing out: The lack of diversity in our ranks means we are missing out on talent. We have not been effective in recruiting people with different backgrounds and perspectives into our work.

Our demographics are changing: How will we respond to a majority non-white population if we remain majority White? We need trust as well as talent. We need effective communication. We need more than white people.

We take the long view: We are in this to work to ensure these natural resources persist after we are long gone. We need to adapt to changing times and changing needs.

The changing face of America, 1965-2065

Why would conservation and public land mean something else to people that are under-represented in our field?
The 1872 declaration establishing Yellowstone, our first national park, said the land “…is hereby reserved and withdrawn from settlement, occupancy, or sale under the laws of the United States, and dedicated and set apart as a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.”

Indigenous people understood this meant White people, not them. Today, the National Park Service lists 266 sites historically associated with Yellowstone. They were all forced off their land and ways of life with this declaration. This process was repeated across the country as early conservation leaders dismissed indigenous people as lesser humans and even sought their extermination.

Of course, racism resulted in segregation within parks too. Not everyone enjoyed the same access and amenities. And during World War II, public lands were used for internment camps for Japanese-Americans.

That was then – what about now?
• The current state of racial diversity in environmental organizations is troubling, and lags far behind gender diversity.
• Cross-race and cross-class collaborations are still uncommon in environmental organizations.
• Environmental jobs are still being advertised and environmental organizations recruit new employees in ways that introduce unconscious biases and facilitate the replication of the current workforce.
• Environmental organizations do not use the internship pipeline effectively to find ethic minority workers.
• Environmental organizations say that the biggest barriers to hiring minorities in their organizations are few job openings and lack of minority applicants.

(Taylor, 2014)

How do we disrupt these systems?
We need to look beyond our own experience.

• View our work through an equity lens.
• Diversify the pipeline – recruit from new and different sources of candidates.
• Change how you recruit and evaluate applicants. When considering the amount of experience needed for a job, consider who had the opportunity to get that experience. Consider whether, and how, life experience can substitute for formal education.
• Support people of color in your organization: provide them with opportunities for professional development, training and promotion.
• Recognize that nature “out there” may be a unique perspective to white America.
• Support and encourage ethnic-led grass-roots initiatives.
• Be mindful that issues like pollution and climate change have disproportionate effects on communities of color and low income communities.

What are our responsibilities in this work?
Teach ourselves.

Don’t expect people of color to explain things or “solve” equity at your organization or be the “POC-whisperer”.

Be an active disrupter: participate, take action, speak up.

Empower people of color to be leaders, to create policies and set agendas.

Equity work is, at its core, an “inside job”. We need to work within ourselves.

This work can be hard. We will need to overcome:
• Feeling overwhelmed.
• Our attachment to our current ways of working.
• Continuing interactions with those who have not done their equity work.
• Strong feelings and conflicts – internal and external – that are natural responses in open communication.

This is not a zero-sum game. Although racism is a problem created by white people and it’s up to white people to help change racist systems, white people don’t have to lose. Through early efforts at meaningful inclusion of non-white and immigrant communities in Metro’s work, I am learning that we are natural allies in conservation work and they already have close connections to nature. By diversifying our workforce, partnerships and contractors, we ensure the long-term success of our work.

References