

# Generating Change: Why Reaching a Diverse Environmental Citizenry is Important for the Future of the Environmental Movement

*Chip Giller, Founder and President, Grist*

## **SUMMARY**

As editor of a website that strives to inspire environmental passion in a young, diverse readership, the author has seen firsthand the necessity of overcoming perceptions that the environmental movement is a niche issue reserved solely for the privileged. Using examples of his journalistic work and profiles of activists, he argues that this perception must be demolished, and the movement itself must be redefined, for progress to be made.

## **KEY WORDS**

Diversity, environmental movement, environment, environmental justice, citizenry, media

My wife and I had our first child in the spring of 2006, and among the many surprises in store was one I hadn't really expected: my daughter's arrival changed my personal sense of environmentalism. I had spent years writing and speaking about the importance of protecting the planet for future generations. But now "future generations" was my child, in my arms. And the planet shrank to become my house, in my neighborhood. Suddenly all these environmental notions seemed much more concrete.

Just before my daughter was born, another event in my life brought the same idea home. I had been immersed in publishing a seven-week series on environmental justice in *Grist*, the online media organization I founded eight years ago. The series raised questions for devoted activists and general readers alike about who bears the brunt of the U.S. environmental burden. The answer: those living in poverty, which all too often in this country means people of color.

It was a glum series, to be honest, but it also offered moments of hope. Profiles of local activists around the country revealed astonishing breadth and energy. These were people fighting against pollution and development and resource abuses. And they were also fighting *for* something: their health, their families, their homes, their ways of life.

These stories made it more clear to me than ever that the environment is not, as some people think, an external playground to be enjoyed by weekend warriors. It is in fact the daily living and breathing space we all inhabit.

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I hope my daughter comes of age in a culture that has made concrete green progress. Perhaps we'll have weaned ourselves from fossil fuels, phased out incandescent light bulbs, kept billboards out of our national parks, adopted smart-growth laws that make cities walkable, and enacted pollution regulations that protect all of our

citizens, no matter what their ethnicity or income. I do want her to see a greener, cleaner planet.

But more than that, I hope she comes of age in a culture where there is no environmental movement.

I don't mean that the issues will be resolved or the people working on them will have lost an ounce of passion. I don't mean the movement is dead, as was notoriously claimed a couple of years ago. I mean that environmentalism as a concept has become bigger than the movement's founders ever imagined. The movement we need now – and the one I see taking shape – is broader, stronger, and more far-reaching than ever before.

There is still great value in the strengths of traditional environmental activism. But as businesses, politicians, and citizens wake up to the realities of climate change, issues once tidily boxed up as environmental are infiltrating every aspect of life. The food we eat, the fuel we buy, the way we get around – these daily choices, humanity is realizing, may affect our very survival as a species. And no one is left out of this equation.

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Building on the invaluable work of the social justice organizers – and of activists who don't align themselves with any movement, but know they don't want a refinery in their backyards – environmentalism has a chance to breach its traditional boundaries and grow stronger. This movement has its roots in a healthy respect for wide-open spaces, but it should strive to become a wide-open movement with a healthy respect for people's roots.

This isn't just a nice idea, the next touchy-feely step in the evolution of a movement often defined by its predilection for embracing trees. It's a necessity.

Some people may cling to the environmentalism of old, may worry that a broader, more diverse movement will somehow be weakened. To those holdouts, I say: without expanding the environmental message beyond the privileged ears it has historically reached, without changing our own definitions of environmentalism to include the challenges faced every day in neighborhoods across the country and around the world, we put the survival of this movement at risk. There are too many people facing too many struggles for environmentalism to remain the province of any one class, race, faith, or political ideology.

### **FIGHTING BACK**

*How were we going to be Indian people when we couldn't use a simple thing like water, or eat our wild rice or go pick berries or get our deer meat . . . things that we need for our feasts or parts of our ceremonies? I think that's why everyone fought so hard for so long, because we had to. Otherwise we felt that we'd just be like everybody else.*

– Tina van Zile, Sokaogon Chippewa activist,  
Mole Lake, Wisconsin

For years, the Sokaogon Chippewa in Mole Lake, Wisconsin, fought the proposed reopening of a zinc mine on land adjacent to the tribe's reservation, fearing the contamination of both their natural resources and their way of life. One of the poorest tribes in the U.S., the group eventually managed to scrape together enough money to pay off the mine's mortgage – money that the mining company then decided to put into a conservation trust fund for the tribe.

It was a story with a seemingly happy ending, but it reflects the disturbing trend we at *Grist* worked to shed light on in our series: many of the worst environmental ills are visited upon those who can least afford to combat them. For example, a recent study in the San Francisco Bay Area found that two-thirds of the residents living within a mile of polluting sources monitored by the EPA – where housing is more affordable than farther afield – are people of color, and one-third are white. Venture 2.5 miles or more from the source, and the percentages flip.

This isn't just coincidence. It's part of a pattern of economic and social injustice that has created environmental inequities as well. You can't fight one without fighting the other.

From the beginning, *Grist* has done its best to turn the established notion of environmentalism on its head and to encourage readers to understand issues in a new context. We consider it our responsibility to expand our readers' definition of *environment* by drawing attention to under-reported topics and to encourage them to exercise their influence however they can, wherever they can.

Our series on poverty and the environment caught the eyes of millions of readers, because it drew new connections. It showed that environmentalism is not a pet cause pursued by the elite, somewhere between dropping the kids off at soccer practice and grabbing a chai latte. It is a daily struggle.

It is the Chippewa fighting a mine and fighting to preserve their heritage. It is Jesus People Against Pollution, an activist group in an historically African-American town in Mississippi, confronting the chemical legacy of a local Superfund site. It is Latino workers in industrial chicken farms seeking fair treatment, and it is impoverished residents of the South Bronx using the corporate scrap heaps that litter their neighborhood to rebuild it.

Understanding the scope and the shape and the colors of these battles, in the U.S. and beyond, is a vital step. Understanding that this is the face of today's environmentalism is crucial. But the next step is even more important: thinking and talking about how to honor diversity while lending each other support. How to create a whole and healthy movement from so many disparate causes and struggles.

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It's worth noting that one of the Chippewa's primary concerns was making sure the tribe didn't end up "like everybody else." So how can we value and preserve our differences while still building upon each other's strengths? And how can environmentalism expand to encompass this complex balancing act?

"This whole question of environment, economics, and equity is a three-legged stool," environmental justice leader Robert Bullard told *Grist*. "If the third leg of that stool is dealt with as an afterthought, that stool won't stand. The equity components have to be given equal weight. But racial and economic and social equity can be very painful topics: people get uncomfortable when questions of poor people and race are raised."

## LOOKING FORWARD

*People have to overcome all kinds of terrible things, and they manage to do it and survive – and survive with such dignity. Those kinds of stories need to be told. And shame on us who don't listen, who put ourselves in a cocoon.*

– Marlene Grossman, Pacoima Beautiful activist, Los Angeles

In late 2004, when environmentalism was declared "dead" by Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, we published their essay in *Grist*. Alongside it, we ran the months' worth of feedback and dialogue that it generated. Almost immediately, we noticed, writers of color jumped into the fray. Traditional, mostly white, environmentalism may be dead, they said, but take a look at what's going on in communities of color. Take a look at the progress that has been made, and at the struggles still surfacing.

It was a truth that could have been easy to miss, if we weren't looking. The mainstream green groups with a high profile in the U.S. – the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council, for example – are predominantly white. Think about it: when was the last time Jesus People Against Pollution made the pages of *The Washington Post*?

But anyone watching closely knows that environmentalism has indeed changed over the last few decades. Not just the race and class of those who are involved, but the methods they use. Gone are the days

when Theodore Roosevelt waved his wand and established national protection for sweeping vistas. Today's environmentalism is a patchwork of local battles – albeit local battles often involving multinational corporations. Many of these battles are fought not out of desire, but out of necessity.

Even our biggest global challenge, climate change, has been addressed most effectively in recent years on a local or regional level – from agreements among mayors and states to activism by Los Angelenos who want their children's buses to stop spewing diesel fumes. Of course, this is due in part to the stubborn reluctance of the country's leaders to take action on the issue – a political stalemate that already looks to be shifting. I have no doubt that, going forward, national action will be a crucial part of achieving our goals. But ultimately, today's environmentalism is also a collection of passionate, vocal, strident defenders of life and home and neighborhood.

It is a mass of people exercising the influence that they can, where they can.

It's a political shift that has affected those of us who call ourselves environmentalists, and even – perhaps especially – those of us who don't. Together, we are working toward a better, safer world. Our challenge now is to combine and channel this energy into new solutions. Our mandate is to leave this world, and this movement, better than we found it.

The environmental movement will only be truly effective if it keeps expanding its constituency and counteracting its reputation as the province of the privileged. To do so, the movement must cross the boundaries of ethnicity, gender, age, and class. This shift will help broaden the definition of what it means to be an *environmentalist* and will connect the movement to groups that historically have been underrepresented in environmental politics. It will also foster the sharing of differing perspectives that can stimulate creative problem-solving on environmental issues.

But it cannot happen without the work of every single person reading this book, and everyone else you know. Only when we can come together to protect our rights to a life without pollution or peril will we succeed. Only by recognizing each other's strengths and differences will we be worthy of that success.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Chip Giller** founded *Grist* magazine in 1999 to lighten up a movement known for taking itself too seriously and to engage an audience that might otherwise be turned off by depressing environmental news. *Grist* now has an audience of 800,000 and has been especially successful in reaching readers in their 20's and 30's. Giller, 36, received the Jane Bagley Lehman Award for Excellence in Public Advocacy from the Tides Foundation in 2004 in recognition of

the vital role *Grist* is playing in increasing environmental awareness. In both 2006 and 2005, *Grist* received a Webby Award, described by The New York Times as "the Oscar of the Internet." In 2006, the National Wildlife Federation honored Giller's achievements with its National Conservation Award. Giller's work and views have also been featured in media outlets like *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *Fast Company*, and *Outside*. Before launching *Grist*, Giller was editor of *Greenwire*, the first environmental news daily. Giller graduated from Brown University with an honors degree in environmental studies. He is a senior fellow with the Environmental Leadership Program.

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