

Diversifying the Conservation Movement

by *Marcelo Bonta and Charles Jordan*

100 million people . . .

Envision, for a moment, what the conservation movement might be like if it brought in a major infusion of new supporters. What would it look like? What would it mean to have so many advocates? At first glance, an expanded constituency would translate into more political victories for conservation, more public support, more members, a larger volunteer base, richer partnerships and more financial support. In other words, we, the conservation movement, would find more success in conserving our natural resources.

The good news is that an immense opportunity stands before us. Today, our nation boasts a population of over 100 million people of color (about 33 percent of the population), many of whom support environmental issues at a higher level than their white counterparts. For example, an exit poll for a 2002 California multi-billion dollar bond issue for water quality and open space protection revealed 77 percent of African Americans, 74 percent of Latinos, 60 percent of Asians and 56 percent of Caucasians approved the measure. We need to be more effective at connecting people of color to the conservation movement and leveraging their substantial support and talents.

The sad news is that the movement continues to struggle with diversity, whether it's in outreach, collaborations, hiring and retention practices, or other facets. For example, people of color are not well represented in the conservation workforce. In a recent study of 158 environmental institutions, the Minority Environmental Leadership Development Initiative found that 33 percent of mainstream environmental organizations and 22 percent of government agencies had no people of color on staff. Another study found that people of color make up only 11 percent of the staff and 9 percent of the boards for organizations that are members of

the Natural Resources Council of America.

To many conservation leaders, this last set of statistics actually seems to over-represent the involvement of people of color on boards and staff of conservation organizations and does not reflect other considerable problems that go much deeper than simple numbers. People of color are often hired as support staff and into positions not necessarily earmarked for leadership potential. The few people of color who actually are a part of a professional staff often leave conservation organizations (and at times



Mountains Restoration Trust

MOUNTAINS RESTORATION TRUST (CA) has partnered with Outward Bound Adventures, Inc. for 7 years, providing youth in the program with on-the-ground conservation experience. Here, Jo Kitz, MRT program director, plants a tree with her OBA crew.

the movement altogether). Many feel unwelcome and uncomfortable in institutions because of the homogeneous culture within both specific organizations and the movement in general. The bottom line is that most organizations

fall short in devoting adequate staff time, money and resources to improving the diversity of their respective organizations. Organizations that want to diversify often are at a loss regarding what to do and where to start, and eventually either do nothing or venture down a path

destined for failure. There is no question that diversifying is a difficult task; however, it still needs to be done.

The diversity crisis goes further than issues within organizations. Effective outreach to communities and groups of color, especially in the areas of cultural competency and equitable collaboration, is rare. A common belief in the movement is that people of color are not an important constituency because of the assumption that they do not care about the environment. However, polls and studies reveal the contrary. For example, a recent poll showed 77 percent of Latino voters (versus 65 percent of all voters) support “a small increase in taxes” to “protect water quality, natural areas, lakes, rivers or beaches, neighborhood parks and wildlife habitat.” Furthermore, many organizations and professionals do not work on diversity issues because they believe it to be merely optional and not a requirement for successful work. Also, both current and past diversity activities are not well known among the environmental community, in part because they are not well publicized. Finally, a lack of funding dedicated towards diversity efforts severely limits the movement’s capability to diversify in a comprehensive way. These overwhelming issues have led the movement to a crisis.

Therefore, how do we respond to one of the conservation movement’s greatest challenges? Diversifying the movement is complex, and the changing demographics of our nation will not make it easier. By 2050, the number of people of color in this nation will more than double, growing to almost 220 million, and will comprise the majority of the population. The political and social implications of an increasingly diverse nation are vast. Communities of color continue to have a mounting influence on society and politics, including the distribution of public finances, the way cities develop and grow, and the strength and creation of environmental laws and policies.

We, as a movement, need to respond accordingly and immediately if we are to succeed. We need a movement that appeals to and benefits all Americans from all



THE BONTA FAMILY, (l to r):
Kyra, Marcelo, Micia and Stella

for pushing diversity at a time when the movement and organizations were struggling to survive and experiencing growing pains. Over the past 35 years, leaders, such as Sydney Howe, Gerry Stover, George T. Frampton, Jr., Richard Moore and Pat Noonan, identified the looming diversity crisis and raised questions as to the direction of the movement. There have also been a number of articles, research and discussion sessions devoted to the topic. A late 1980s survey revealed that many leaders from over 500 environmental organizations felt “the lack of racial and cultural diversity in their own organizations and throughout the environmental movement makes the movement less powerful and less effective in accomplishing its goals.” There is no doubt that these leaders and early efforts raised awareness on diversity issues, yet sustaining an effective, long-term effort has been challenging, to say the least.

In order for diversity efforts to be sustainable, conservation leaders need to view diversity as a top priority. Diversity needs to be worked on in many areas and interwoven throughout organizational operations, such as programs, projects, initiatives, mission and policy statements, recruitment, staff retention, partnerships and collaborations, outreach, and work experiences for young people. We need to work on making the movement and

walks of life. It will not be an easy road to follow. But change is not an option, change is a *must* if we want a movement that is sustainable and relevant in the public and political consciousness. We have a great opportunity and responsibility before us. *How* we respond will determine the fate of our movement. We need a strategy that will sufficiently address the diversity crisis and create sustainable, lasting change.

How Do We Diversify?

There have been numerous past efforts to diversify organizations and the movement.

We need to acknowledge the pioneers of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s

our organizations attractive places to work for a diverse array of people while also drawing out the conservation values of people of color, especially to the point of pursuing a conservation career.

Recruitment is the main area in which many conservation organizations focus their diversity efforts. Hiring people of color at all levels, including the executive level and board, and having a diverse job interview panel is essential. However, the amount of energy many organizations put into recruiting a diverse staff may be misplaced. Organizations will most likely find more success in recruiting people of color and diversifying if they work on diversity in multiple areas, including changing the organizational culture and working equitably with communities and organizations of color. Limiting diversity efforts to recruitment only, especially at entry-level positions or for support staff, is insufficient and will fail more often than not.

Creating cultural change within conservation institutions and the movement is arguably the most important aspect of diversifying. It could be daunting to be the single person of color or one of a few in an organization that is homogenous in its appearance as well as thinking and culture. Transforming into a multicultural movement requires continually addressing diversity and providing workplaces where all staff feel comfortable and are attaining their true potential. It entails becoming culturally competent and adept at understanding different ways of acting and communicating. A multicultural organization acknowledges that remaining diverse and managing various viewpoints will be an ongoing challenge and provides regular discussions, open forums, and learning opportunities to help resolve organizational diversity issues. Institutions that become multicultural will discover that people of color will want to work for them and stay for the long term, and will most likely find it easier to work with any community or organization.

Diversifying also means effectively reaching out to communities of color. Being culturally competent is crucial to outreach efforts and can be the deciding factor

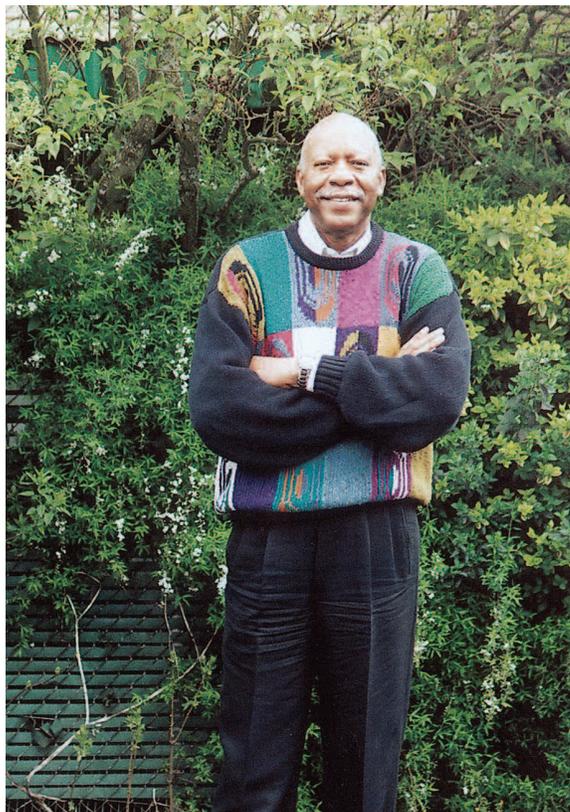
of a successful connection or not. If we want to start engaging people of color, we need to meet them where they are and speak to their environmental values. We will need to invest time building relationships and trust and provide something of value. We must also choose our messengers wisely because sometimes the messenger may actually be more important than the message. Finally, we will need to communicate effectively by understanding the community with which we want to work, adjusting our language and communication methods accordingly, and working through the community's main information sources, which may be the local church or an elder.

To effectively reach out to communities of color, environmental institutions will need to expand their part-

nerships and collaborations. They will need to work with groups that already effectively work with communities of color, including organizations of color, such as Latino Issues Forum, youth-serving organizations, urban parks and recreation departments, and schools. Many of these groups, a number of which are led by people of color, have a proven track record of successfully working with communities of color. They have earned the respect and gained the trust of these communities. Most importantly, partnerships need to be based on equity, meaning all parties equally share resources, power and decision-making responsibilities.

Conservation organizations seeking to diversify will need to partner and work together to share information, efforts and lessons learned about diversifying while more efficiently using resources and keeping costs down. Diversifying on your own is challenging. Organizations attempting to diversify have commonly done it alone, and many have ended up aborting their effort because the hill became too difficult to climb. Failure is no longer an option. Diversity is a necessity for building a successful and effective organization. Working together will ease the difficulty and provide more lasting results.

Foundations are an integral part of diversifying, not merely because they can provide much-needed funds



CHARLES JORDAN

but because they are another segment of the movement looking for diversity guidance. The Environmental Grantmakers Association, a leader in promoting diversity in its over 250 foundation members, has found that many environmental foundations want to diversify. If foundations see this diversity need in their funded organizations as well, then they can work on making progress together. Also, as organizations show their commitment to diversity, it would be extremely useful for foundations to devote more funds to help leverage the existing efforts and create more impact.

Working along the educational pipeline by providing opportunities for young people of color from kindergarten to graduate school is essential to achieving a diverse environmental community for generations to come. We need more organizations like Environmental Learning for Kids in Denver and Outward Bound Adventures in the Los Angeles area, both of which help raise the next generation of environmental stewards by providing positive outdoor experiences for young people of color. Partnering with youth-serving organizations and urban parks and recreation departments is important to making the youth connection. Providing opportunities for youth to exercise leadership skills and voice their opinions is an effective way to engage young people. Also, internships are often the entry point to conservation careers for young folks. Therefore, it may be essential for organizations to provide paid internships.

In sum, diversifying on many fronts, especially on cultural change, recruitment, outreach, partnerships and the educational pipeline, will be more effective than focusing a diversity effort in one area.

Recommendations for the Conservation Movement

Our diversity crisis is a systemic problem. Therefore, we must approach the problem systematically across the movement. A comprehensive strategy for diversifying includes working on cultural change, outreach, partnerships and collaborations, recruitment, and the educational pipeline. To carry out this strategy, every organization, business, agency, foundation and academic institution

that works on conservation issues needs to commit to the cause. Therefore, movement-wide, we must focus on four major areas in order to initiate effective change:

1. CREATE CULTURAL CHANGE. Creating cultural change within conservation institutions and the movement is imperative to diversifying. Cultural change means having an inclusive, diverse mindset that translates into actions, behaviors and attitudes that exemplify multiculturalism and equity. We need to build a conservation



© Boston Natural Areas Network

movement that is relevant to all Americans. To help create cultural change, organizations need to incorporate diversity throughout their operations.

NEIGHBORHOOD PARKS AND URBAN GARDENS often draw a diversity of people, as land conservation groups that work in these areas realize.

2. SEEK PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS. We need to seek strategic alliances both within and outside the movement. Within the movement, collaborating with each other on our diversity efforts is essential, so we can move forward synergistically and grow exponentially. We also need to work across movements, including the labor, civil rights and faith movements. Expanding our list of partners will extend our reach, improve our understanding and ensure our relevance.

3. ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE. We need to effectively connect young people of color to nature through environmental education programs and provide positive work experiences for students of color if we want an effective movement for generations to come. How we engage young people today will have significant effects far into the future since many of these same people

will be our conservation leaders when people of color make up our nation's majority.

4. CONNECT THE GENERATIONS. We need to unify the generations that are currently working within our movement and cultivate emerging leaders of color. We need to learn from and build upon the progress of those who have worked on diversity issues in the past. Experiences, wisdom and lessons learned need to be passed from one generation to another if we are to effectively move forward on the diversity continuum. Baby Boomers need to identify and mentor emerging leaders who can carry the mantle forward. Likewise young, emerging leaders need to take the initiative in connecting with more experienced conservationists.

A Leading Organization

In order for the movement to carry out these recommendations, we need adequate funding and an organization or partnership to serve as the central hub for diversifying the movement. It will be charged with carrying out movement-wide diversity actions and periodically assessing our progress on achieving diversity goals. Other responsibilities include providing technical assistance and guidance on what to do and how to proceed in a responsible and culturally competent way, facilitating the creation of accountability measures and measures of diversity, and directing funds strategically towards diversity efforts.

As we wait for a leading organization to coalesce, there are existing organizations that can be effective at serving in this lead capacity. Organizations such as the Land Trust Alliance and the Environmental Grantmakers Association, who have hundreds of member organizations, can (and have already on some fronts) provide leadership, guidance and technical assistance on diversity issues. This service would be especially helpful for organizations that have limited capacity and resources and have struggled to initiate a diversity effort. By providing guidance on strategic actions, lead organizations can help catalyze stronger partnerships and more efficient uses of resources.

Recommendations for Organizations

Comprehensively solving our diversity crisis means the involvement of every conservation organization. Leadership support, dedicated resources (i.e., staff time and money), and diversifying throughout organizational

operations are critical to maintaining an organizational diversity initiative. To facilitate change, organizations need to take these important general steps:

1. ATTAIN LEADERSHIP SUPPORT and a commitment of resources.

2. CONDUCT A DIVERSITY ASSESSMENT to establish a baseline from which to work. An assessment helps identify an organization's current status, its needs, its goals and tools to diversify. It may also include a comparative perspective of other organizations' diversity activities (see the Center for Diversity & the Environment at www.environmentaldiversity.org regarding other efforts).

3. CREATE A DIVERSITY ACTION STRATEGY to implement the assessment's recommendations. Each organization is unique and may need a distinct strategy to meet its needs. The strategy should include periodic evaluations of progress towards diversity goals.

Recommendations for Individuals

We, as individuals within the movement, have the most important roles and the greatest responsibility. Our individual beliefs, values, thought processes and actions make up the movement. Therefore, we need to hold ourselves accountable for transforming the conservation movement. While it is urgent to begin diversifying our movement immediately, we should not feel that we have to do it all now. This will be a long process. Even small steps from each of us can take us a long way. Here are some actions we, as individuals, can take to push forward on diversity issues:

■ **FIND ALLIES.** Talk to others at your workplace and to people working on diversity issues outside your organization. Find and/or create a network of people with which you can comfortably discuss diversity issues. Organize a regular gathering of like-minded people within or outside of your organization. For example, a group of environmentalists of color in Portland, Oregon, called the Young Environmental Professionals of Color, meets monthly to network, strategize and discuss various environmental topics that affect them.

■ **FIND OPPORTUNITIES TO DIVERSIFY** within your spheres of influence. Figure out what you can start doing today. For example, if you have access to discretionary funds or control of budgets, earmark money towards diversity activities. If you work on outreach, learn how to become culturally competent and expand your outreach activities to include communities of color. If you participate in an organizational strategic planning process, incorporate diversity strategies and language into vision statements, the mission and

FOR NOTES AND RESOURCES see this article posted on www.lta.org.
A full version appears in *Diversity and the Future of the U.S. Environmental Movement*,
Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies Publication Series, 2007.

goals of the organization. Of course, if you have major clout, you can implement the broader recommendations for the movement and organizations described earlier.

■ **BROADEN YOUR THOUGHT PROCESSES.** Think long term and with an expansive vision. Constantly question your “business as usual.” Ask yourself questions like “For whom am I protecting these lands?” “What kind of movement am I going to hand over to my children and grandchildren?” “When thinking of the communities

THE CONSERVATION TRUST FOR NORTH CAROLINA is working with well-known conservation planner Randall Arendt (right) and community development corporations to plan sites that provide both affordable housing and protect the conservation values of the property.



Conservation Trust for North Carolina

We need a movement that appeals to and benefits all Americans from all walks of life.

or constituencies I serve, whom do I think of? Whom should I think of?” “When advertising a job opening to my network, who is included (or not included) in that network?” “What type of people would find working at my workplace appealing or not appealing? Why?”

■ **ENGAGE ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP.** Ask them to adopt diversity as an organizational priority. Ask for a commitment of resources, especially money and staff time.

■ **START BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS** with communities and organizations of color now, especially before you may actually need their help. Do your homework

MARCELO BONTA is the founder and director of the Center for Diversity & the Environment. He consults with environmental organizations on diversity issues and has organized numerous workshops, conferences and trainings. Marcelo has also worked on biodiversity conservation policy and planning issues and has guided large-scale conservation strategies. He is an Environmental Leadership Program Senior Fellow and the founder of the Young Environmental Professionals of Color.

CHARLES JORDAN is a passionate visionary who has inspired thousands of professionals in conservation. His commitment to the environmental movement came as a result of his service as a commissioner on the President’s Commission on American’s Outdoors and his subsequent involvement as chair of The Conservation Fund. In these roles, he became aware of the centrality of open space, clean air and clean water to the quality of life. He especially championed the need to expand the national constituency for conservation by recruiting new leaders and greater involvement from minority and low-income communities. Charles serves on the board of directors of the Land Trust Alliance, as well as in national leadership roles for several organizations.

about the community and offer something useful first.

■ **SEEK OPPORTUNITIES TO BROADEN YOUR EXPERIENCE,** expand your network and continue learning. Some conferences, such as the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference and the Environmental Grantmakers Association annual conferences, have offered one-day pre-conference diversity workshops and trainings. Other conferences may provide individual, or a series of, diversity sessions. The Conservation Fund and the Land Trust Alliance have started offering a diversity training course for land conservation organizations. Become involved in efforts that bring a broad range of organizations and people together, such as the Environmental Diversity Working Group in Washington, D.C., and the Diverse Partners for Environmental Progress series of national summits and regional roundtables. Numerous diversity resources can be found on the websites of organizations (see Resources section in the website version of this article at www.lta.org). Reading reports, such as the *Soul of Environmentalism and Environmental Stewardship for the 21st Century: Opportunities and Actions for Improving Cultural Diversity in Conservation Organizations and Programs*, provide beneficial learning opportunities.

Conclusion

As the nation continues to diversify, the conservation movement is left with one of the greatest challenges it will face this century. Will we diversify so that we can be successful and relevant to generations to come, or will we ignore our diversity problem at our own peril? We have no choice. Diversifying is not an option. It is a necessity. At the very least, it means survival of the conservation movement. At most, it means creating a healthy, influential and sustainable movement. Our response to the diversity challenge today will have reverberations and repercussions for generations to come. We must invest our resources at once or our children and grandchildren may inherit a world with dwindling natural resources and a movement with no significance in the modern world. We owe it to ourselves, the conservation movement and the American people to get it right. The future of conservation and our future generations are at stake. 🌿