

On this Juneteenth, it is fitting to lift up and celebrate a recent, significant emancipatory act that until now has ramified little beyond the niche trade press. I refer here to the dramatic early June exit of 26-year-old Black staffer ruth tyson from the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), via letter e-mailed to all staff and also posted on Ms. tyson’s Facebook page. No ordinary missive, this 17-page document—*An Open Letter to the Union of Concerned Scientists: On Black Death, Black Silencing, and Black Fugitivity*—is a comprehensive critique of the ways its author experienced the workplace culture of UCS as oppressively and hegemonically white. This culture made no room for her voice (“Black silencing”); provided no space for her agency (“Black fugitivity”); and offered no food for her soul (“Black death”). Ms. tyson’s rhetorical act of courage, which was not officially released to the press, was reported only in *Environment & Energy Daily*. It is profound, lyrical, and absolutely of-this-moment; I urge all environmentalists—and especially, white environmentalists—to read it in full.

Here, a brief historical detour is in order. Ms. tyson’s perceptive and forceful letter is not the first cri de coeur of its kind in the recent America past. That came thirty years ago, when in 1990, a broad coalition of multiracial grassroots environmental justice activists, led by the SouthWest Organizing Project (SWOP) of New Mexico, sent a searing 12-page letter to the then-largest ten environmental nonprofits in the U.S. (including, *e.g.,* the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund (now Earthjustice)). That missive called out these organizations for (among other faults) failing to diversity their staffs, failing to engage indigenous peoples and people of color in decision-making, and failing to consult and involve communities in NGO program planning that directly affected

them. This letter hasn't dated much, and also deserves a full read.

It was the SWOP letter and the events it directly spawned, including the First People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C. in 1991—not any endogenous, simultaneous institutional ephiphanies—that began markedly to transform hiring practices at targeted (and other) environmental groups. The result, as noted by my colleague Holly Doremus here, is that today there are a nontrivial and ever-increasing number of BIPOC staffing mainstream environmental organizations. Although many present-day environmentalists are unaware of the SWOP letter and its crucial role in getting BIPOC in the doors of mainstream environmental groups, the sequence of events is surely unsurprising: as Frederick Douglass observed, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will."

Fast forwarding three decades to Ms. tyson's letter: the names of the Big 10 have changed a bit (the Isaak Walton League is out; the Union of Concerned Scientists, Nature Conservancy, and Center for Biological Diversity are in), but the same issues of structural and cultural racism remain. To be sure, there has been progress: there is more visible diversity in organizational photos, and in some enlightened NGO pockets (such as particular local or regional offices of national organizations), BIPOC are truly included, elevated, and celebrated, rather than simply represented. But for most major NGOs, most of the time: the gist of SWOP's deep-culture critique of 30 years ago remains apt:

Although the environmental organizations calling themselves the "Group of 10" often claim to represent our interests [. . .] [t]he lack of people of color in decision-making positions in your organization such as executive staff and board positions is also reflective of your histories of racist and exclusionary practices.

The SWOP letter also noted a related and enduring programmatic problem: *"Racism is a root cause of your inaction around addressing environmental problems in our communities."* This is a significant issue, because although environmental justice organizations have the local knowledge to identify a community's problems, they rarely have the funding and technical expertise to deliver the needed policy, technical, or infrastructural solutions.

Importantly, the problems that SWOP named, and that Ms. tyson now ratifies and updates, are not critiques specific to UCS (even though at present, UCS will surely feel uniquely exposed). They are problems of large-nonprofit culture more

generally, reflective of both broader culture and heavy reliance on private philanthropy, in which whites with (often, inherited) money drive many a programmatic decision. One could also supplement Ms. tyson’s list of organizational-culture grievances, such as “robotic” team meetings and unrealistic productivity expectations that produced burnout and undermined human connection, by identifying additional attributes of dominant white NGO culture that can make it particularly inhospitable to non-whites. For example, although an atheist myself, I have long been concerned about the insistently secular culture of mainstream environmental nonprofit groups, in which any employee’s faith based motivations for earth-saving work must remain well hidden. This small-tentism is culturally intolerant and also, tactically unwise.

The tactical error of structural racism, which should be as obvious as its moral infirmity, brings me to a final point. When I spoke at length with Ms. tyson about her experience at UCS, her reluctant but personally necessary departure, and her gutsy letter, I was taken by her synthetic intelligence, issue passion, and authentic voice. However, I was even more deeply struck—and saddened—by the thought that UCS had had this star in its midst, yet managed to alienate rather than cultivate. Indeed, it was the sense of *wasted capacity* in this all-hands-on-deck planetary moment that seemed the episode’s greatest tragedy.

It is odd, then, to feel such *hope* in the present mess, in which a green group I have long admired, which is culturally similar to several NGOs for which I have worked, is on the receiving end of a harsh critique that appears well founded. Yet I do feel a hope, and it is this: that by amplifying voices like Ms. tyson’s and forcing real institutional responses, we can usher in an era when Big Greens listen to—and not merely photograph—the talented BIPOC in their midst.