

Black and Green

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Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, February 8, 2009

In his inauguration speech and early actions from the Oval Office, President Obama has signaled that he intends a sharp departure from the policies of the Bush administration. Nowhere is the contrast clearer, or more sorely needed, than in his approach to the environment. With an ambitious plan to retool the nation's energy economy, and a "green dream team" of highly regarded scientists and administrators to carry out his plans, the President is poised to become the most environmentally attuned American leader in a generation.

Obama's environmental agenda is an important development in its own right, in a country that has in recent years watched from the sidelines as other nations take the lead in global efforts to address climate change, the control of toxic substances, and the protection of endangered species. But there is something else of significance here. In a welcome departure from the stereotypical image of environmentalism (think Birkenstock-clad white male), the conservationist-in-chief is African-American. In a presidency widely celebrated for historical breakthroughs, Obama's breaching of the green-white wall may be one of his most enduring legacies to the American environmental movement.

With the new administration aspiring to build bridges and break old patterns, now is the perfect time to recast environmentalism in more inclusive terms, recognizing its inherently broad appeal and reshaping its public image. It is time to foster a more diverse culture of sustainability that cuts across lines of race, class, political partisanship, and urban/rural divides.

In fact Obama is only the most visible example of environmental leadership by people of color that has gone unrecognized for far too long. The history of US environmentalism includes not only John Muir's famous efforts to protect American wilderness, but also those of African-American activists in Chicago who in 1965 formed the Citizens Committee to End Lead Poisoning, launching the first major campaign for blood screening for children. Alongside such celebrated personalities as Al Gore or activist David Brower must figure Latino environmental leaders like Carlos Porrás and Richard Moore, who have worked with hundreds of low-income communities across the western United States mobilizing against industrial pollution.

The connection between race, class, and the environment is not accidental. Historically, those suffering the greatest exposure to pollution and occupational hazards on the job – from farm workers handling pesticides to miners with black lung disease – have been immigrants, working-class whites, and disproportionate numbers of people of color. A similar pattern is seen in the location of heavily polluting industries and toxic waste sites in low-income and minority communities.

Faced with the most egregious environmental problems, these same communities have been on the front lines of efforts to improve environmental quality, through groups like the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Sustainable South Bronx, and the National Tribal Environmental Council. Despite these efforts – and despite public opinion polls consistently finding equal levels of environmental concern across racial and socioeconomic groups – there is a lingering misperception that green concerns are for "whites only," limited to Anglo urban elites who can "afford to care" about ecology, having satisfied basic material needs.

The environmental elitism charge, which comingles elements of race, class, and urban-rural divides, has been cynically amplified by those seeking to skirt environmental regulations. Their spokespeople use divisive rhetoric such as "jobs versus owls" in the timber industry, and pit autoworkers against the goal of climate stabilization in an attempt to forestall the transition to more fuel-efficient vehicles.

Upon closer examination, the intuition underlying the environmental elitism charge has always been paper thin. Clean air and water are not mere luxuries, they are necessities – as any parent of a child with pollution-induced asthma will attest. It is equally clear that climate-related disasters such as Hurricane Katrina are most devastating for those who lack the economic resources to get back on their feet.

If we are to achieve the scope and scale of changes needed to put our economy on a sustainable path, environmental concerns must be mainstreamed, integrated into the vocabulary and everyday practices of numerous social sectors and political constituencies. Environmental issues are well suited to the sort of bridge-building promoted by the President-elect – witness the recent alliance forged between Christian evangelical leaders and climate scientists publicizing the dangers of global warming. In practical terms, the Obama administration must ensure that its promised “green-collar jobs” extend to blue-collar workers, and should appoint experts not only from mainstream organizations in the Washington DC Beltway, but from diverse components of the environmental movement. For a presidency that seeks to redefine important parameters of American politics, painting a deeper shade of green would be a welcome legacy.

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