

# Diversification: Fantasy, Theory, or Reality?

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This Thesis Is Submitted In Partial Fulfillment  
Of The Requirements For The Degree Of Bachelor Of Arts  
For The Center For Environmental Studies At Brown University

May 1993

### *Abstract*

There has been growing criticism from organizations representing people of color and people of poverty that their concerns have not been important to traditional environmental groups. In the last few years, this criticism has become increasingly widespread and aimed in particular at national organizations. The historical absence of people of color from traditional environmental groups is indisputable; what is under dispute is the belief that both traditional environmentalists, and their conceptions of environmentalism, ignore many of the pressing concerns of people of color and poverty.

Many scholars and activists claim increasing evidence of a non-traditional environmentalism which does recognize the needs of people of color and poverty. Further, some social justice organizations draw connections between civil rights and environmental issues. These overlapping concerns have been termed "environmental equity" or "environmental justice" issues. The civil rights aspects of these issues are indicated in studies which show that race, even more than income level, plays the most significant role in the distribution of environmental health risk.

Consequently, there is discussion within traditional environmental organizations about issues of diversification. This diversification can be accomplished in two ways: 1) increasing the number of people of color in these organizations and 2) working on issues that are more directly relevant to people of color and people of poverty. These two steps define the process of diversification as it relates to the traditional environmental movement; the concept of diversification also relates to social justice organizations which are traditionally concerned with issues of race and poverty. For these organizations, the process of diversification includes working on environmental issues, as well as reaching out to people from all affected communities in doing so.

There are several conditions for successful diversification, and the barriers to fulfilling these conditions are many. Accordingly, it is hard to find current evidence of successful diversification among both traditional environmental organizations and social justice organizations in Rhode Island.

Diversification may also affect local environmental quality. It is possible, in theory, that diversification will increase an organization's effectiveness in carrying out its mission of improving local environmental quality, by means of increasing its effectiveness in communicating its message to various communities of color and poverty. Nevertheless, in Rhode Island, evidence shows that diversification by itself has not yet had any significant effect on local environmental quality.