

NEWS



What Is Intersectional Environmentalism?

by Sheri Radford / Apr 8, 2021

The fight for justice, for both people and the planet

To anyone well-versed in intersectional environmentalism, the cataclysmic events of 2020 weren't a complete shock. A global pandemic, deadly wildfires in Australia and California, a record-breaking hurricane season, youth climate strikes, Black Lives Matter protests and unprecedented attempts at voter suppression in the US all came together, intertwining and amplifying each other. It was a year that also saw record-shattering temperatures in places like Miami—and Antarctica—and huge protests against police violence in Nigeria, Chinese control in Hong Kong, restrictive abortion laws in Poland and exploitative farming laws in India.



When viewed through the lens of intersectional environmentalism, the devastating events of 2020 can be understood as the inevitable result of decades of policies that have valued profits and power at the expense of people and the planet. Becoming clearer every day are the interconnections between injustices against the planet and injustices against the world's most vulnerable and marginalized people. We can no longer ignore the fact that social justice and environmental justice are intrinsically linked.

People's different social identities can overlap to intensify either prejudices or privileges, adding up to something that is ultimately greater than the sum of the parts. Social identities include age, gender, race, class, sexuality, culture and immigration status. Over the years, many systems of inequality, which have oppressed individuals based on these social identities, have also intensified the effects of climate change.

Where did the idea of intersectionality come from?

Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American lawyer, civil rights advocate and law professor at Columbia and UCLA, first developed the idea of intersectionality in 1989. She argued that the experience of being a Black woman can only be understood by looking at both race and gender together, not separately. To illustrate the concept, including in her much-watched TED Talk [The Urgency of Intersectionality](#), she often cites the example of the 1976 court case DeGraffenreid v. General Motors Assembly Division.

Emma Degraffenreid and four other Black women argued that General Motors discriminated against Black women. GM didn't hire any Black women before 1964, so when seniority-based layoffs later took place, all of the Black women lacked seniority and therefore lost their jobs. The court, however, refused to consider compound discrimination and said that the plaintiffs could allege discrimination based on either race or gender but not a combination of the two. GM employed Black men in the factory, which contradicted the claim of racism, and White women in the office, which contradicted the claim of sexism. The court was unwilling to consider that the plaintiffs' experience could be understood only as the intersection of racism and sexism.



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Privilege

For many decades, much of the mainstream discussion around environmentalism has come from a viewpoint of privilege, especially white privilege. Many of the commonly espoused tips for helping the environment also assume that the eco-activist has a certain level of privilege with regards to disposable income, free time, mobility, transportation options, etc.

Organic produce is expensive. Cooking everything from scratch is time-consuming, and it requires access to a fully equipped kitchen and clean drinking water. Reusable stainless steel straws can be too difficult to use and to clean thoroughly for people with mobility issues. Public transit is unsafe—or unavailable entirely—in certain marginalized neighbourhoods.

Unequal injustice

The reality is that people who are Black or Indigenous or who come from at-risk communities are far more likely than white people to suffer from the effects of environmental degradation. These include problems such as poor air quality, limited access to clean drinking water and an increase in respiratory illnesses in children. BIPOC are also more likely to reside in areas with environmental hazards such as garbage dumps, toxic waste sites and factories spewing pollutants into the air and water.

The parts of the world most affected by climate change are the parts that contribute the least to the problem, and vice versa. Residents of richer countries, such as the United States and Canada, produce a huge percentage of the world's garbage, but it's the inhabitants of poorer places like West Africa who suffer the most and sometimes are even forced to leave their homes, becoming climate migrants. Such environmental migrants are forced to flee rising sea levels, extreme weather, water scarcity and other devastating effects of climate change, which they did not cause.

Amplifying other voices

Black and Indigenous activists have been advocating for social and environmental change for decades, but BIPOC voices are all too often ignored. Instead, the voices of white activists have been amplified.

Being an intersectional environmentalist means stepping back, listening, learning and often allowing others to lead the way. BIPOC know the most pressing issues and injustices facing BIPOC communities. If you are not BIPOC yourself, don't try to lead the charge or act the part of the saviour. Instead, sign the relevant petitions, donate to helpful non-profit organizations, help to spread useful social media posts and include BIPOC perspectives in your own environmental endeavours. Help BIPOC communities fight for the same environmental protections that are often the norm in white communities. Vote for politicians who support environmental justice for all, and help ensure everyone has the same access to the ballot box.

And don't forget to listen to the voices of today's youth on the subject of intersectional environmentalism. As with so many movements throughout history, it's young people who are leading the way toward a better future for all. This time they're fighting against injustice and the mistreatment of both people and the planet, and they could use everyone's help to build a better and more inclusive world for all.

Learn more

- Visit the [website](#) and [Instagram](#) for the Intersectional Environmentalist, which aims to dismantle systems of oppression in the environmental movement.
- Visit Green Girl Leah's [website](#) and [Instagram](#). Green Girl Leah is Leah Thomas, a writer who explores the relationship between social justice and environmentalism.
- Visit The African American Policy Forum (AAPF) [website](#) and [Instagram](#). Co-founded by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the AAPF is an innovative think tank that aims to dismantle structural inequality.









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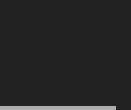
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