

A Call for Diversity Data Is Met With Silence by Many Green Funders. What's That About?

Tate Williams

An initiative to get nonprofits and foundations to publicize diversity stats is building momentum. But green funders are lagging, prompting some of the biggest players in the sector to urge others to cough it up. Who's leading the charge and who's trailing behind?

Since October 2014, a [collaborative](#) of organizations has been pushing NGOs and foundations to submit standardized diversity data to Guidestar, just as they would their financial and governance information. The effort has been growing steadily, and Guidestar now reports more than 2,500 NGOs submitting diversity data, including more than 60 foundations.

The project of Guidestar, the D5 Coalition, and Green 2.0 is urging groups across the nonprofit sector to participate, but there's a special emphasis on those working for the environment, where low diversity is well documented. So when participation among environmental funders—big ones in particular—was lackluster, a group of some huge names in the field sent out a letter trying to light a fire under their peers.

Organized by Bullitt Foundation President Denis Hayes and Green 2.0, leaders at Ford, Hewlett, Kresge, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and Wilburforce joined Hayes in signing the letter to funder network and coalition members encouraging them to submit their data.

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“We know that our nation’s demography is changing rapidly, and that many of our leading environmental organizations do not reflect the richness of our increasingly multicultural nation,” the letter stated. “The good news: There is much valuable work underway to improve diversity at all levels of our organizations. However, we need better data to determine if these efforts are making a difference and to assess best practices.”

Of the nation’s top 50 funders of environmental issues, only nine have submitted their diversity data—the six who signed the letter, plus the California Endowment (actually closer to a health funder), the Fresno Regional Foundation, and Meyer Memorial Trust. Data from these nine funders is currently live on Guidestar ([see Kresge](#), [Ford](#), and [Hewlett](#), for example, under the People & Governance tab).

That leaves a lot to be desired, with large and extremely influential funders like the Walton Family Foundation, the Packard Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Moore Foundation yet to volunteer demographic information. Foundations, especially big ones, do tend to be slow, so maybe they just haven't gotten around to it. Or maybe they don't respond well to the kinds of pressure campaigns that they themselves love to support, however gentle this one may be.

Whatever the case, a lot of these funders travel in the same, tight circles, which makes you wonder if there are some awkward conversations happening.

The issue is not just about propping up the leaders and calling out the laggards. The impetus behind the data collection project is meaningful analysis, which organizers say they can only conduct if the number of participants reaches a significant scale. The idea is that if they can collect enough non-anonymous, standardized data on diversity in the sector, they can better analyze how things are going, what’s working, what’s not, etc.

Past analyses of nonprofit diversity have not been that specific, although they have made an impact in their own way. It is, in fact, nearly one year since an eye-opening report came out on diversity in the environmental movement. Green 2.0 [commissioned a study](#) by Dorceta Taylor, a professor at the University of Michigan, that found only about 12 percent of staff at environmental NGOs and foundations are people of color, compared to 36 percent in the general population.

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This is far from a new problem, which underscores the push for proper tracking. Responses from the environmental movement have ranged from “we’re working on it” to “it’s hard.” Having a baseline of data would help the collaborative to close the loop.

Why is it so important for funders to lead the way? Actually, a lot of reasons. For one, they hold the purse strings, so their direction can influence the movement in a broader way than any organization can.

But they also have the resources to comprehensively tackle the issue and understand what it means to run a diverse environmental outfit. It’s important for funders to know what they are demanding of their grantees. They can pass on their wisdom, and hopefully sufficient funding, for the rest of the movement to follow.

Then again, there is an accountability element in disclosing this data. There’s a very good argument that an environmental group or funder that doesn’t reflect the diversity of the country is simply a weak environmental group—too narrow in its view of the issues we face, or lacking organizing

power to be truly effective. That kind of information sure would be good to know on Guidestar.

One irony here is that the corporate world is increasingly attuned to diversity issues and prospering in an America where demographic change is only accelerating. Can it really be that many business leaders are more focused on diversity than top environmental funders?

Green 2.0 continues to beat the drum, with testimonials on its website from leaders like the letter's signatories, and big names like Bill McKibben and Tom Steyer. For example, from U.S. Rep. Raul Grijalva:

...it is troubling that some Green organizations and the foundations that support them have not taken this initial step towards a more diverse sector. Diversifying Green organizations and foundations will make them more effective in addressing current and future environmental challenges. The Green movement and the country's people of color deserve nothing less.

Now that Hayes and company have thrown down the gauntlet to their peers, we'll see if they take the advice. The collaborative is hoping to get at least half of the top 50 environmental funders to share their data, and the letter gave a deadline of August 15. So the clock is ticking.

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