



Why Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion are the Foundation of River Network's Mission

Water is sacred, and necessary for all life. Healthy rivers producing clean, affordable water are a fundamental human right, the foundation of our dignity, health, economy, environment and quality of life. Every human being needs water, but not every human being has equal access to it. Threats to water affect vulnerable communities the most, and yet these communities are seen and heard from the least in the mainstream water conservation community. River Network's commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion is not apart from our mission, but the path forward to achieving it. Addressing water disparities provides us with a moral and strategic opportunity to build a stronger river movement, aligning people of varied ages, races, economic conditions, and other identities.

With focus, determination and humility, we ask these questions of ourselves: Who must we work alongside and what issues must we engage in to live true to our beliefs? Is our work successful if it is not equitable? What are the gaps in our knowledge, relationships and resources? How do we better balance both human and ecological needs? What do we need to change to make our work more inviting to a broader range of people? What is possible if we can help to create a larger, more diverse river movement?

Our mission is to connect all people, not just some people, in order to protect and restore all rivers and waters, not just the wild and the pristine. Our understanding of this promise has evolved over decades, from our roots in land conservation, a mainly white and privileged movement, to lessons learned from more diverse voices in defending the Clean Water Act and helping to establish the Indigenous Waters Network and the Urban Waters Learning Network. American environmentalists have successfully served as the voice for rivers and nature, but we have fallen short in listening to and amplifying the voices and contributions of people who have less access to those resources because of the color of their skin or the size of their wallets.

Environmental disasters involving water have become more and more common. Too many people and communities find themselves harmed by drought, floods, sea level rise, other impacts of climate change, failing infrastructure, loss of healthy, free-flowing rivers, and drinking water contamination. Without a more inclusive, larger, collective effort for our rivers, decision-makers are likely to either ignore these problems or choose unfair solutions that impact vulnerable and underrepresented populations the most. The environment and quality of life of these communities will become more degraded, while wealthy communities will have the resources to avoid and recover from water disasters.

When we connect values with strategies, we can achieve our mission while contributing to a healthier society as a whole. We need a movement that embraces all people and grows to engage more of us to protect and restore our nation's waters. Elevating more voices brings more power, innovative ideas, and

solutions that are more effective and just. There is an urgent need to allow space for new voices and perspectives, to strive for fairness in the outcomes of our work, and to stretch ourselves to understand how the needs of all people connect to healthier waters. When this work is not comfortable or easy, it is a sign of growth that encourages us to press forward. We ask for help and guidance in our journey and offer ourselves in service to others pursuing their own, so that we can transform ourselves as individuals, organizations, and as a movement.