Review of Activity to Address the Lack of Diversity in the Environment Sector
SUMMARY FINDINGS

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"Just because you're in the water splashing around, doesn't mean you're swimming."

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This is a summary of findings and recommendations from a research project commissioned in 2023 by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to review existing and planned initiatives which aim to address a lack of diversity in the environment sector in the UK.

Rather than capture all aspects of diversity, the research focuses on groups we know are currently underrepresented in the environment sector: people experiencing racial inequity; from low socioeconomic backgrounds; disabled people and neurodivergent people; and people who may identify with more than one of these characteristics.

The research involved 72 survey responses, and 40 interviews with organisations/individuals. Two versions of the survey were used, tailored to whether the response was on behalf of an established environmental organisation or a community activist.

Language: When describing individuals or communities, we will seek to use the term(s) they identify with. We will use 'underrepresented communities' as a collective term to describe people and communities currently underrepresented in the Environment Sector.

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1. CHANGE IS OVERDUE – YOU ARE WHAT YOU DO; DON'T JUST SAY IT, DO IT

Let's be blunt 'you are what you do' and for many organisations, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) isn't a priority, people may know they should be doing it – they make strategies and statements - but they don't fully appreciate the potential benefits.

A deficit focused approach fails to deliver change. Instead, highlighting the positive additions that genuine inclusion can bring, can better enable markers of success, motivate senior managers and support staff to effect genuine change.

Many issues stem from two central points:

a. Organisations don't pay enough attention to the lived-experience of people from underrepresented communities working in their organisations - so they don't understand what they need to change to improve their EDI practice – to make the reality match the rhetoric.

b. Many people from underrepresented communities feel excluded from nature and from the environment sector This disconnect is exacerbated by the slow progress of environmental organisations in embracing EDI - despite acknowledging the need for *collective* efforts to protect the environment. The narrative is changing to include racial and social injustices in environmental matters, emphasising the urgency of diversifying environmental professions and addressing systemic biases, and recognising the disproportionate impact of environmental harm on global majorities.

The narrative around environmental issues needs to shift. We need to identify what success looks like and why it matters, rather than solely focusing on barriers and exclusion.

## 2. KEY FINDINGS: MORE PEOPLE FROM UNDERREPRESENTED COMMUNITIES ENTERING THE SECTOR

Access and recruitment

- EDI support and knowledge wasn't felt to be easily accessible by organisations in the sector.
- Organisations without staff dedicated to EDI struggled to implement recruitment practices for a range of reasons.
- Targeted recruitment was found to have had mixed success rates. 44% had found this either 'extremely' or 'reasonably successful' but 25% had found it 'not at all' or 'not successful'.
- Even when many organisations did recognise the need for workforce change - this led to minimal changes in their staff composition. Only half of the survey respondents considered targeted recruitment, and even fewer had implemented such programmes. Those using targeted recruitment methods had experienced positive outcomes.
- Partnerships beyond the sector have proven effective in broadening community engagement, and as a result, changed the demography of those who apply for roles within an organisation, yet of our survey responses, just 55% had worked for a voluntary organisation outside the environment sector.

- Retention, or CPD, as opposed to recruiting a diverse workforce is not sufficiently thought about.
- Understandably, organisations often choose to hire individuals with relevant degrees and scientific backgrounds for roles aligned with their work needs. However, the high cost of higher education poses a barrier, particularly for those from less privileged economic backgrounds.
- Entry into Environment Sector roles typically involves volunteering and feeling at ease in natural settings. Many organisations are making recruitment more inclusive and accessible, but much of this is coming from outside the mainstream Environment Sector.

Support for people from underrepresented communities

- To address systemic issues, there's a need to combat racism, and prejudice, within the boards and senior leadership teams of the Environment Sector. This will require a significant shift in senior-level leadership, as the lack of diversity in voices at a senior level appears to be shared across the sector.
- Where the process of change has been uneven, organisations have stepped back from implementing – or continuing to implement – change (even though progress never moves in just one direction, as illustrated below).
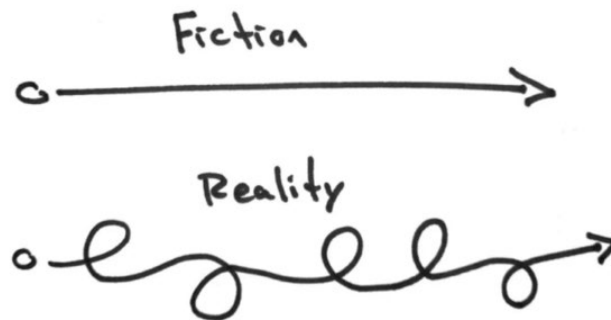
- Organisations that typically offer advice may not have a strong understanding of EDI. This situation is exacerbated as they are at different stages of their own EDI journey. Some organisations that are working to change EDI by delivering programmes of work are not always dealing with the lack of diversity in their own staff.
- A key element of work being delivered in this area are programmes that offer training, work experience and skills development. Several organisations currently offer these programmes.
- In less diverse workplaces, there may be just one person who identifies as being from an underrepresented community, or (visually) having one of the Protected Characteristics. This can be lonely and isolating because there's no one to talk to about shared experiences or feel a sense of togetherness and solidarity.

Perceptions and understanding

- The narratives around environmentalism need to change - starting with simple community engagement.
- The NUS Report, Race, inclusivity and environmental sustainability, provided a brief definition of the Environment Sector, and then gauged respondents' level of interest in pursuing a career within this

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sector. The data reveals a notable discrepancy in the perceptions of career appeal between White British respondents (44%) and respondents identifying as Black, Asian, or from other ethnic minority groups (57% for the Black, Asian, or minority ethnic group inclusive of White-Other, and 54% for the Black, Asian, or minority ethnic group, (excluding white other).

- Several organisations led by underrepresented communities saw the so-called mainstream Environment Sector as being rigid in their approach to engaging and recruiting from underrepresented communities, *'they're not able to come out of that mode of thinking, they're not able to get into communities to do engagement work.'*

- A key issue was seen as a lack of understanding of the communities, and groups, organisations were trying to connect with. Although the case for engaging communities more broadly was felt to have been made, the work required, the skills needed and the degree of resource necessary were all however still lacking. One interviewee felt that the case for diversity had been made, but other than as a moral case, we didn't find evidence of this.

3. KEY FINDINGS: FACILITATING PROGRESSION

- The project-driven culture of much of the Environment Sector can make it harder to recruit and train people on a longer-term basis, and to take a more holistic approach to a talent pipeline. Our research found that, usually, organisations look for people who already have the skills to deliver projects.

- Our research findings suggest that most career support targets those at an early stage of their career development – often not yet in the workforce.

- We see the focus of investment on entry level reflected in many areas of career development and support, including networking, mentoring, sponsorship, volunteering, fellowships, leadership programmes, careers advice, targeted recruitment, placements, and secondments.

- Organisations that included targeted recruitment in their activity were focused on - early career 7%, mid-career 4% and 3% to leaders.

- There is a significant gap in provision for the career and skills development of management and leadership in the sector.

- The need to support people who are change-makers and innovators and those who speak out on difficult issues was stressed. People who take on the role find it challenging as they may face racism, ableism and misogyny.

- Organisations were particularly interested in understanding what success looked like for those of a similar size and in similar locations, this shaped their interest in identifying collaborators and partners leading in this area and establishing communities of practice (see table below).

Increased access to collaborators and partners who are leading in this area	21%
Establishing communities of practice	18%

- There are mixed opinions on where placement support is most needed. Organisations that deliver placement opportunities stress that one of the areas funders could be most helpful is in *'helping people who are at an entry level in their careers. Reducing the barriers to entry, increasing the opportunities.'*

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- In contrast, one organisation led by underrepresented communities stressed *'engagement needs to be sustained, one off apprenticeships are not going to succeed – for the individual or the organisation. Individuals need time to progress.'*
- Some interviewees talked about the value of a *'collector of good practice'* - 'you've plotted a path, tested things, you've trialled … move something from being a case study best practice into a system you know.'

4. KEY FINDINGS: REMOVING BARRIERS

- Prominent sources of advice, in relation to removing barriers, were The Wildlife Trusts (22%) and the Wildlife and Countryside Link (18%). One campaigning organisation questioned whether training was really equipping organisations to continue the work once the trainer had 'left the building'.
- Smaller organisations saw themselves as being *'quite far behind'* even struggling to see how they might start on this journey. In some cases, this wasn't because there wasn't adequate information and resources available, it was a fear of engagement with uncertain/ unknown sensitivities.
- In survey responses - 30% of organisations do not have a dedicated EDI strategy. Yet 82% of survey respondents had made changes to strategies or action plans because of reviewing approaches to EDI.
- We found that often, the organisations that were radically removing barriers were smaller organisations, founder-led, building communities and membership from the ground up. It is unsurprising that the organisations led by underrepresented communities did not operate in the same way as larger, established organisations.

5. KEY FINDINGS: ACCOUNTABILITY AND EVALUATION

- Many organisations across different sectors are now increasing their focus on evaluating the impact of increasing their workforce EDI and adopting new processes and initiatives in recognition of the positive impact this can have on organisational culture, profile, innovation, and performance.
- In the environment sector, evaluation and monitoring processes and reporting often prioritise assessing funded programmes such as volunteer and audience diversity, engagement, and contribution, rather than what are seen as internal changes such as the diversity of the workforce.
- Organisations rarely gather evaluation feedback on inclusivity as a tool to review behaviours in leadership and accountability. Nor do they consider impact on goals, strategies, business plans or indicated action regarding resources and training or on workforce policy development (evaluation is seen as a funding necessity rather than a tool for organisational development).

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Change is overdue –** you are what you do; don't just say it, do it.
- **Find the energy: strength in numbers –** find the leaders and partners who are invested and work with them to advocate and lead.
- **Be alert to trends -** Increased action by underrepresented communities claiming their place in the sector, highlighting the need for community-led initiatives.

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- **Grow the talent -** Talent development strategies need to address the significant gap in support for career progression and leadership development for mid-career and senior leaders.
- **Celebrate diversity -** Platforming successful work by underrepresented communities to demonstrate viable careers in the sector is essential to dispelling perceptions that this sector isn't 'the place for me'.
- **Communities of Practice -** Coordinating communities of practice with a shared sense of purpose can encourage collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and benchmarking.
- **Knowledge Sharing, Resources and Networks -** Cumulatively, there is growing knowledge across the Environment Sector regarding enhancing EDI and workforce diversity. Harnessing and disseminating this valuable resource could significantly benefit organisations striving to diversify their workforce, boost engagement and representation, and enhance their understanding of best practice.
- **Evaluation as a learning resource -** improve evaluation practices to focus on measuring the influence of EDI on organisational culture, behaviour, governance, and decision-making.
- **Supporting sector transformation -** back organisations specialising in significant sector transformation. Don't focus on dominant players, who claim to promote change but show little evidence as this neglects smaller, often more effective, grassroots organisations.