
Why Blacks Should Be Environmentalists

CARL ANTHONY

WHEN MARTIN LUTHER KING decided to raise his voice in opposition to the war in Vietnam, many of his critics told him he ought to stick to domestic issues. He should concentrate on securing civil rights of Blacks in the South, and leave foreign policy to the professionals who knew best. But King decided to oppose the war because he knew it was morally wrong, and because he understood the link between the brutal exploitation and destruction of the Vietnamese people, and the struggle of Blacks and others for justice and freedom in our own land.

Today Black leadership, and the Black community face a similar challenge. Every day the newspapers carry stories about the changing atmosphere and climate, threats to the world's water supply, threats to the biodiversity of the rainforest, and the crisis of populations of poor nations growing too fast to be supported by the carrying capacity

of their lands. Some environmentalists suggest that in the near future, we will be unable to feed the world's population without radical changes in land ownership, distribution of wealth, and new community decisions about crops and diets. Can Blacks afford to view the social and economic problems of Black American communities in isolation from these global trends?

The modern civil rights movement came into being when southern Black organizations, frustrated by Southern intransigence, challenged racist laws and practices restricting the rights of Blacks to public accommodations. Thirty years ago, at Montgomery, Alabama, Blacks won the right to ride in the front of the bus. Today, African Americans must ask where the bus is going.

Since the late 1960's, African American economic and political gains in the United States have suffered erosion, as legislation and social programs have been cut from fed-

Carl Anthony is an architect and urban planner. His work has focused on planning and designing facilities for meeting basic needs in urban communities. He has served on the Faculty of the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture and Planning, and the U.C. Berkeley College of Environmental Design. With Karl Linn, he is co-founder of the Urban Habitat Program at Earth Island Institute. He is working on a book, *The Landscape of Freedom*, which will describe connections between the Afro-American struggle for human rights and changing American attitudes toward the land in the decade following the Civil War.

eral and local budgets. During this period, the environmental movement has developed new insights about the connections that join people, community and land. It has also come a long way from its conservative, apolitical origins to become a major force for progressive social change. An environmental perspective could provide much needed focus for a new generation of Black Americans. Indeed, Blacks may have a great deal to gain by forging closer bonds with existing environmental organizations working to save the planet.

I. Developing New Visions

Blacks could benefit from expanding their vision to include greater environmental awareness. For example, a recent study of deteriorating conditions called young Black males in America an endangered species. "This description," the author suggests, "applies in a metaphorical sense, to the current status of young black males in contemporary society." The study, edited by Jewelle Taylor Gibbs, presents a comprehensive interdisciplinary perspective of the social and economic problems of these young people. It provides valuable statistics on high school drop out rates, work skills and attitudes, unemployment, robbery, rape, homicide and aggravated assault, drug addiction and teenage parenthood. But Gibbs makes no mention of the utter alienation of these young people from the natural environment, which is, after all, the source of Earth's abundance and well being. The loss of this contact with living and growing things, even rudimentary knowledge of where food and water comes from, must have serious consequences that we yet have no way of measuring.

The study says nothing of the difficult days ahead as American society seeks to

make the transition from its current levels of consumption of resources to more sustainable patterns of the future. Developing an environmental perspective within the Black community could help smooth this transition in several ways:

- by promoting greater understanding of the productive assets of society, including land, water and natural resources.
- by strengthening collaboration with groups seeking to redirect public investment and economic development away from wasteful exploitation of nature toward urban restoration and meeting basic human needs.
- by gaining access to information and resources that enhance the potential of community survival.
- by developing new knowledge and skills to be shared by groups of people who live in the city.
- by strengthening social and political organization and creating new opportunities for leadership within the community.

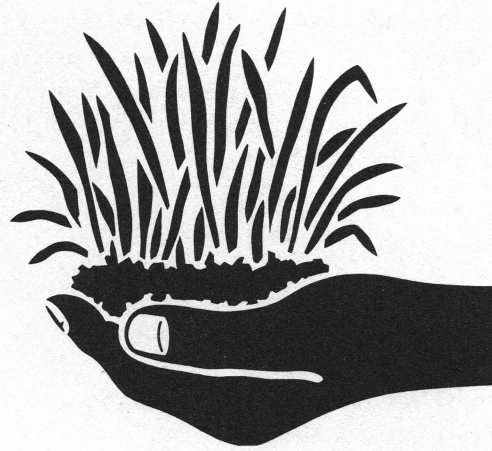
Environmental organizations in the United States should also modify practices to expand their constituency to include Blacks and members of other minority groups as participants in shaping and building public support for environmental policies. With the exception of limited collaboration between environmentalists and Native Americans groups, and anti-toxic campaigns, there has been little communication between environmentalists and non-European minority groups within the US. Critical issues such as population control, limiting human intervention in the ecosystem, or rebuilding our cities in balance with nature have been discussed almost entirely from a European, and often elitist perspective.

Environmental organizations have taught us to appreciate the diversity of non-human species and to recognize the fundamental interdependency of human and non-human life on the planet. Such a perspective affirms the importance of a fundamental link between human societies and the ecosystem that sustains them: the air, the water, the minerals and fossil fuels, the soil and diversity of life forms that are the source of bountifulness and health. Appreciation of the ecological web, of season, setting, climate and nature, can guide us toward greater knowledge and skills for survival and success.

Respect for ecological diversity implies respect for human diversity. Thus far, however, the environmental movement, despite its highlighting crises in underdeveloped countries, has tended to be racially exclusive, expressing the point of view of the middle- and upper-income strata of European ethnic groups in developed countries. It has reproduced within its ranks prevailing patterns of social relations. Until recently there has been little concern for the environmental needs and rights of historically disadvantaged groups in developed countries. Few efforts to mobilize such groups in addressing environmental needs of Third and Fourth world communities have been made. If environmentalists hope to have credibility as the voice of a grassroots planetary perspective, this pattern will have to change. Black Americans can play an important role in this shift of strategy and consciousness.

II. Environmental Justice

The principle of social justice, however, must be at the heart of any effort aimed at bringing Blacks into the mainstream of environmental organizations in the United States. Such a vision must offer an alterna-



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tive to the romantic view of the wilderness without people as being the only concern of environmentalists. Advocates of environmental justice would join efforts to conserve species diversity, living natural resources—plants, animals, microorganisms and ecosystems of tropical regions. They would question, however, a view of the tropical rainforest as a private laboratory for European pharmaceutical companies ignoring the needs of indigenous populations. Advocates of environmental justice seek to avoid distortion of environmental information as a way of rationalizing the economic status quo. They would challenge us not to misuse concern for endangered species as a way of diluting our collective responsibility for meeting basic human needs for health care, food and shelter. Environmentalists should not manipulate legitimate concerns about population growth as strategies for preserving racial dominance and purity.

To be useful for Black Americans, an environmental perspective must acknowledge that institutional violence and oppression do exist, and that capital accumulation by a small, privileged elite is at the heart of the global ecological crisis. Environmental protection, therefore, must be understood

as intimately connected to efforts to eradicate injustice. Solutions must offer a practical guide for goals that can be accomplished in the short run as we seek a path toward a more sustainable future.

III. Jobs vs. Environment

The principle of environmental justice can provide for more than a symbolic coalition between environmental organizations and Black political leadership addressing the needs of separate constituencies. It can be the basis for functional collaboration in a new environmental and economic agenda.

A big issue is jobs. In 1955, for example, the Black and White employment rates among teenagers were about equal (52 percent for each); by 1980 a 26 percent gap had opened up between them as the employment rate for Blacks fell to 27 percent, and that of Whites rose slightly to 53 percent. One half of the male teenage unemployment is concentrated among 7 percent of the youth population. Without intervention, structural and institutional changes will lead to greater losses among population groups least able to afford these losses.

Undoubtedly even larger changes will be needed to make the transition from industrial society to more sustainable patterns.

Environmental organizations can no longer afford to take the view that they are unconcerned about who benefits and who loses from restrictions on economic growth. Shifting resources away from projects that are damaging to the ecosystem toward programs and projects that meet basic human needs must become the highest priority for the environmental movement.

Environmentalists suggest that global restoration can create new work. They have argued that programs such as mandatory

refillable container legislation, recycling and pollution abatement, reforestation and increased use of public transportation can stimulate creation of new jobs. Social expenditures on health, education, welfare and the arts, they point out, have few negative environmental impacts. Finally, some environmentalists argue that, in a steady state economy, work can be redistributed, sharing on an equitable basis opportunities with all who wish to work. Thus a commitment to full employment and environmental protection is possible.

If these proposals are to be taken seriously, however, Blacks, other minority groups, and blue collar workers must be active participants in an environmental movement that places a high priority on their needs. Organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League have a real stake in the outcome of such environmental policies. They should be invited to participate in the dialogue establishing public environmental priorities. New organizations and perspectives are also needed.

IV. Environmental Restoration and the Drug Epidemic

It is not likely that major allocations of funding for urban restoration can be made available unless such programs can solve multiple urban problems. An example of these conflicting needs occurred recently when the financially strapped City of Berkeley turned down a modest request to fund a feasibility study for a popular restoration project: the opening up of Strawberry Creek as a central element in revitalizing the downtown. The City was under pressure to

allocate \$500,000 to fight the drug wars in the predominantly Black flatlands neighborhood of South Berkeley.

The fiscal bind of the City underscores a connection between social and environmental problems. Drug abuse in the inner city is approaching epidemic proportions. Recent studies of drug use among young Blacks confirms high correlation to low school achievement, delinquency and accidental death, the newest threat being the specter of AIDS which is rapidly increasing among intravenous drug users in the inner city.

These connections are likely even deeper than they appear. The inner city drug crisis is, perhaps, an inevitable outcome of an unhealthy separation between communities and their surroundings. Drug lords and law enforcement agencies battle for control over inner city neighborhoods, while fearful residents look on in dismay or resignation. The people who live in crack-infested neighborhoods have little control over their environment. Often ownership of property is held by absentee landlords. Discussing the mass migration of Blacks from the South to northern cities, Wendell Berry has correctly observed:

The move from country to the city, deprived (Blacks) of their competence in doing for themselves. It is no exaggeration to say that, in the country, most blacks were skilled in the arts of make do and subsistence. If most of them were poor, they were at least competently poor; they could do for themselves and for each other. They knew how to grow and harvest and prepare food. They knew how to gather wild fruits, nuts and herbs. They knew how to hunt and fish. . . . In the cities, all of this know how was suddenly of no value, and they became abjectly and dependently poor as they had never been before. In the country, they possessed a certain freedom in their ability to *do*

things, but once they were in the city freedom was inescapably associated with the ability to *buy* things.

Without blaming the victims, or suggesting the clock be turned back, these remarks nevertheless give some idea of the damage of excessive urban dependency.

The link between environmental dependency and the drug epidemic points to a relationship between urban restoration and progress in eradicating drug abuse. "Never do anything for only one reason," says Dan Hemenway, author of a book on permaculture, a new approach to agriculture that emphasizes humans living within constraints of natural systems. How can environmental perspectives help fight drug abuse?

There are many connections between what we ingest—whether intravenous drugs or healthy food—how we feel, our bodies and the Earth. Emphasis on these connections, including disciplines of preventive medicine, diet and exercise are central to the new environmental ethic. Measures of self esteem such as social merit, skill, artistry, effort and integrity, rather than conspicuous consumption are environmental values related to an emerging global consciousness. This consciousness can be an important resource for inner-city communities, providing a practical context for new citizen initiatives on a scale with the drug crisis.

Grassroots neighborhoods have been organizing to fight drug abuse. Courageous individuals in many such neighborhoods have become vulnerable to attack by threatened drug dealers. Support of internationally vibrant environmental organizations can be targeted to such grassroots organizations. New networks can be established. Collaboration with environmental organizations can lead to greater wilderness exposure for inner-city kids, within the city, within the region or even in international exchange programs. The challenge of

mountain climbing, exposure to geological formations of the Grand Canyon, the discipline of sailing, the quietness of the forest floor, and new human friendships can be compelling alternatives to the adventure of dealing drugs, if such challenges are available on a sustained basis. The mysteries of the universe can stimulate young minds before they become cynical.

Environmental scientists, such as toxicologists and epidemiologists, can work with community organizations, public officials and urban planners to find ways of integrating the wilderness experience and drug treatment facilities. Such collaboration can also lead to sustainable new urban habitats for re-entry of those who have completed treatment programs. Grassroots organizations could benefit greatly from the broader base political support such programs would engender.

V. Inner City as Damaged Land

The American inner city was once a wilderness. Today, islands, estuaries, forests, riparian habitats that once existed in these privileged locations have been replaced by asphalt, concrete, barbed wire fences, boarded up stores, crack houses, abandoned factories, landfills, and pollution. After generations of isolation and broken promises, exploitation and manipulation, the people who live in these places rarely pause to remember what it once was, or to speculate on what it might become.

Isolation of Blacks from stewardship of the environment has deep historic roots. It is hard to keep the faith. The Black population migrated to the cities to escape the four centuries of exploitation on plantations, crop farms, and coal mines of the south. Displacement of Blacks from the rural

countryside is parallel to experiences of others in the Third World. Understanding of these experiences, however painful, is an important resource as we seek a path toward sustainable development.

For two decades, American central cities have been shrinking in population as those more fortunate have been fleeing to the suburbs in search of a better life. Suburban development continues the destruction of fragile agricultural lands. Can we afford a new round of urban expansion and abandonment as the Black population seeks to realize its legitimate aspirations as a part of the American dream? Will the suburbs become new ghettos isolated from new work in the information age? Should we encourage urban gentrification while ignoring the underclass trapped in American ghettos? None of these alternatives is an adequate reconciliation of economic growth and the integrity of the environment. If we are to restore damaged inner cities, we must also invest in the future of the people who live there.

VI. Developing Urban Environmental Leadership

In the next decade, important decisions about the future of cities, and surrounding agricultural land will have consequences affecting millions of people. The deteriorated infrastructure of urban areas must be rebuilt. There are hidden rewards for undertaking a program of rebuilding our urban cores in tune with nature. The investment of billions of dollars which will be required offer opportunities for fresh approaches to affordable housing, public services, recycling of resources and waste. There is room for small projects and bringing wilderness back into the city. Restoration of inner city neighborhoods should be a high priority for en-

vironmentalists. But investment in education and social organization of the existing inner-city population is needed if this population is to have a stake in the outcome.

Within this same time period, new urban environmental leadership must be developed. The belief that human societies ought to be established on a more sustainable technical and physical basis creates an opening for increased growth and maturity for Black and other minority groups in the city. In ten years, hundreds of geologists, biologists, artists and writers, agricultural economists, political scientists, epidemiologists, and resource and population specialists who make up the leadership of the environmental movement could be Black Americans. These new environmentalists could provide guidance to hundreds of thousands of people in society at large and in their own communities, making the difficult transition from industrial to more sustainable patterns of urban life.

Building new bridges could help Blacks resolve age old conflicts between desire for separation and integration. A global, rather than an isolationist view, and a new respect for diversity offers encouragement to rethink relationships between neighbors, communities, past and future possibilities. An extended time horizon, concern about the future of the planet, challenges all of us to visualize renewed communities of diverse population groups living together without racism.

VII. Earth Island Institute Urban Habitat Program

In order to meet responsibilities for citizenship, Blacks and other minorities must have opportunities to experience the fullness of the healing powers of nature, and to play a greater role in creating environmental projects that benefit all members of the community. We must find new ways to bridge the gap between minorities and advocates of the environment. The Urban Habitat Program at Earth Island Institute is an example of an organization set up to contribute to these objectives. It will serve as a clearinghouse emphasizing access by community based organizations to global, regional and neighborhood environmental resources. Initial efforts will focus on African American communities in the San Francisco Bay Area. As the program evolves, parallel efforts will be made in Hispanic, Asian and other minority communities. Priority will be placed on strengthening the human potential within these communities for environmental awareness, discipline and action. The program is a modest beginning in an effort long overdue. Hopefully, its elements can be replicated in other urban communities.

ACTION*

1. Arrange presentations to groups with substantial minority membership by existing environmental organizations and individual resource persons.
2. Develop outreach programs by organizations like the Sierra Club to promote active learning and exposure to the wilderness experience by minority youth.
3. Create networks among minority based organizations, environmental groups, public schools, community colleges and institutions of higher learning to expand educational opportunities for minorities in environmental science and related fields.
4. Work specifically with inner-city organizations fighting drug abuse to develop environmentally related projects such as tree planting, restoration, urban farming, horticultural therapy, international exchanges, etc., reinforcing neighborhood-initiated efforts at law enforcement, prevention and treatment of drug abuse.
5. Build coalitions with environmental groups, labor and minority organizations promoting creation of new jobs compatible with environmental restoration.
6. Develop new legislative initiatives linking environmental restoration and inner city needs.

*Action section by Carl Anthony