

Calling out racism to save our planet

Lack of diversity is destroying the green movement, writes Mya-Rose Craig

The environmental sector is institutionally racist. You are unlikely to hear those words explicitly said, even though it is true, because it is an uncomfortable truth. The sector has been accused of other things too – sexism and classism – but it is the unmentionable racism that is arguably the largest issue.

Minority ethnic people make up 13% of the UK population, according to government figures, yet the 2015 Labour Force Survey shows that a minute 0.6% of environmental professionals are non-white. This makes the environmental sector the least ethnically diverse after gardening (which has 0.2% non-white professionals). This is particularly worrying because we are facing a number of environmental crises in the UK and globally, while an entire section of our population has been alienated by the very people who should be engaging with them.

I am half Bangladeshi, and ever since I was a child I have been keenly aware of the lack of people like me out in Nature in Britain. In 2015, when I was 13, I set up Camp Avalon to engage inner-city and minority ethnic children and teenagers with Nature. I decided to run this event, and eight more over the next four years, because I felt that other children and teenagers like me did not have the opportunity to experience and engage with Nature and I wanted to give them the chance to do so.

On the very first day I learnt an important lesson. Five boys who were attending the camp were supposed to be birdwatching, but instead of looking through their binoculars they were chatting and showing very little interest in the ducks. Then one of our younger volunteers started talking to them about peregrine falcons, describing the speed of one of these birds and comparing it to a Formula One car. The boys instantly perked up. I suddenly realised what should have been blindingly obvious: to engage people with the environment you have to make it relevant to them.

I try to help every single child and teenager attending one of my camps to engage with Nature in their own way. To do this, I offer a wide range of activities, from wildlife art and photography to bird ringing. Minority ethnic role models are also essential: people who can understand the young people's backgrounds and experiences, as well as being trusted figures in their communities. In addition to my sister, my mother and me acting as ethnic minority Nature-loving role models, I try to have others at the camps doing the same. For example, 23-year-old biologist Sarina Saddiq attended the last camp and was able to demonstrate to the teenagers how young people like them can enjoy and study wildlife. Most of the children

have never been to the countryside or a Nature reserve before joining the camp.

Unfortunately, getting funding for our camps has been a struggle, as many funders have little understanding of our work or the communities we work with. The Institute of Fundraisers recognised the lack of ethnic diversity in their sector as a problem in August 2019, when they published their plan for tackling the issue.

I wanted to explore the barriers that discourage minority ethnic people from connecting with Nature, so in 2016 I ran a conference called Race Equality in Nature. The event brought together people from

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