

Environmentalism For All: The necessity for diversity, equity and inclusion in environmentalism and community planning

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Being a professional who has worked and lived in different regions of the Midwest and east coast over the past few years, I've had opportunities to meet more people in the fields of environment protection and planning. I've been able to gain more insight about myself as well as about Americans of various races, creeds, and nationalities. As an African American, an environmentalist and as planner, I am consistently reminded of how few minorities there are in these fields. There's been significant talk and writing recently about the state of the environmental movement. Some have even gone so far as to call the movement "dead". (Nordhaus, 2004) Is this true? Have we seen the best of what environmentalism, smart growth and other movements has to offer?

My answer to these questions is no. I would argue that the very best of environmentalism and regionalism is still yet to come. The ideals that environmentalism and smart growth are founded on, are a great starting point. But, if they are to survive, grow and continue to make positive progress, the concepts of diversity and inclusion has to move to the front of the line. They need to be fully integrated into our visions, missions and so forth. The face and make up of what might be called traditional environmentalism has to change or else the movement "will" die. I don't mean to say that it will disappear but, I think that it could lose its relevance perhaps even its credibility in America.

In about fifty years, half of America's population will be non-white. (Rast, 2006) Finally, a whole new population and generation is saying, "Hey, what about us?". The impoverished, lower income and many members of minority groups biggest issues, traditionally, were about income, getting food on the table, keeping the lights on, and getting the rent paid. Anything beyond this was luxury. But things are changing. Today and into the future, the threats of global warming, diminishing natural resources and the increased frequency and/or intensity of natural disasters, are powerful indicators things to come. (Enderle, 2007)

Environmentalism and the planning community has to broaden our view and act to help the those who are most vulnerable to changing conditions. The white-bread, privileged image of traditional environmentalism has got to change to show the realities of America. The real America is in our communities, in our neighborhoods, and the neighborhoods that you drive past on your way home to the suburbs.

References

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