

Open Letter to the Environmental Community:

Dear ECO,

You've disappointed us. Students of color on this campus do not feel welcome in the environmental community, and we never have.

We are The Students of Color Environmental Collective. A group tired of having our experiences of oppression on this campus silenced and forgotten by this community. The **only** group on campus who is actively working at the intersections of race, identity, class, and the environment.

The only group where white, middle-class people aren't the only ones with a seat at the table in the environmental movement.

And you may have wondered, or may have even asked us personally, why? Why does such a group exist, and why do white people need to take a step back for students of color in environmental spaces?

The whiteness of environmentalism today is deeply rooted in the racist history of the movement and colonialism. Many idols of the environmental movement--John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, Aldo Leopold--were all explicitly racist and founded the national parks for elite white folk like themselves whilst forcibly removing folks of color and colonizing indigenous people. We do not feel represented by the leaders of the environmental movement.

This is no accident, it is a direct result of the racist organization of society by government activity, where low-income, non-english speaking people are at a structural disadvantage. There is low-to-no knowledge of the political structures in place that place our communities most at risk for environmental degradation. Often our communities lack the education or empowerment to address the environmental conditions that hurt us. Often we are denied access to natural landscapes by economic and structural barriers, and this affects our personal health.

This is called **environmental racism**. And when we try to engage in environmental organizing, sometimes our own families and communities will reject us--to them, being an environmentalist is siding with the oppressor, because environmentalism was built for white people. These structural issues continuously exclude people of color at all levels from campus to positions of power.

We are writing this letter to you today to highlight some of the concerns that students of color on campus have brought to our space regarding the environmental community.

First, we are not taught by professors of color. Most of us must learn about the displacement and oppression of our communities by professors who do not understand our struggle, do not understand our stories. We are constantly fed the message that we do not matter and will not

nor will ever be the leaders in conservation, environmental policy, or resource management. This academic institution does not validate our existence nor our power in these spaces.

Many of us grew up in cities and towns full of toxic pollutants in our air, water, and waste. We woke up to the smell of gas from nearby oil fields and landfills, shaken by the sounds of industrial plants and highway traffic. Many of us come from families who have fought to overcome the struggles of debt, immigration status, discrimination, sexism and so forth simply to give us the opportunity to attend this university. We did not grow up with Priuses or weekly camping trips in the mountains. We did not have the luxury of eating local, organic food from farmer's markets. Studying and learning about nature and living the stereotypical life of the eco-warrior was a distant, inaccessible dream.

Whether it be our ESPM classes, CNR or CED major programs, environmental events, projects, campaigns, or student organizations- we have been repeatedly marginalized and invalidated in spaces where we did not feel welcomed nor respected. Students of color are continuously leaving the environmental community due to their feelings of alienation and frustration that we are not supported, empowered, or included in this community.

When we could no longer rely on you all for support, we knew we needed to start building a community for ourselves- a safe space where we could finally engage in meaningful environmental justice organizing and be able to escape from the continuous threat of racist, exclusive rhetoric. We have had students come to us with stories that they have experienced microaggressions, cultural appropriation, and racism from some ECO- affiliated organizations.

Students of color have come to our space expressing that they feel unwelcome in the environmental community on campus and that when they are invited into these spaces, they feel tokenized.

In response to all of these concerns, these are our current demands:

- 1) Be aware of the culture within the environmental community (and on campus in general) and the fact that it indirectly centers around an affluent (white) lifestyle. This makes us and many others feel forced to fit into certain preset social standard of what makes an environmentalist. Being pressured or forced into this standard is very damaging, especially when this social standard is heavily dependent of access and income.
- 2) Put racial justice at the forefront of your agenda--there is no skirting around the issue of environmental racism. *"There is no environmental justice without racial justice. Fighting one injustice means fighting them all, because they are all created by the same systems of oppression."*
- 3) Do your research on how to be a better ally. Understand what microaggressions are, what cultural appropriation is, and how remaining silent places you on the side of the oppressor.

- 4) Make your events and activities accessible. When you expect students to spend money to participate in an event or organization or expect full, dazzling resumes to become a member of your organization, you are already creating a barrier for most marginalized students.
- 5) Recognize that most “sustainability” practices of resourcefulness, growing your own food, etc. originate from communities of color. You do not need to “teach” us to be sustainable, rather, you learned it from us and our communities; you need to be mindful of that.
- 6) No more tokenization of Native American land stewardship of the past without doing anything to help indigenous people themselves
- 7) Mourn for the environmental activists murdered in developing countries (with their deaths funded by US dollars) the way y’all mourn for the rainforests and land that they died trying to protect.
- 8) Acknowledge the lack of diversity in institutional support for students of color in environmental spaces. Acknowledge the faults that presently exist and work with us to address these phenomena that have alienated a large portion of the community.

Yours,

The Students of Color Environmental Collective