

State of the Planet

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SUSTAINABILITY

Environmentalism Shouldn't Be This White

BY BEVERLY TENG | MARCH 16, 2022



Image: Artem Podrez

One female Asian faculty member.susta

A big part of the master's application process is researching professors in your program either to find an advisor or to speak with someone to learn more about the program. I vividly recall scrolling through countless webpages last year looking through environmental faculty members at schools in the US and Canada.

At Duke University, one of the leading environmental schools in the US, I found just one female Asian professor in the program I was interested in.

I was applying to graduate school right around the time Biden was elected. As an ethnically Chinese person and soon-to-be international student in the US, it was difficult for me to ignore the months of “kung flu,” “China virus,” and increased violence against Asian people as I made my decision.

The relationship between an academic supervisor and a graduate student comes with a very intense power dynamic that has often resulted in graduate students being exploited. Therefore, it is very important for graduate students to find supervisors they are comfortable working with.

Because Asian Americans are generally well represented in other STEM fields, their underrepresentation in environmental fields, such as ecology and geosciences, isn't talked about often.

For example, in 2018, Asian Americans represented 5.6% of the overall population but only accounted for 3.0% of ecology PhDs that year. There has also been very limited representation of Asian Americans as leaders in environmental science societies, such as the Ecological Society of America.

Underrepresentation in environmental fields **isn't exclusive** to Asian Americans. In 2021, Zippia, a career development platform, reported that only 6.9% of environmental science professors were Hispanic or Latino, only 5.1% were Black or African American, and only 0.3% were American Indian or Alaska Native.

What would it mean to change these numbers, so that the makeup of the environmental scientists reflected the real world?

I met my friend, Naomi, in our second year of university in an environmental sciences class. In that class and every subsequent class we took during undergrad, she was the only Black person in the room. Right now, she is preparing her environmental science master's applications and has finally found a supervisor at the University of Manitoba. I remember how excited and relieved she sounded on our call last month when she told me, “My new supervisor is Black, which is amazing because there are basically no Black researchers in agriculture!”

Maybe, just maybe, this will be an opportunity to experience environmentalism through a non-white lens.

The environmentalism movement that I, and many of my friends, have experienced is not an inclusive one because it was created mostly by white people for white people.

Even now, as a sustainability graduate student at Columbia University, I constantly find myself in classrooms full of mostly or all white people, being taught by white professors, and dealing with racist microaggressions from my white peers and instructors.

My own ethnicity has made and continues to make my experience as an environmentalist fundamentally different from that of my white counterparts. I can't think of a term or phrase that adequately describes the incredible anxiety that I have experienced, not only because I am an environmentalist at such a troubling time, but also because I am an *Asian* environmentalist.

What term can I use for the dread and anxiety that I feel when yet another instructor cannot tell me apart from the one or two other Asian women in my class?

What term explains the intense discomfort I feel from being involuntarily singled out in class by my white professor to speak on human rights in China during a lecture on ethical supply chains?

What term will express the frustration I felt when my white classmate suggested, in a condescending tone, that we needed to "educate the Global South" on climate change?

With every condescending comment and every microaggression, I hear the same voice telling me, "You do not have a place here."

When I ask myself what I've learned about being an environmentalist, my first thought is of the scientific theories and jargon that I've picked up over the years. I don't know the first thing about being an Asian environmentalist and how to amplify my own voice, let alone someone else's, in this wave of whitewashed environmentalism.

From Black Lives Matter to Stop AAPI Hate, pressure from social movements over the past couple of years has forced many academic institutions to make promises to invest in diversity and inclusion. For environmental fields, specifically, delivering on these promises must mean including Asian perspectives along with other minority perspectives.

At Columbia, I did not get a female Asian advisor like I had hoped and it is likely that I will not be taught by an Asian professor during my time here. However, I hope that the space I occupy in the classroom will allow me to help open up academic environmentalism to others who look like my friends and me.

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