



Justice Outside

# Racial Equity in Outdoor Science and Environmental Education: Re-Establishing the Field with Intention

by Jedda Foreman, Rena Payan, Laura Rodriguez, and Craig Strang

*"We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate, and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature."*

— Sonya Renee Taylor

The outdoor science and environmental education (EE) field is reeling. The impact of COVID-19 has been devastating. The pandemic has revealed that across the country, organizations in this field are structured and have responded more like restaurants than school systems. Within days or weeks of the shutdown, there were massive lay-offs and furloughs, and by the end of the calendar year, if shelter in place and physical distancing guidelines are not lifted, nearly three-fourths of all organizations are uncertain about their ability to reopen (Collins, Dorph, Foreman, Pande, Strang, & Young, 2020). Ever.

For all of us, regardless of what sector of business, government or public good we are in, there is no playbook or set of best practices for making our way through this situation. Every organizational leader we've talked to is juggling competing priorities, responsibilities as novel as the virus itself, and no-win decision-

making dilemmas, with fewer resources than they had before. It is clear that the challenges of 2020 will continue to test even the wisest and hardest working leaders.

And, as is a common theme during crises (especially economic crises), we are hearing from white-led organizations that work on equity, inclusion, cultural relevance, justice, and diversity, much of which began recently, is "being put on pause." Some leaders are questioning whether or how equity work can continue when they don't know if their organizations will survive this crisis or when most of their staff have been laid off. This line of thinking leaves the field on a path that will return us to the "normal" that resulted from decades of performative commitments to racial equity, inequitable policies that disadvantage Communities of Color, and exclusive and marginalizing workplace environments (Romero, Foreman, Strang, Rodriguez, Payan, & Moore Bailey, 2019). We suggest that anti-racism in our field is important enough that we should pursue it even when it is not convenient to do so.

What if we returned from this pandemic with a deep and profound commitment to a new way of being? What would it look like if, instead of this crisis making our work towards equity slower and less important, it became an opportunity for the field to work towards equity faster and make that work a higher priority? What if equity and inclusion were built into every fiber of our reimagined and reopened organizations, considered in every new initiative so that "pausing" is not possible as it is simply how we go about each day? As the Learning Policy Institute wrote, "(school) districts and states

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Photo courtesy of Camp ELSO

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can make policy and practice decisions in the coming weeks and months that both respond to current needs and chip away at long-standing gaps in opportunity and access. (Cardichon, 2020)" We believe the same is true for environmental education organizations.

**H**ere are seven ideas for white-led organizations to join the effort in transforming the EE field to a new way of being that is rooted in racial equity and has justice embedded at every inflection point:

### 1 Talk about racism.

Racism is at the heart of inequity in this country. Currently, the impacts of COVID-19 on health and the economy are being disproportionately felt by People of Color. When we think about how environmental education can emerge stronger from this pandemic, it must involve naming race as a factor in inequity. As The BridgeSpan Group wrote in a recent report, "A race-neutral approach would fail to account for the ways that existing disparities and structural racism affect outcomes (Patel, Smith, & Martin, 2020)." We need to directly talk about anti-blackness, white supremacy culture, police brutality, and how racism is built into our country's policies and systems in deep ways that manifest in our everyday interactions. When white people speak out, People of Color don't bear the burden alone to bring these issues to light. As Natasha Cloud wrote, "if you're silent, you are part of the problem (Cloud, 2020)." Specifically, the environmental movement and environmental education field are steeped in racist history from John Muir and Teddy Roosevelt, to the formation of our National Parks, to the field's insular hiring and advancement trends, to the appropriation of indigenous culture while simultaneously erasing its current context and contributions, to the stories we tell and songs we sing at campfires. We have a responsibility to read, discuss, and to educate ourselves and each other about the harm embedded in our history, our "monuments", and which ones need to be pulled down (Brune, 2020).

## 2 Rethink goals, priorities and measures of "success."

There is a damaging, harmful paradigm in our field that tells us that the value of our work is defined by "numbers served." This paradigm privileges quantity over quality and outputs over outcomes. When our funders, our boards, and our egos tell us that more is better, and the surest sign of resilience when we reopen is to return to our previous scale as quickly as possible, equity is always the casualty. Prioritizing numbers served will lead to two racist outcomes: we will design programs for majority audiences first and wait until "later" to adapt them for marginalized communities with "special needs;" and we will offer programs first to customers that can pay retail program fees because more revenue allows us to hire more staff and run more programs. Scholarships, tuition waivers, transportation grants, and community partnerships will have to wait until "we are back on our feet," until we have "more bandwidth." A new paradigm would have us look away from head counting, and instead prioritize addressing the needs of the most vulnerable communities first.

Communities that have been hit the hardest by COVID-19, hammered by school closures, failed by remote "learning," traumatized by racist violence, and historically denied the physical and emotional

benefits of access to safe outdoor spaces—what if we designed our reopening strategies to serve these communities first? We can make the case to our philanthropy and government agency partners that they should also adjust their measures of success to address relevant societal challenges rather than simplistic numeric targets.

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## 3 Re-imagine the workplace.

For those of us still working, the workplace looks radically different. Not only have our office locations largely shifted to our homes, but ways of interacting, meeting, conducting programs and doing business have been completely disrupted. This disruption is an opportunity to examine our existing workplace structures, systems, and cultures through the lens of white supremacy culture (Okun, n.d.). Tema Okun and Keneth Jones write that white supremacy is part of the fabric of all of our organizations, but the good news is, there are antidotes. Let's re-envision how we work with one another: how decisions are made, who holds power in our organizations, what kinds of expertise and lived experience are valued and promoted, what we expect from one

another, and how transparent those expectations are. Let's create new practices and traditions, define shared values, and create new feedback systems that promote equity, inclusion, respect and power-sharing.

## 4 Reinvigorate professional learning.

Organizations facing a financial crunch when reopening may have a natural reflex to reduce professional learning time to maximize the time spent delivering programs. We recommend going slow to go fast. Double down on professional learning and the reflection time that it provides to rethink the quality, purpose and priorities of your work. In addition to safety protocols, program logistics, and inspiring new natural history content, make sure that your new team has plenty of time to get to know each other, to build rapport and a common vision, to define values, and to create a brave space for challenging conversations together. Ensure that professional learning includes time to: increase understanding of the history of racism in our field (and the U.S. more broadly), reflect on unconscious bias, build awareness of and strategies for confronting microaggressions, and focus teaching and learning on cultural relevance, multiple ways of knowing, and, as Paulo Friere says, "using education as a practice for freedom (Friere, 2018)." Take some time to learn directly from the communities that you will be inviting to your programs. While your whole team should have opportunities to attend conferences and workshops, it is important to prioritize the participation of professionals who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in these opportunities. For many Black, Indigenous, and People of Color on a mostly white staff, their only opportunity to find affinity spaces, empathy, mentors of Color, and relief from being a "minority" is to attend professional learning experiences outside your organization. Professional learning and networking that includes opportunities to engage in affinity spaces can provide for those with marginalized identities an antidote and healing to counteract the effects of isolation and oppression, and, for those with dominant identities, provides a learning space that does not rely on the emotional labor of the oppressed.

## 5 Redesign hiring practices.

When we're open and begin to rebuild the capacity of the EE field, we can reconsider what expertise we want at every level of leadership in our organizations. We must prioritize experience and expertise advocating for and communicating about equity, lived experience in and with the communities we're striving to reach, and models of leadership beyond those rooted in white supremacy culture and characteristics. Redesigning hiring practices includes redesigning job announcements and job descriptions, qualifications, hiring criteria, interview questions, performance evaluations, and where we recruit. These reimagined components will ring true if they mirror comparable revisions to our organizational mission, vision, values, goals and priorities. Changes to the racial and gender diversity of our directors, middle managers and instructors that six months ago could only happen gradually over years, could now be a stunning and welcome example of punctuated equilibrium. Our newly comprised teams will be uniquely suited to establish partnerships and design authenti-

cally culturally relevant programming with and for marginalized communities that we aim to serve first. Note to HR directors and hiring committees: you shouldn't have any trouble finding qualified Professionals of Color to apply; they were among the first to be laid off at the outset of the pandemic!

## 6 Rebuild partnerships.

Establish authentic and mutually beneficial relationships with a broad range of environment-rich organizations across sectors including environmental justice, youth development, health and wellness, food justice, nutrition, transportation, clean water, clean air, and more. These organizations may not self-identify as being in the environmental education sector.

Meet, read up, listen carefully, find the intersection of the goals of your programs with the needs and priorities of your partners. In addition, establish partnerships with school districts, county offices of education, and other mainstream education systems that can provide access to environmental education experiences for a broader range of learners.

When we envision mutually beneficial relationships, rather than audiences or customers we can serve, we can dismantle a deeply rooted sense of saviorism that positions those with resources as benevolent bringers of outdoor experiences. Partnerships with community-based organizations and school systems can help us to identify vulnerable populations, and help us to understand what societal conditions have led to their vulnerability. If these genuine partnerships are established at the same time that we have redesigned hiring practices and reimagined our workplace, we can have the resources, expertise and lived experience within our organizations to build trust and expedite the efficacy of our work together.

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## 7 Redefine the field.

With broader partnerships, inclusive workplace cultures, more equitable hiring practices, and a clear focus on equity at all levels of our work, we can redefine the field of environmental education — which has roots in the oppression and marginalization of People of Color — into a field that works towards ensuring that every person is able to access the healing benefits of spending time outdoors and connecting to nature. Environmental education can be a field that recognizes and honors that "environmental literacy" is comprised of the knowledge, skills, know-how, attitudes, values, and beliefs that are held by communities in unique and powerful ways.

Centering equity cannot be the work of one person or

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even one organization—individuals must work together to change policies, pedagogy, curriculum, culture, and systems. All of these steps are part of a systemic approach to centering equity and, in particular, racial equity. Prioritizing racial equity will enhance the environmental education field for us all. As BridgeSpan articulates, “deliberately prioritizing racial equity will further benefit the rest of society through the ‘curb-cut effect,’ which has shown that laws and programs designed for vulnerable groups have positive impacts on others (Cardichon, 2020).” Naming racism, creating antidotes to white supremacy, valuing many kinds of experience and expertise, and building strong partnerships will improve our relationships to each other and to nature, and make the environmental education field stronger, more resilient, and vastly more relevant.

None of these actions are new. Each of these ideas has been articulated, described in-depth, and called for by social justice and environmental justice leaders of Color in the environmental education field and beyond, for decades, often in ways that are under-recognized and under-supported. Their messages have been largely ignored or unseen by white-led and predominantly white organizations. There is nothing good about this pandemic: the loss of life, loss of jobs, loss of cherished organizations is staggering and hard to comprehend. Since there is no going back, let’s figure out how to use this moment, by establishing an environmental education field that is truly centered in racial equity and inclusion.

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