

Mainstream Greens and Funders Are Still Very White—Are They Risking Their Relevance?

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NORTH100/SHUTTERSTOCK

With a few encouraging exceptions, major environmental foundations reporting their diversity data remain overwhelmingly white, and have become less diverse overall from 2017 to 2018. That data's limited, however, mainly because most of the 40 large foundations under scrutiny are still keeping their diversity data to themselves.

Those are the big takeaways from the latest [report card](#) from Green 2.0, an initiative that has been working with GuideStar for the past five years to collect and report on diversity data in the environmental movement. Some participants have pointed out that their numbers are actually a bit better than what was posted on GuideStar. But the report still paints a grim picture of low foundation diversity and participation in the initiative, both of which undermine the movement's impact and relevance.

On the [foundation side](#), based on 14 major funders that submitted their data, racial and ethnic diversity of full-time staff, senior staff and board members all dropped from 2017 to 2018, with people of color in senior positions at just 4 percent. That number was 26 percent for full-time staff, and 21 percent for board members. The NGO side saw far more groups reporting data, although with a few "incredibly bad actors," and still-lagging diversity numbers that hovered just above 20 percent people of color (that number in the U.S. workforce is more like 40 percent). Gender balance for NGOs and funders varied by institution, but was overall less problematic.

Of course, this is a very old tune in environmentalism, and fortunately one that does not reflect the field in its entirety, which tends to be more diverse and intersectional outside of the mainstream and in environmental justice work. But major foundations and NGOs wield a lot of money, power and influence over the field. At a time when the public and even politicians are becoming more diverse—and communities of color face [disproportionate](#) environmental impacts—the data suggest a field out of step with the world around it.

“Those that do not take equity and inclusion seriously within their four walls in 2019 are not only confounding, but also not equipped to drive innovation among either their grantees or collaborative spaces,” said Whitney Tome, Green 2.0 executive director.

‘It Is Mind-Blowing’

The Green 2.0 transparency and data push follows a [landmark 2014 report](#) the group commissioned, in which University of Michigan sociologist [Dorceta Taylor](#) found diversity in environmentalism falling very short, with staff at NGOs and foundations at around only 12 percent people of color.

Green 2.0 then set out to place some strategic pressure and provide support to the field, hoping to nudge progress toward representation. On a recent conference call to discuss the results, however, the frustration at the lack of momentum, or even cooperation, was palpable.

Related: [A Call for Diversity Data Is Met With Silence by Many Green Funders. What's That About?](#)

“It is mind-blowing to me that NGOs in 2019 are slow to understand the importance of diversity, to highlight it, and to make it a priority,” said Robert Raben, Green 2.0 founder. “It is inconceivable to me... that some key environmental organizations refuse to talk about the subject—by talk about the subject, in this case, I mean report their data.”

This is not to say that all institutions are failing to improve. The Hewlett Foundation, for example, made notable progress in the past year, with full-time staff hitting 42 percent people of color, senior staff at 33 percent, and board members at 38 percent. Doris Duke Charitable Foundation also made gains in racial diversity among staff (37 percent) and board members (45 percent). And Green 2.0 hailed the appointment of new top leaders at foundations like Libra, Surdna, and Meyer Memorial Trust.

Which is to say, organizational shifts are clearly possible when stakeholders make them a priority.

Larry Kramer, president of Hewlett, joined the announcement to discuss steps they've taken and the results, citing trainings, making DEI an explicit organizational goal, and gaining buy-in across the team. He also points out that publicly sharing their diversity data, beyond just tracking it internally, was an important part of keeping themselves accountable.

“While there is, of course, still room for improvement, there have been steady gains across the whole organization that have happened really naturally as a result of the changes, which is to say, just increased attention and focus,” Kramer said. That's led to new engagement with important audiences and communities.

Of course, any single year of data doesn't tell the full story, and Green 2.0 says that the numbers compiled are not a perfect representation. The data are self-reported to GuideStar, numbers change, and they're always working to improve the process. But the initiative called out the flat or decreased diversity based on what data they do have, flagging the lack of momentum they were hoping to see.

Some of the major foundations I asked about the report did point out that their latest numbers are at least somewhat better than the report card suggests.

Packard, for example, notes that their latest data shows 39 percent of its staff are people of color (instead of 31 percent), although their board remains 88 percent white.

MacArthur points out that its diversity numbers are also better than the report card originally showed, pointing out that the foundation [posts accurate numbers on its website](#) and the information on their GuideStar account was out of date. “We are happy to share the data on our website with anyone or any organization,” said Andrew Solomon, MacArthur’s managing director of communications. “But it is the responsibility of groups publishing so-called research reports to make efforts to ensure they are sharing accurate and up-to-date information.”

Green 2.0’s Daniel Herrera said they are working with MacArthur to add their latest data (updated report card [here](#)), but do consider it the participants’ responsibility to keep their information up to date. Using the GuideStar platform is important to the project, he said, as it offers one consistent location and format to track the field’s data, and encourages full transparency.

Other participants, like the Moore Foundation, previously submitted diversity data, but then stopped. Moore Special Projects Officer Genny Biggs said because 20 percent of staff declined to state their racial or ethnic identities, and some had expressed concerns about confidentiality, they stopped releasing data. The foundation’s board had been entirely white, but recently appointed a woman of color. Biggs said “with limited turnover, staff composition is slowly moving in the direction of increased diversity.”

GuideStar does not post personal information, but Herrera said that they have heard concerns about confidentiality. They encourage voluntary self-identification, meaning individuals can always opt out, and GuideStar won’t display sexual orientation or disability information for organizations with fewer than 15 staff.

Radio Silence

Some of the missing or outdated information suggests that not all of the Green 2.0 participants are as diligent as they could be in contributing, considering the effort hinges on regular self-reporting. But then there are the NGOs and foundations that have basically ghosted the whole effort.

One group on the NGO side that has initiative leaders worked up is Pew Charitable Trusts (formerly a private foundation, it changed status to a nonprofit in 2004), a giant in marine conservation that has shrugged off the initiative. A statement from Pew listed the organization's interests, then pointed out, "We do not consider ourselves an environmental organization. We are committed to creating a workplace that provides equal employment opportunity, values diversity, and fosters inclusion." Pew would not elaborate on why it doesn't consider itself an environmental organization, or what exactly that has to do with its participation.

Meanwhile, only 14 of the [40 top foundations scrutinized](#) submitted data to GuideStar at all. That leaves missing players like Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Rockefeller Foundation, and Walton Family Foundation. The first two did not respond to a request for comment, and Walton's spokesperson would only say releasing diversity data is something they are looking at, but they are not doing so at this time.

So what are they afraid of? After all, this a critical, but also a supportive initiative, with Green 2.0 making a point of celebrating those that are reporting, and applauding internal DEI efforts at places like Sierra Club, even though its numbers still aren't that great.

It seems that improving diversity in the movement is not only slow going, but perhaps even more troubling in the foundation world, many don't even want to talk about it. But that's ceasing to be an option.

'Out of Step'

Again, this is a longstanding problem in the environmental movement, and important in terms of basic moral concepts of fairness and justice that drive equity work in any sector. But in 2019, it's worth noting some of the other reasons this is such a big deal, not only for foundations to improve their own diversity, but to also embrace a movement-wide effort to do so.

For one, as is often emphasized in environmental justice work, low-income communities and people of color experience the [negative impacts](#) of environmental harms "first and worst." That means they not only have a certain right to shape the solutions, but they also bring a necessary perspective to a discussion from which they are all too often excluded.

"As a result, the proposed solutions often sound promising, but they don't materially improve the environment or conditions of the communities that are most affected, and in some instances, they even make situations worse," said Crystal Hayling, executive director of the Libra Foundation, which funds Green 2.0. "If communities of color had a full seat at the table, we'd see vastly different solutions and policies emerge that are rooted in honesty, equity, justice and community."

Environmental problems are also complex and interconnected with many other issues that people experience on the ground, and viewing them from a narrow perspective leads to limited understanding. You miss out on the perspectives of people who are closest to the underlying systemic problems.

"A multi-sector movement that does not provide mirrors for which people see themselves reflected leads to false or superficial solutions," said Angela Adrar, executive director of the Climate Justice Alliance, "which not only eat into the time we do not have to solve history's most urgent problems, but minimizes our power."

Lack of diversity also limits power in terms of sheer size and depth of the constituency. As Larry Kramer of Hewlett said about climate change work,

“We’re never going to build the kind of political coalition that we need to really move the country forward unless we have fully engaged all of the audiences of color and communities that are part of the national community.”

It’s also a shifting world. As Whitney Tome points out, the U.S. just swore in the most diverse incoming Congressional class in history. Much of the political momentum we’ve seen in environmentalism in recent years is coming from diverse movements, such as Standing Rock and other indigenous activism, People’s Climate marches, and support for the Green New Deal. For young activists, especially, issues of justice and equity are inseparable from environmentalism.

“The values of philanthropy are communicated by the messengers they seek to employ,” Adrar said. “Foundations that continue to hire overwhelmingly white staff or all-male staff are out of step with the sociopolitical shifts of our day.”

In other words, foundations and NGOs that don’t prioritize diversity have a lot more to fear than being called out in a report card. Their very relevance is on the line.

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