



Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Statement of Intent

(Approved by River Network's Board of Directors in September 2016)

All people have a right to clean and ample water that sustains life. To achieve this right for all communities, it is imperative for the river and watershed community to build a more diverse, equitable and inclusive movement. River Network is committed to being a catalyst and partner in this transformation.

Biases and disparities disproportionately burden communities of color, indigenous communities, and low-income communities with legacies of environmental damage and on-going harm that limit their access to healthy, life-sustaining waters. All voices must be included in River Network's work to achieve more equitable solutions. Just as biodiversity strengthens natural systems, water protection work is made stronger by the contributions, experiences, perspectives, and values of different people and communities.

River Network is committed to building on its history in working with others by embracing diversity, equity and inclusion in all areas to achieve our mission. Through our programs we seek to connect with all communities and increase the impact of their efforts to secure clean and ample water. River Network will be intentional about our staffing and engagement practices and strive to increase the diversity of our staff, vendors, board, members, and supporters with strategic recruitment and partnerships and an inclusive work place culture.

River Network invites dialogue with partners working on these issues to seek guidance and develop collaborations. By expanding our reach, River Network intends to go beyond traditional cultural and social boundaries to become more effective in building an equitable and inclusive river and watershed movement. We invite all communities to join us in this journey of transformation.



The Case

for why diversity, equity and inclusion is the foundation for River Network's mission

Water is sacred. Healthy rivers producing clean, affordable water are a fundamental human right, the foundation of our dignity, health, economy, 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 they are seen and heard from the least in our water conservation community. Today, being an effective advocate for the rights of nature must include being an effective advocate for the human right to water. Our shared need for clean, accessible, affordable water should bind us together in common cause as neighbors to defend against floods, droughts, water pollution, and drinking water threats.

River Network's commitment to diversity, equity 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.

Our Learning Journey

With focus, determination and humility, we are examining where we came from, where we want to go, and why it is crucial to get there. We ask these questions of ourselves:

What do we believe in and who must we work alongside to live true to our beliefs?

Is our work successful if it is not equitable?

How can we achieve our mission without more people?

What are the gaps in our knowledge, relationships and resources?

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?

For 30 years, River Network has been protecting and restoring rivers and waters by connecting and empowering people. Our mission is to connect all people, not just some people; to protect and restore all rivers and waters, not just the wild and the pristine. Our understanding and experience of this promise have evolved over decades, from our roots in land conservation, a mainly white and middle/upper income 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. Our learning continues as we endeavor to work effectively with people regardless of their race, ethnicity, income, color, national origin, or age.

American environmentalists have successfully served as the voice for rivers and nature, but we have fallen short in listening to and amplifying the voices of people who have less access to those resources because of the color of their skin or the size of their wallets. We are a network that understands ecosystems; do we understand and value social systems and their interaction with water resources as well? We know that when we separate ourselves from nature we do ourselves harm. When we separate ourselves from one another, what opportunities do we miss and how do we harm rivers? The health of our waters tells us a great deal about how well or poorly we are living together. River Network believes that our rivers give us the opportunity to heal one another through re-building our health and relationship to water.



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What do we risk if we cannot build a more inclusive movement?

Environmental disasters involving water have become more and more common, threatening drinking water supplies, flooding homes and businesses, and degrading the ecological health of our rivers. From toxic spills and mine drainage in Alabama and Colorado, to rivers running dry in New Mexico and Colorado, flooding in Louisiana and California, and failing infrastructure in Michigan and Ohio, people and communities find themselves challenged by drought, floods, sea level rise, and drinking water contamination.

Without a more inclusive, larger, collective effort for our rivers, decision-makers are likely to either ignore the problems, or at best choose unsustainable and unfair solutions. Those most affected will continue to be the least able to influence a new water future. Our social and political systems tend towards inequitable outcomes, especially based on race and class. If we do not intentionally pursue solutions that increase water equity, outcomes may instead continue or worsen disparities. The environment of vulnerable communities will become more degraded, and wealthy communities will have more resources to avoid and/or recover from catastrophes. While problems will be more evident and more compelling, our ability to respond successfully at a systemic watershed level will be eroded. Simply put, we will be more divided from each other to the detriment of our rivers and our communities.

What can result from this new river movement?

When we connect values with strategies, we can achieve our mission while contributing to a healthier society as a whole. Communities that build bonds and bridges between differences in their people are far more successful at solving large, complex problems like water management and climate change. Democracy itself requires trust, shared values and norms. And trust depends on equity and fairness. Conversely, poverty, environmental injustice, and exclusion pull us apart and weaken our river protection movement and our democracy.

This work brings us assets we would not otherwise have. With more voices comes more power, innovative ideas, and solutions that are more effective and more just. More leaders and advocates will join us, and we will find new opportunities for shared understanding and action. New allies have much to contribute: they hold on-the-ground knowledge of the condition of local waters, watersheds, and the communities that rely on them; and they bring strong social cohesion born from the experience of being their own first responders in troubled times. Finally, people who care. People who care conserve. Communities who care are the most prepared to sustain conservation into future generations.

Uniting the most connected with the most affected is a place for this transformation to begin. We must invite new voices, strive for fairness in the outcomes of our work, and stretch ourselves to understand how the needs of all people connect to a healthier river. That this work is not comfortable or easy is a sign of growth and encourages us to press forward.