



Insights from the Field to Close the \$2.7 Billion Funding Gap Between White-Led and BIPOC-Led Environmental and Conservation Organizations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC¹) experience climate change and its harmful effects to a greater degree than other populations in the United States. Along with land use decisions that are detrimental to BIPOC communities, the knowledge and lived experience of this disproportionate impact of climate change is the basis of the modern environmental justice movement.

Although BIPOC communities are affected so heavily by climate change, the perception is that philanthropic funders in the United States mostly focus on white-led, “Big Green” environmental and conservation groups that address issues such as reduction of carbon emissions and alternative energy.

What is not as readily evident or celebrated is how effectively BIPOC communities and organizations within these communities address climate change through cross-movement work, including: agriculture; water access and justice; affordable, climate-resilient housing; eco-friendly urban planning; and environmental work with a social justice lens.

The research team of the Inclusion Diversity, and Equity in Environmental Philanthropy (InDEEP) initiative set out to understand this gap in environmental and conservation philanthropy and to identify a set of practices that could help the philanthropic sector close the gap.

Despite the value of BIPOC-led work in this field, the InDEEP researchers found that white-led organizations are more resourced and better funded than BIPOC-led organizations. An analysis of data from Candid for the five-year period from 2014 through 2018 found that the funding gap between white-led and BIPOC-led environmental and conservation

¹ BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) is not a term that resonates with everyone – this is an evolving lexicon. InDEEP started this work using the term “people of color.” Some Indigenous people felt that this term did not reflect their experience. In this dynamic environment, InDEEP wants to convey that its initiatives speak to all people who are marginalized due to their degrees of non-proximity to whiteness. InDEEP’s intention is that the term “BIPOC” includes Asian and Latino/a/x people as well as other racially and ethnically under- and misrepresented groups.

organizations is approximately \$2.7 billion. In that five-year period, a total of \$3.7 billion was awarded in the environmental and conservation field, with \$3.2 billion going to white-led organizations and \$498 million going to BIPOC-led organizations.

Building on the discovery of this funding gap, the research team sought to learn more about the work BIPOC-led organizations are doing in the environmental and conservation fields. Based on interviews of key BIPOC thought leaders in the field, as well as interviews of funders, the resulting report looks at the issues identified by BIPOC-led organizations as most relevant or challenging to their work, the strategies used to address those issues, and the systemic change generated using those strategies. The report reviews (mis)alignment of those strategies with those primarily funded by major environmental funders. Finally, it examines measures used to track progress of mitigating climate change equitably and makes the case for the necessity of equity- and justice-oriented measures to completely understand impact. The report focuses on work in five domains: climate change mitigation, climate resilience, environmental justice, food systems, and conservation.

Interviewees indicated that philanthropy tends to uphold the status quo by investing in white-led, already well-funded organizations, including white leadership working in communities of color or on behalf of communities of color. Underinvestment in BIPOC leadership and the lack of an intersectional lens to environmental and conservation movements emerged as a significant funder blind spot hindering the achievement of environmental justice.

Based on these key findings, the report also offers six implications for practice:

- **Acknowledge race.** Research has shown that even when controlling for other factors like gender, geography, education, and socioeconomic standing, race is still a determinant of outcomes. A philanthropic organization cannot hope to address a societal ill without acknowledging the impact of race on the outcomes associated with that societal ill.
- **Understand how climate change's human impacts vary by race.** People, primarily BIPOC people, who live in warmer climates are moving to more habitable and workable areas, contributing to a growing population of climate refugees. As climate change increasingly contributes to ecological collapse and resource scarcity, BIPOC people face greater uncertainty in relocating and adapting.
- **Expand understanding of issues and strategies that will work.** Interviewees noted that BIPOC-led organizations have generated systemic change within policy, funder focus, community awareness, and personal sustainability efforts. The list of issues and strategies noted to be pivotal to influencing climate change, climate resilience, environmental justice, food systems, and conservation is lengthy and populated by

issues that span subject areas – cross-movement work. These are the issues that impact people’s everyday lives.

- **Rethink relationships.** Closed solicitations are a hallmark of some funder organizations. Interviewees – both BIPOC leaders and funders – noted how much of a deterrent that is to entry. Funders must continue to rethink how they build and nurture relationships with potential grantees and then how they use those relationships.
- **Rethink funding practices.** Certain funding tactics can be helpful: give multiyear, unrestricted funding; simplify and streamline paperwork; be transparent and responsive; and offer support beyond the check.
- **Rethink progress.** This report identified a set of equity- and justice-oriented indicators of progress in climate change mitigation. These indicators are not intended to replace traditional measures of climate change mitigation but to help users understand how much movement in health, housing, education, and income indicators is related to climate change. Funders should incorporate and value both types of measures and understand a portfolio as a whole.

Taken together, these findings and implications for practice represent a call to action for environmental philanthropy: make greater investments that are racially equitable and begin to close the \$2.7 billion funding gap.



“[In the traditional sense] with conservation, you’re conserving something that’s still intact. With BIPOC communities, there’s not really much nature still intact to conserve. [Conservation in these communities] deals more with restoration or regenerating something like urban farms.... It would be like restoring or making something regenerative that was a vacant lot before. You’re not conserving very much [based on] the ideas traditional conservation means, which means efforts have something natural with value. Thus, we’re going to conserve it. It still provides us benefits.” —BIPOC LEADER
