



Equity is Great, but What Does it Have to Do with Sustainability?



About the Authors

Clement Loo

Clement Loo is an Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies and the Student Success Coordinator for Equity, Diversity, and Intercultural Programs at the University of Minnesota Morris. He also serves on the Advisory Council and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) and is a fellow of the Institute on the Environment's Educator program. His research and teaching focus on food justice and equitable/inclusive stakeholder consultation as a tool to improve the robustness of scholarship and practice within higher education.

Sarah Stoeckl

Sarah Stoeckl, PhD, Program Manager in the Office of Sustainability at the University of Oregon, focuses on outreach, engagement, and support for faculty, students, and staff, as well as the broader Eugene-Springfield community. Sarah is working to increase the office's attention to issues of justice and equity as key to sustainability, and to enhance the university's dialogue around the intersections between environmental and justice issues, including the need for racial justice. The overlapping crises of 2020, including the COVID-19 pandemic, mass uprisings against police brutality against Black communities and people, and increasing visibility of global warming's effects, have only further clarified how essential it is to tackle social injustice and the climate crisis simultaneously.



“In a few decades, the relationship between the environment, resources and conflict may seem almost as obvious as the connection we see between human rights, democracy and peace.”

- Wangari Maathaiz

Historically, “environmentalism” and “social justice” have not always overlapped. Indeed, even today, we encounter colleagues who have explicitly argued that addressing social issues might serve as a roadblock that will slow down the environmental or climate movements. The general public tends to view, and media tends to depict, environmentalism as characterized by conservation efforts aimed at protecting or restoring wilderness, parklands, and wildlife, or else on technological and economic solutions to climate change, reducing individual consumption and waste, and maximizing efficiencies while saving money. A related area, environmental justice, has been characterized by a focus on human-centric issues including reducing toxics, urban planning, worker safety, labor issues, food security, and access to public transportation. Meanwhile, those focused on supporting Indigenous sovereignty, equity and access for people with disabilities, income inequality, LGBTQA rights, dismantling white supremacy, and related challenges remain lumped into the “social justice” category writ large, seemingly separated from environmental concerns. However, this separation need not continue, given that social concerns are knit into the definition of sustainability and sustainable development. Yet mainstream media depictions and the public understanding of sustainability and the environmental movement still tend to depict two separate pathways, one focused on “nature” as separate from humans and one focused on human cultures, needs, and social systems as separate from the non-human world.



Many of the historic focus areas of mainstream environmentalism in the world's wealthy countries underscore privilege by focusing on areas of particular interest to those with greater wealth, for example, individual consumption habits, expensive technologies such as electric cars and solar panels, or preservation of recreational spaces (most with their own histories of Indigenous displacement and racial inequity). It has tended to not focus on issues that have an impact on the daily lives of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Mainstream environmentalism until very recently has paid relatively little attention (and perhaps continues to not pay sufficient attention) to topics such as environmental remediation (e.g., air and water quality) and social issues such as public transportation or equitable access to green spaces and healthy food. Environmental justice advocates have also argued that the mainstream environmental movement has failed to appreciate the disparate impact of pollution, climate change, and toxic waste on communities of color and lower-income communities (Bullard 2000; Cutter 1995), and lower- and middle-income countries (Loo 2015).

The tendency of affluent people that fail to appropriately recognize and consider the needs and concerns of marginalized individuals can be seen in the "no more than two degrees" target endorsed by many climate advocacy groups. Such a target fails to account for the unequal climate change impacts already being felt by the poorest countries and the poorest citizens of wealthy countries, despite being those who have contributed the least to global warming. For example, the sub-two degrees target, while perhaps achievable with limited economic difficulty for higher-income countries, leaves many Pacific island nations with much, or even all, of their land under water. There should be greater recognition of the role of Pacific Islanders and Pacific Island nations in shifting climate discourse in favor of adopting stricter mitigation standards. All of this is not to say that we should stop concerning ourselves with conservation or ecosystem health, but that the cry of communities of color is that of the canary in the coal mine for all of humanity. Concerning ourselves with the issues of human communities, especially those most impacted by environmental degradation as well as social, political, and economic exclusion, is a strategy that respects life. One example is the Paris Climate Accords, which sets a goal of keeping the global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius. While there are additional goals to try to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees, the framing of them as stretch goals puts the lives of those on the front lines of climate change at risk. Setting these goals more ambitiously to include the needs of all peoples would prioritize making the world safe for us all.

Skeptics of mainstream environmentalism come honestly by their concern about the motivations and safety of spaces and groups often called “environmental.” Many of mainstream environmentalisms’ heroes have a complex history that includes racist actions and attitudes. One notable example is Madison Grant, who was both a prominent conservationist and also a proponent of the scientifically-debunked and racist eugenics movement. The much-beloved John Muir described the Ahwahneechee people of Yosemite as “strange creatures,” who “seemed to have no right place in the landscape” (Johnson, 2014). Furthermore, several members of the DEI committee report personal anecdotes and anecdotes from students and People of Color who avoided working in sustainability because they believe it is an area that privileges the perspectives and concerns of affluent, white people.

In contrast, social justice advocates and activists tend to focus on conditions for people and the cities, towns, and neighborhoods in which they live. They have also focused on creating outreach, education, and actions that address structural injustices that oppress Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, the poor, people with disabilities, and other historically underrepresented groups. Often those injustices are environmental in nature yet they may not be thought of that way by those with power and influence. People in historically underrepresented groups are more likely to live in areas riddled with pollution from heavy industry and landfills, blighted by mining or fracking, or overheated from a lack of public greenspace. They are also more likely to experience poor health outcomes due to lack of access to fresh food, health care services, health insurance, exposure to unclean air and water, and to be underserved or even ignored by governmental entities tasked with regulations that benefit public health and protect the public. Last but certainly not least, climate change is an inequality amplifier, meaning that people already living under unequal conditions will experience the effects of climate change first and worst, both in wealthy nations and poor countries around the world. The impacts of this social neglect and hostility are connected to environmental health problems such as type II diabetes, asthma, heart disease and increased risk of stroke, and certain birth defects and cancers. The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbates and further emphasizes these disparities.

Of course, these divisions are not entirely clear-cut. Many activists and advocates share overlapping concerns and interests. Several Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have embraced environmental issues and concerns. More and more, organizations that are conservation- or environmentally-focused are incorporating justice into their vision statements. [350.org](https://www.350.org/) was an early “mainstream” adopter and many others have followed suit in recent years. The social uprisings decrying police violence against Black people in the US during 2020, in particular, led a myriad of organizations and businesses that are primarily white-led, to issue statements in support of racial justice and to refocus their energies to account for this history of systemic oppression (Osaka 2020). This series is informed by the work of organizations that have been at the forefront of integrating environmentalism and equity into their sustainability work. Such organizations include several of those listed in the [community resource on Racial Equity and Social Justice](#), including the Center for Diversity and the Environment, the Center for Earth, Energy and Democracy, Resolutions Northwest, the Portland State University Student Sustainability Center, and Green 2.0.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Sustainability as a concept has the potential to connect the perspectives of mainstream environmentalism and social justice. Julian Agyeman, Robert Bullard, and Bob Evans (2003, 5) define sustainability as, “the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems.” As Agyeman notes in a follow-up to the definition he crafted with Bullard and Evans, this definition “prioritizes justice and equity, but does not downplay the environment, our life support system” (Agyeman, 2007, 120). Agyeman is a Professor of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning at Tufts University, and he argues that a paradigm of “just sustainability” can be a conceptual bridge for the many passionate people engaged in environmental or social justice work.

In much of the industrialized West, “sustainability” has been criticized for being a watered-down buzzword that reinforces the social and economic status quo and fails to center those most impacted by past harms. Globally, however, sustainability has been understood more holistically, and it very explicitly and forcefully includes elements of equity, social justice, and human well-being. Consider, for example, the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#).

The SDGs focus on human thriving and equality; a healthy planet for all; inclusive and responsible business and economic practices; and functional government, institutions, and infrastructure. Their focus areas go well beyond environmentalism, focusing on gender equality, high-quality education, and the elimination of poverty. The SDGs can be a tool to nudge colleges and universities (and others) in the US to think beyond environmental concerns alone when working for sustainability. It can remind those who are narrowly focused on the environment to consider who should benefit from our efforts to conserve and protect our natural resources.

The time is ripe for strong collaboration and movement building between both environmental and social justice perspectives. To name only two examples, activism by Indigenous Peoples opposing the Dakota Access Pipeline and Black residents of Flint, MI, both defending the human right to safe drinking water and cultural autonomy, have risen to national prominence and garnered support from civil rights organizations and traditional environmental organizations alike. Many of the leaders within the global youth climate movement innately center diversity and social justice in their work. Students at higher education institutions are looking for the same holistic, system-wide perspective, and action from sustainability offices and staff.

While these overlapping ideas, needs, and perspectives remain complex, there is an increasing awareness that a healthy planet must be one that is equitable for all people and environmentally sound. In “Racism is Killing the Planet,” Hop Hopkins argues that “we’ll never stop climate change without ending white supremacy” (2020). He describes the interconnections between a racist, economic logic that treats certain people and places as disposable. Hopkins writes, “All I know is that if climate change and environmental injustice are the results of a society that values some lives and not others, then none of us are safe from pollution until all of us are safe from pollution. Dirty air doesn’t stop at the county line, and carbon pollution doesn’t respect national borders. As long as we keep letting the polluters sacrifice Black and brown communities, we can’t protect our shared global Climate.”

While simultaneously working to solve both social injustice and environmental crises may sound overwhelming, both higher education and sustainability professionals have a unique opportunity to lead in the balancing of these two crucial areas. Our research as scholars and professionals within higher-education goes deep into the data and thinking that can drive sustainable changes. We teach people young and old about the realities of injustice and environmental degradation and should challenge ourselves to challenge them to envision radical solutions that build upon that knowledge. And last, sustainability professionals are used to thinking in terms of systems, interconnections, overlapping causes and impacts, which make us uniquely situated to focus on holistic solutions. Will higher education rise to the challenge?

Key Points

- Equity and social justice are components of sustainability.
- The importance of equity and social justice has historically been underappreciated by the environmental movement and efforts to improve sustainability.
- There is much overlap between those working primarily for social and racial justice, and those focused on specific environmental issues. The concept of sustainability, with its focus on thriving social, environmental, and institutional systems, can provide a bridge.

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