

## Challenging Racism in the Environmental Movement

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Environmentalism has brought many benefits to society throughout history. From National Parks to the Clean Air and Water Acts, there have been significant strides towards conservation and sustainability.

However, the benefits of environmentalism have not reached all people. The environmental movement of the United States has its own unique history that, while positive in many respects, has deep roots in racism and inequality.



*Photo by Lorie Shaull*

Many environmentalists have learned about the [foundation of the US Forest Service](#) by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1905, the [establishment of the National Parks Service](#) by Woodrow Wilson in 1916, or the [creation of the Sierra Club](#) by John Muir in 1892. These actions were monumental in the scope of the environmental and conservation movements in the United States, but we must look at these foundations and leaders through a more critical lens. We must ask ourselves, “Whom was this movement built for and whom does it benefit?”

Theodore Roosevelt did indeed drive the conservation and development of national parks. But he was a eugenicist who believed in purifying the human race and held beliefs backed by racial pseudoscience.

TR [worked closely with Madison Grant](#), a fellow conservationist, to build parks and forests. Grant was also the author of “The Passing of the Great Race, or The Racial Basis of European History,” which was a work of racial pseudoscience that focused on the decline of “Nordic” peoples. Roosevelt praised Grant on this work, saying it was “a capital book; in purpose, in vision, in grasp of the facts our people most need to realize.”

Roosevelt [also worked alongside Gifford Pinchot](#), appointing him as the head of the National Conservation Commission and the Forest Service. Pinchot was a delegate to the International Eugenics Congress and a member of the advisory council of the American Eugenics Society.

President Woodrow Wilson, the founder of the national parks service, was also a [well-known racist](#). He took steps to actually *resegregate* multiple agencies of the federal government, in addition to dismissing the majority of black supervisors in federal offices.

This type of [discrimination persisted](#) within outdoor spaces. People of color continued to be legally barred from or segregated at state and national parks up to and even after passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.



*Dr. Carolyn Finney*

John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, maintained racist views towards Native Americans and African Americans. As described by Dr. Carolyn Finney, a Middlebury College Scholar-in-Residence “While his environmental ethic included wilderness, it clearly did not include nonwhites.”

These “fathers” of conservation thus had a very clear view of who was important in American society and in the environmental movement. As Dr. Finney states in her book *Black Faces, White Spaces*, “By seeking to cultivate a sense of national affiliation by appealing to what is arguably our deepest human fear — extinction — Roosevelt and others were able to justify an approach that allowed for African Americans and other nonwhite peoples to be systematically excluded, ignored, and erased (metaphorically and literally) from the larger conversation about who we are as a country.” This includes the conversation about the preservation of the environment and access to outdoor spaces, among other topics.

“Whiteness, as a way of knowing, becomes the way of understanding our environment, and through representation and rhetoric, becomes part of our educational systems, our institutions, and our personal beliefs,” Finney writes. She points out that much of our understanding of nature is dominated by white narratives. The most popular environmentalists that we study and idealize are white. This is not because there are no nonwhite environmentalists out there. It’s because we are not doing enough to look for or listen to [them](#).

When we look at the makeup of people visiting parks and leading the environmental movement, we see that it is still [overwhelmingly white](#). We have not overcome the racism that the movement was founded in. White people, and white narratives, continue to dominate the space.

Besides the disparity between Black and white people in outdoor recreation and activism, one of the most disturbing truths is that people of color are [disproportionately affected](#) by environmental hazards. People of color are forced to live near the most polluted air, water, and soil as NIMBYism pushes polluting facilities away from white, wealthy communities. People of color are not only excluded from the greatest benefits of the outdoor world, but they suffer the greatest risks associated with environmental destruction.

As Vermonters pride themselves on their environmental initiatives, they must also recognize that the movement cannot be complete without welcoming and incorporating *all* people.

So, you might be asking yourself, “What can I do to be a part of the solution?”

There are groups pushing for the change we need, such as Green 2.0, which provides resources and metrics to facilitate diversity, equity and inclusion within the environmental movement. Other, more broadly focused environmental groups such as the Sierra Club and

350VT have begun to outwardly support the Black Lives Matter Movement and incorporate racial justice into their mission and activism.

These are steps in the right direction, but right now we need leaps. There is no room for performative activism — that is, activism for its own sake rather than to achieve real and beneficial change. Real challenges to racist systems and institutions are integral to correcting the path of the environmental movement.

We need to educate ourselves on inequality and racism within the broader society as well as within the environmental movement that is so important to us. It's time to get uncomfortable and ask ourselves difficult questions about race and equity. We might say the wrong things or have misunderstandings, but learning and growing are better than silently following the status quo.

We need to take action to create more welcoming and inclusive spaces. It's about more than simply checking boxes for diversity. We need to change the structure of our groups and open up to new voices and ideas. We need to support the groups doing the hard work to create inclusive spaces. Lastly, we need to amplify Black and other nonwhite voices. The narrative must shift to reflect more perspectives.

Here is a list of resources to get started on the path to anti-racist environmentalism. It's by no means exhaustive but can help begin the process.

#### **Listen...**

To Vermont Public Radio's "[Racism — And Anti-Racism — In Vermont](#)"

#### **Join...**

Workshops similar to 350vt's "[How are Racial Justice and Climate Justice Connected?](#)"

#### **Read...**

*Black Faces, White Spaces* by Carolyn Finney

*The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature* by J. Drew Lanham

"[Black Women in Wilderness](#)" by Evelyn White

"[Five Ways to Make the Outdoors More Inclusive](#)" by the Atlantic's Marketing Team

#### **Donate to...**

<https://naacprutland.org>

[www.350Vermont.org](http://www.350Vermont.org)

#### **Sign...**

The petition created by the Vermont Sierra Club calling for Governor Scott to "[put People and Planet First and especially people of color](#)"