

Ethan McIntosh on Intersectional Environmentalism

Bringing together a group of activists doing environmental work across disciplines, the Organizing Strategies panel at the 2015 Land and Water Conference offered participants a unique chance to think critically about the desirability and feasibility of environmental activist strategies. The four panelists from across the United States had a chance to describe their respective projects, which ranged from more traditional lines of work like lobbying and litigation to the pioneering of new legal and economic models for protecting and monitoring land and water.

However, the conversation was able to expand and explore issues within the larger American environmental movement thanks to several younger members of the audience, who took advantage of a lengthy question/answer session to question and challenge environmental work from intersectional and international points of view.

One person brought up the subject of environmental racism, and asked how mainstream environmental movements were addressing issues of race and their inextricable ties with environmental issues.

The responses from the panelists, by and large, indicated that race and racism are seldom addressed comprehensively throughout much of the mainstream movement. Severine von Tscharner Fleming, founding director of The Greenhorns, reported that the vast majority of the young farmers whom her organization recruits and supports are white, and said that most of the people involved in the mainstream environmental movement are white as well. Aaron Regunberg, a politician and activist with a background primarily in youth and labor organizing, emphasized the predominantly white leadership of environmental groups as a serious problem for the movement going forward.

Luke Metzger, the director of Environment Texas, discussed the tension in his line of work between prioritizing the issues faced by marginalized members of society and persuading the most politically powerful people to make change from the top. According to Metzger, negotiating with powerful corporations and forming coalitions with conservative politicians to achieve short-term gains often means “looking away” from fundamental ideological divides, and can end up alienating underprivileged voices over the long run.

Another member of the audience used the discussion on intersectionality as a platform to bring up the globalization of extractivism and asked what the environmental movement was doing to form international coalitions.

Metzger initially responded by suggesting that given the United States’ relative global power, fighting bad corporate behavior in America could have impacts elsewhere. However, in his discussion of a specific suit that his organization was

filing against Chevron in the U.S, Metzger admitted that he didn't know whether legal action in the U.S. could realistically curb Chevron internationally.

And in response to another question about building international solidarity, Liz Barry of the Public Laboratory was honest about her lack of international experience, but did offer that in her experience building coalitions, one effective way of disseminating information across networks is through "social bonds," or face-to-face communication between activists. However, she did joke that it falls short to address transnational issues by saying, "Let's hang out more!"

It's clear that all of us have work to do when it comes to applying intersectionality to our environmental work. Knowing how much extractivism disproportionately impacts low-income of color, it would be counterproductive to treat environmental issues and systemic racism as separable issues. In order to be truly effective and long-lasting, environmental movements need to not only increase minority representation in their leadership, but also commit themselves fully to ending institutional racism.

And in order to have a shot at slowing down climate change and natural resource depletion on a global level, it is essential for environmental activists to coordinate internationally. When we fail to form multinational coalitions unified against unrestricted free trade by borderless multinational syndicates, we remain complicit in the "race to the bottom" that allows large corporations to freely roam the globe in search of countries in the Global South where they can extract and pollute, unfettered by the rules and regulations present in wealthy countries like America.

In short, it is essential that environmental groups think about how they can help build up movements that span across lines of nationality, race, and class. To quote Audre Lorde, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."