

Climate Change and Social Justice

Section One

I'm a Black Climate Expert. Racism Derails our Efforts to Save the Planet.

Stopping climate change is hard enough, but racism only makes it harder

By Ayana Elizabeth Johnson

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SOURCE: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/06/03/im-black-climate-scientist-racism-derails-our-efforts-save-planet/>

Here is an incomplete list of things I left unfinished last week because America's boiling racism and militarization are deadly for black people: a policy memo to members of Congress on accelerating offshore wind energy development in U.S. waters; the introduction to my book on climate solutions; a presentation for a powerful corporation on how technology can advance ocean-climate solutions; a grant proposal to fund a network of women climate leaders; a fact check of a big-budget film script about ocean-climate themes, planting vegetables with my mother in our [climate victory garden](#).

Toni Morrison [said it best](#), in a 1975 speech: "The very serious function of racism ... is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being." As a marine biologist and policy nerd, building community around climate solutions is my life's work. But I'm also a black person in the United States

of America. I work on one existential crisis, but these days I can't concentrate because of another.

The sheer magnitude of transforming our energy, transportation, buildings and food systems within a decade, while striving to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions shortly thereafter, is already overwhelming. And black Americans are disproportionately more likely than whites to be [concerned about](#) — and affected by — the climate crisis. But the many manifestations of structural racism, mass incarceration and state violence mean environmental issues are only a few lines on a long tally of threats. How can we expect black Americans to focus on climate when we are so at risk [on our streets](#), [in our communities](#), and even [within our own homes](#)? How can people of color effectively lead their communities on climate solutions when faced with pervasive and [life-shortening](#) racism?

Even at its most benign, racism is incredibly time consuming. Black people don't want to be protesting for our basic rights to live and breathe. We don't want to constantly justify our existence. Racism, injustice and police brutality are awful on their own, but are additionally pernicious because of the brain power and creative hours they steal from us. I think of one black friend of mine who wanted to be an astronomer, but gave up that dream because organizing for social justice was more pressing. Consider the discoveries not made, the books not written, the ecosystems not protected, the art not created, the gardens not tended.

[How peer pressure can fight climate change](#)

It's hearing police sirens and helicopters in my Brooklyn neighborhood and knowing those who sound them do not always aim to protect and serve. It's walking the back roads near my mom's home Upstate New York and being more scared of the local white kids in the pickup truck with the Confederate flag on the bumper — in a state that was never part of the Confederacy — than I am of the local black bears. It's spending my weekend writing these words.

Here's the rub: If we want to successfully address climate change, we need people of color. Not just because pursuing diversity is a good thing to do, and not even because diversity leads to [better decision-making and more effective strategies](#), but because, [black people](#)

[are significantly more concerned about climate change than white people](#) (57 percent vs. 49 percent), and Latinx people are even more concerned (70 percent). To put that in perspective, it means that more than 23 million black Americans *already* care deeply about the environment and could make a huge contribution to the massive amount of climate work that needs doing.

I did get tiny tasks done last week — emails, (virtual) meetings. Because we are taught the show must go on, I mustered the composure to conduct an interview about the importance of planting trees. But none of the deeper work got done, none of the work that could be a significant contribution to how we think about climate solutions and how fast we implement them. Instead of working, I was checking in on my people, staying informed, doom-scrolling.

Now I'm totally spent. Not from the day, but from the week, the month, the year, this presidential administration, this country that keeps breaking my heart. We are resilient, but we are not robots.

[Five myths about climate change](#)

People of color [disproportionately bear climate impacts](#), from storms to heat waves to pollution. Fossil-fueled power plants and refineries are [disproportionately located in](#) black neighborhoods, leading to poor air quality and putting people at [higher risk for coronavirus](#). Such issues are finally being covered in the news media more fully.

But this other intersection of race and climate doesn't get talked about nearly enough: Black Americans who are *already committed* to working on climate solutions still have to live in America, brutalized by institutions of the state, constantly pummeled with images, words and actions showing just us how many of our fellow citizens do not, in fact, believe that black lives matter. Climate work is hard and heartbreaking as it is. Many people don't feel the urgency, or balk at the initial cost of transitioning our energy infrastructure, without considering the cost of inaction. Many fail to grasp how dependent humanity is on intact ecosystems. When you throw racism and bigotry in the mix, it becomes something near impossible.

Look, I would love to ignore racism and focus all my attention on climate. But I can't. Because I am human. And I'm black. And ignoring racism won't make it go away.

So, to white people who care about maintaining a habitable planet, I need you to [become actively anti-racist](#). I need you to understand that our racial inequality crisis is intertwined with our climate crisis. If we don't work on both, we will succeed at neither. I need you to step up. Please. Because I am exhausted.

Section Two

Climate Change is also a Racial Justice Problem

By [Sarah Kaplan](#)

SOURCE: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-solutions/2020/06/29/climate-change-racism/>

What does racism mean for climate change — and vice versa?

Normally, I use this column to respond to questions from readers about climate change. But — amid our ongoing national reckoning with racism prompted by the unequal impacts of the covid-19 pandemic, the recent killings of African Americans at the hands of police, and 400 years of history — this was the question on my mind.

If humanity is going to effectively tackle climate change, scientists and activists told me, it's a question we have to answer. You can't build a just and equitable society on a planet that's been destabilized by human activities, they argue. Nor can you stop the world from warming without the experience and the expertise of those most affected by it.

Racism is “inexorably” linked to climate change, said Penn State meteorologist Gregory Jenkins, because it dictates who benefits from activities that produce planet-warming gases and who suffers most from the consequences.

[One study](#) published last year in the Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences found that black and Hispanic communities in the U.S. are exposed to far more air pollution than they produce through actions like driving and using electricity. By contrast,

white Americans experience better air quality than the national average, even though their activities are the source of most pollutants. [Another paper](#) in the journal Science found that climate change will cause the most economic harm in the nation's poorest counties; many of those places, like [Zavala County, Tex.](#), and [Wilkinson County, Miss.](#), are home to mostly people of color.

In a course he teaches called "Climate Change, Climate Justice and Front Line Communities," Jenkins traces this connection from slavery, which created the economic foundation for the industrial revolution, to modern-day policies that influence where people live and environmental risks to which they are exposed. [Studies show](#) that coastal communities in the South, where African Americans are a significant fraction of the population, are at the greatest risk from sea level rise. [Other research](#) has found that neighborhoods once shaped by discriminatory housing policies known as "redlining" have more pavement, fewer trees and higher average temperatures — a combination that can lead to deadly heat illness.

Racial inequality also means that the people most at risk from climate change have the fewest resources to cope. According to a [study by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies](#), more than 30 percent of black New Orleans residents didn't own cars when Hurricane Katrina hit — making it almost impossible for them to evacuate. After the storm, the city's black population fell because many residents couldn't afford to return.

"Unless inequity is addressed now," Jenkins said, "future impacts from climate change will disable many communities of color."

For Corina Newsome, a wildlife conservationist and climate activist at Georgia Southern University, the link between environmental issues and racial injustice is personal. Last year, the Philadelphia neighborhood where her family lives was rocked by an [oil refinery explosion](#) that discharged thousands of pounds of dangerous hydrofluoric acid into the atmosphere. In coastal Georgia, where she works, she witnessed how black communities are hardest hit by flooding, and how people who can't afford air conditioning suffer the most in heat waves.

"These same exploits that are causing climate change on a massive scale ... are causing very immediate health problems in areas inhabited by black and brown people," Newsome

said. “You can’t afford to not care about it when you’re part of these marginalized communities.”

But she draws hope from the ways hard-hit communities are combating the problem, like the Savannah-based nonprofit [Harambee House](#), which provides green job trainings and environmental health workshops in black neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, kids of color are spearheading America’s youth climate movement. A [Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation poll in 2019](#) found that at least twice as many black and Hispanic teens participated in school walkouts on climate change than their white counterparts; they were also more likely to say people need to take action in the next year or two.

“Climate change is the most immediate threat for the marginalized people of this country and of the world,” Newsome said. “But that also means we are the most quick to act.”

The world of climate activism has historically been dominated by white men, said Dorceta Taylor, an environmental sociologist at the University of Michigan who studies the history of the environmental movement. A [2014 study](#) by the Green Diversity Initiative found that people of color made up about 12 percent of staff members and leadership at nongovernmental environmental organizations and foundations.

But those numbers are shifting. And with more diversity has come an increased focus on issues of environmental justice — something that has strengthened the movement by bringing “a kind of moral outrage to the conversation,” Taylor said.

“Seeing the incredible disproportionate impacts, the flooding, the heat,” she continued, “young people are saying, ‘That is wrong. We have to do something about it.’”