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Not seeing eye to eye: challenges to building ethnically and economically diverse environmental coalitions

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Environmental issues are collective action problems that can only be solved with coordinated efforts among diverse groups of people. Whether people are willing to collaborate to solve these problems, however, depends on their perceptions of, and trust in, each other. If people misperceive each other—for instance, due to inaccurate beliefs about who truly cares about environmental issues—then it becomes difficult to build diverse coalitions to address these collective problems. In this paper we review recent research on factors that lead diverse groups of people to misperceive each other's environmental concerns, and the consequences of these misperceptions for collective action. We then conclude by discussing a more inclusive approach for building diverse coalitions in environmental movements.

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We live in a segregated world. Because of the way that world operates, people's memberships in social groups—categories like their race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status—shape their positions in society, and thus their perceptions of, and experiences with, a wide range of issues and outcomes [1]. Environmental issues are no exception [2••,3,4••]. Global temperatures are rising, endangering our lives, collective habitat, and the lives and habitats of many of the species with which we share the planet [5,6]. In addition, pollution and other environmental hazards continue to undermine health and well-being, education, lifetime earnings, and other consequential outcomes [7,8]. How people make meaning of this reality, and make decisions about how to deal with it, depends on their position in society and what it leads them to see, or renders invisible [1].

In the United States, for instance, Americans live in geographic clusters that are divided by race, ethnicity, and wealth [9–11], clusters that have different environmental experiences. Racial and ethnic minorities, and low-income Americans are often exposed to higher levels of environmental hazards than their White and middle-income and high-income counterparts [12,13]. Those differences in experiences shape how Americans end up 'seeing' environmental issues [3,4••]. For example, in a recent survey researchers found that Americans' race, ethnicity, and social class predicted their conceptualization of environmental issues [4••]. Specifically, while White Americans and Americans from higher socioeconomic backgrounds considered 'eco-oriented' issues like climate change and pollution from industrial facilities to be environmental issues, non-White and lower-income respondents also included 'human-oriented' issues like poverty and racism in their conceptualization [4••].

These differences reveal that what 'counts' as an environmental issue depends one's position in society. Members of groups that are relatively unscathed by social conditions like poverty and racism have greater difficulty recognizing those as environmental issues than members who face the consequences daily. If one lives in a poor neighborhood, they may notice that it is not only the air quality or water quality that is bad, or that there is not much green space to get regular exercise; they may also notice that obesity occurs more frequently, there is less high-quality food around, and children do not do as well in school, compared to people living in places with access to more resources. Therefore, it becomes easier to see these as all part of a larger interconnected set of problems, caused by poverty and racism. If one lives in a wealthy neighborhood, they may not see many of these problems, and therefore would be less likely to recognize that they are all related, let alone related to poverty or racism.

It is not only conceptualizations of environmental *issues* that are affected by living in segregated communities; we also forget some of the *people* who are concerned about environmental issues. If you ask Americans how concerned different subgroups of the population are about the environment, what you find is an 'environmental belief paradox' [2••]. Specifically, Americans—including those from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds—*believe* that the social groups that are most concerned about the environment are White Americans, young people, and women, and that racial and ethnic minorities and low-income people are the least concerned. If you actually survey those same subgroups, you find that reality runs counter to the stereotypes; the groups of Americans that are *most* concerned about the environment are racial and ethnic minorities and low-income people [14].

The problem with misperceiving others

Many environmental issues are, by their nature, 'collective action problems' that require coordinated efforts to address [15,16•]. By this we mean it is highly unlikely that any one group, or one new technology will solve our environmental problems. Instead, finding realistic solutions will require collaboration between diverse groups of people. When Americans misperceive the environmental concerns of their fellow citizens, that creates a challenge for building diverse coalitions to tackle environmental issues. It is difficult to muster the motivation to work toward a common goal with people you misperceive as not caring about the issue.

Working together in civic society requires trust and common ground, but it is difficult to find that common ground and trust that people will have your interests at heart when you live in separate and unequal conditions [17] that lead different segments of the population to perceive and prioritize issues differently. This is a lesson we have learned from the history of environmental movements and scholarship. Historically, environmental scholarship has divided itself into two camps: a mainstream (i.e. White) literature that focused on the 'eco-oriented' issues described earlier, and a more ethnically diverse environmental justice and environmental racism literature that focused on the more 'human-oriented' issues. The latter literature focused less on appealing to White middle-class people than the mainstream literature, and instead focuses on the intersection between the environment and social conditions that magnify human harm (e.g. racism, poverty), as well as the disparate harms across groups [18,19].

Separating environmental issues, and people, in this way makes it difficult to build diverse coalitions to tackle environmental problems. Indeed, fostering coordination between groups is one challenge that currently plagues environmental movements. For example, recent research has revealed evidence for a 'social trap' in the climate domain [16•]. Social traps are a unique type of collective action problem whereby lack of trust in governments, social institutions, and the people they represent, erodes the effects of perceiving environmental risks on support for environmental policies and other pro-environmental behaviors [20]. This undermines coordinated attempts to engage in pro-climate behaviors and support for policies to address climate change [16•]. Specifically, although people who believe that climate change is a threat to their nation are more willing to act or support pro-climate policies, this is particularly true in nations where people trust each other across demographic lines and trust their social institutions [16•].

This suggests that when attempting to build coalitions, people try to determine who is 'on their side' and partner with those they perceive as having shared interests and values [21]. If their perceptions are accurate, this can be an efficient strategy; but if they misperceive others, it obstructs coalition building [22]. Accuracy and inaccuracy in perceptions of people in the environmental realm are influenced by the patterns of segregation we described. In the U.S., Americans work and interact with people in segregated institutions [23–25]. They consume media that is separated into 'White-oriented' and 'Black-oriented' categories [26,27]. These various forms of social sorting creates, among other things, segregated social networks [11,28] that affect who we meet, what we learn about, and what we believe about different groups of people [1,29]. One consequence is that people who live in the same society but come from different backgrounds can share the same interests and goals without realizing that they do. Because they are socialized and continue to live in different contexts that focus on different manifestations of those larger goals, they may not actually realize that their goals are shared across groups. This is part of the reason that Americans misperceive the environmental concerns of people from various racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds [2••].

Missed points of connection that undermine coalition building

It is clear that there are fairly widespread concerns about, and interest in, environmental issues, and that these concerns and interests are shared across diverse segments of the population. Given those shared interests, one would think it would be easy to build diverse coalitions to tackle environmental issues. The central problem seems to be that different subgroups of the population care about environmental issues for different reasons. For example, low-SES people of color are concerned for their health, well-being, and survival, as well as the planet's survival, whereas among high-SES Whites, health, well-being, and survival are not as pressingly in danger. These differences in experiences have led to different prioritizations, creating some friction between groups. Whites have prioritized ecological issues, whereas minorities have prioritized the intersection between ecology and justice [19]. Those differential priorities led environmental movements to splinter into two submovements: a mainstream (i.e. White) environmental movement, and a more racially diverse environmental justice movement [19]. Early on, the mainstream environmental movement ignored social justice and equity issues that drive differential exposure to environmental hazards and excluded people of color and working-class people [19]. Those issues are still present today—for example, the environmental and climate science community is one of the least diverse scientific disciplines [30].

It is not inevitable, however, that environmental groups splinter and pursue separate agendas; they can instead choose to collaborate by building on the points of connection between what are inherently overlapping issues. Historically, mainstream environmentalists opted to appeal mostly to White, middle, and upper-class people by linking images of wilderness and wildlife protection with their romanticization of 19th century experiences [18]. At the same time, environmental justice advocates evoked images of racism, land appropriation, and community destruction that occurred in the same era [18]. This bifurcated messaging strategy inevitably leads to an 'us' versus 'them' way of making sense of environmental issues. It leads people to believe that there are environmental issues that affect wealthy White American people and that those are separate from environmental issues that affect people from low-income and racial and ethnic minority backgrounds.

That in-group versus out-group way of thinking continues to influence contemporary discourse despite reality being more complex and interconnected [1]. The land appropriation and destruction of green spaces where communities can gather that primarily concern racial and ethnic minority communities are connected to the destruction of wildlife that concerns Whites. There is clearly common ground between these issues (and others) that should facilitate collaboration. Both sets of communities want spaces devoid of pollution and toxins that undermine the welfare of human and non-human life [5,7]. Part of the coordination problem seems to stem from who has historically been in the decision-making rooms, and the nature of their discourse. One consequence of the lack of diversity in environmental organizations [30] is that it shapes the extent to which ethical and justice considerations enter climate discourse [31•].

An inclusive path forward

Although we have spent most of the paper focusing on problems that undermine diverse coalitions, we are cautiously optimistic about a future in which diverse constituents come together to work toward meaningful solutions to pressing environmental issues. One reason for our optimism is the recent wave of climate marches that have occurred, drawing diverse crowds of climate activists (i.e. the March for Science and People's Climate March). Exposure to information about those marches increased bystanders' collective efficacy beliefs—it made them feel like they could successfully join with others to bring about change [32,33]. If these movements continue, that could potentially build more diverse coalitions to tackle the multiple facets of environmental issues and their disparate impacts.

Marches are not the only reason for (cautious) optimism. In recent years we have begun to witness some change in how some high-profile environmental issues are discussed. Specifically, the water crisis in Flint, Michigan is one of the few largely public-facing examples of environmental issues that was framed as clearly resulting from racial and economic injustice. The Flint water crisis was precipitated by a decision to cut costs by switching Flint's water source from the Detroit water system to the Flint River [34]. Flint River water, however, was inadequately treated before the switch, causing it to corrode lead-based pipes which, in turn, leached poisonous lead and other chemicals into the water for months [34]. Prominent scholars [34] framed the Flint water crisis as a prime example of environmental injustice since Flint has a population of almost 100 000 with 54% of its residents identifying as Black and 40% living below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

Although the Flint water crisis was framed as an environmental justice issue, that did not dissuade White people, high SES people, and others who were not directly impacted by the crisis from working alongside low SES Flint residents of color to bring attention to the issue and seek redress for the contaminated water [35••]. Flint residents formed strategic alliances with environmental activists, researchers, and local physicians to gain evidence that the drinking water was contaminated with lead [34,35••]. Flint residents' community activism combined with the results of research showing elevated lead levels in the drinking water and children eventually led officials to switch the water source back to the Detroit water system [35••]. A diverse coalition of people both within and outside of Flint banded together to advocate for clean water for Flint residents [35••]. These successful efforts in demanding justice and clean water for Flint residents demonstrate the powerful role that diverse coalitions play in bringing about real change.

It is worth noting, however, that the Flint water crisis could have been averted with earlier coordination among diverse groups of people. The Flint River had been polluted for over a century [36,37]. Although efforts were made in the past to clean it, many continued to dump hazardous water into the Flint River, leading it to become exceptionally polluted [36,37]. When the government initially switched Flint's water source without adequately treating the Flint River, residents noticed the change in water quality and brought it to the government's attention immediately but were ignored [34]. Although they were eventually able to persuade officials to return to the Detroit water system, that solution only came after harm was already done. This case should serve as a reminder of the importance of incorporating the perspectives of marginalized voices earlier in decision-making processes that impact their lives [1,34].

In addition to Flint, in the last two years, momentum has been building for Congress to introduce and pass Green New Deal legislation, modeled after the New Deal legislation that helped bring the United States out of the Great Depression. The Green New Deal resolution introduced by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey includes 'eco-issues' like reducing carbon emissions, protecting nature, and overhauling transportation systems, but also specifically addresses intertwined issues of justice including jobs, access to housing, healthcare, education, and affordable food [38]. Incorporating economic justice into the response to climate change, addresses both climate change, and the myriad structural inequalities that make people of color and low-income Americans more susceptible to the consequences of climate change. Although, critics argue the Green New Deal takes on too much, one architect of the policy, Rhiana Gunn-Wright, argues that the issues of climate and structural inequality are inextricably linked, ' . . . climate change is not just a technical problem. It's not just an issue of emissions. It's an issue of the systems that have allowed an industry that essentially poisons people to continue, and to do so even as it further and further imperils our survival, both as a nation and as a globe. It comes down to issues of 'race and class and place' [39]. This modern rhetoric from contemporary leaders is consistent with what the research we have reviewed suggests: it is possible to build diverse environmental coalitions, but doing so requires integrative approaches that speak to the issues being faced by a more diverse set of people.

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