

Statement on systemic and pervasive racism within the environmental field

People of African descent in Africa, the US and Europe are undermined by white supremacy within the environmental field.

The world is currently grappling with two pandemics, one has recently emerged – the other has raged for centuries. As we ascertain the damage of coronavirus to our health and economies, we are also reeling at the reality of racism and social injustice which is killing Black people and sabotaging our potential. This has called for honest conversations and action to dismantle systemic racism, not just in America but across the world.

As a collective of Black environmental leaders we are demanding an end to the casual acceptance of white supremacy within the environmental field. Systemic racism exists within the interplay of the attitudes of environmental organisations and their staff, within the negative narratives and messaging about Black people and our relationship with nature, within the imposition of conservation models, in the disregard for our knowledge systems, within disparities in access and rights to land, within nature related health disparities and environmental justice, within a lack of access to funding which impedes our voices being heard and methods being implemented, and within exploitative partnerships which serve to tick boxes and manage a continued dominance.

There needs to be acknowledgment of the historical and current injustices within the environmental field, which are rooted in a history of eugenics and white supremacy, that has deliberately and systematically excluded Black people from nature and the environmental field; leading in some instances to the greater harm of disenfranchisement from nature and a loss of knowledge and relationship with the natural world.

Ending and repairing the damage of racism within the environmental field will involve removal of structures and systems which allow a gate to be kept exclusively by people who benefit from and perpetuate white supremacy. Our call is for equity in access, the cultivation of organisational cultures which value the contributions of people of African descent and the removal of systems which impede our activation.

In order to eradicate racism within the attitudes, conduct, messaging, policy, resourcing, approaches and impacts of environmental work, as a minimum the environmental field should;

- Educate themselves on the role of racism within the history of their movements
- Have honest conversations about the beliefs and attitudes of environmental organisations and staff towards Black people and communities
- Value the knowledge systems and the experience of Black communities and practitioners

- Support processes ensuring communities have a right to access wildlife spaces
- Re-evaluate funding priorities to help democratise the environmental space, and enable support for black perspectives and Black led projects
- Address inequity within decision making processes with regard to funding, policy and field approaches
- Prevent disparities in the contamination of the environment in Black residential areas
- Temper competitiveness when projects would be best led by local/Black communities - with better resourcing
- Develop new ways of doing business and forming partnerships that are respectful
- Support and strengthen Black institutions

There are commonalities in the way people of African descent are undermined by white supremacy throughout Africa, the US and Europe;

Negative Narratives

There is exclusivity within the staffing of environmental organisations in Africa, the US and UK which is disproportionately white middle class, creating a “green insiders club.” Historically an internal perception has developed within these organisations that they are the true custodians of the natural world and this is acted upon in their conduct towards Black people. Such organisations also have a tendency to frame people of African descent as being inferior and incompetent in nature, often whilst appropriating our traditional knowledge. This creates gatekeeping, through which people of African descent must apply to participate within environmental decision making and in implementing care for the environment. It also means that people of African descent are often excluded from conversations about environmental projects which affect us as global citizens and as local communities. When we challenge the wisdom of environmental organisations we are often denounced as trouble makers and even arrested or killed. There can be a lack of respect for the professionalism and perspectives of Black people which forces us to work hard just to be heard, which can in itself exhaust often already minimal resources.

Rights, Access, Environmental Justice

Violent acts of white supremacy have displaced and disenfranchised people of African descent from ancestral lands and from feeling safe to enjoy natural spaces. Racist laws, policies and attitudes have served to keep Black people away from the better quality natural areas and wildlife sites, and the same are used to justify areas in which a high proportion of Black people live being targeted for the placing of toxic waste and industrial processing plants. In countries where people of African descent are the minority they experience nature related health disparities, suffering higher levels of pollution and degraded environments. In African countries where there are large white settler populations, as a result of colonialism, Africans experience exclusions from land, water and other natural resources and greater exposure to pollution.

Disenfranchisement from nature

In too many cases, Black people's relationship with nature has been sabotaged by the interference of white supremacy. Aggressive racist behaviour such as forest evictions, fortress conservation, fenced off tourism parks, colonialism, slavery and Jim Crow has led to a process of displacement and disenfranchisement from nature; people of African descent are made to feel that they do not belong. The damage of disenfranchisement includes not just physical separation but damage to emotional and spiritual relationships with the natural world and a loss of knowledge and cultural heritage.

Funding

Black led organisations in particular, struggle to access funding to be able to share their perspectives and undertake environmental work. A lack of funding for Black led initiatives creates disparities in the voices heard and the ideas implemented within the environmental field, which leads to a continuation of western models and white centred approaches. Often racist perceptions of Black led initiatives are used to justify denying funds. It is our experience that funders tend to prioritise white led organisations who then might approach Black organisations to access their specialisms, often with the expectation that they should work for free.

Partnerships

Forming healthy partnerships is a big challenge, relationships between environmental organisations and Black led initiatives are often sadly characterised by exploitation and a lack of respect for the experience, knowledge and approaches of Black practitioners. Lesser funded Black organisations face inequity as they do not have equality of resources to prevent exploitation. Partnership is an opportunity to support and cooperate, however larger organisations often compete rather than collaborate with Black initiatives and communities, even in issues relating to Black participation. In some cases onerous partnership terms weight approaches towards the culture of the larger organisation which further entrenches white/western worldviews, making it more challenging for Black organisations to show leadership or express their perspectives, and often leads to disenfranchisement. It can mean that to be successful, Black led projects have to navigate through the gatekeeping of white fund holders and land owners who do not always recognise the needs, meaning or methods of our perspectives and approaches.

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