



How the **federal government** and **philanthropy** created an **environmental workforce** that is ready for tomorrow's challenges.



REVISITING THE ENVIRONMENTAL CAREERS ORGANIZATION'S DIVERSITY INITIATIVE:



Advancing Racial Equity by Investing in Students and Early Career Professionals

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Forward

In the spirit of the word Sankofa, taken from the Akan people of Ghana, meaning, “go back and get it,” this report attempts to steer government leaders toward investing in and sustaining efforts to cultivate a new generation of equity and justice leaders and practitioners by surfacing the reflective insights of a former environmental careers pipeline program.

To bridge those lessons from the past together with present-day needs, this report details the success of the Environmental Careers Organization’s (ECO) Diversity Initiative, which during its 17-years of operation, from 1990 to 2007, significantly contributed to diversifying the ranks of the environmental movement. Specifically, the initiative provided paid internships and short-term work experiences for college students, recent graduates, early career professionals, and career changers. It was particularly focused on recruiting talent from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds for placement within environmentally-focused organizations in the public, private, and community sectors.

The impetus for this report is found in the utility of taking a retrospective look at the ways in which past federal investments in diversifying the environmental workforce are contributing to equity outcomes in the present. By revisiting practices and lessons from the past, we help to answer the question, “How does an environmental careers diversity initiative, launched more than 30 years ago, have bearing, impact, and influence on current efforts to advance equity?” Also, we suggest approaches for intentionally investing in similar contemporary initiatives across sectors and industries to yield the equitable outcomes needed now and in the future.

Although seldom mentioned in major gatherings, the collaboration of transformational leaders both within and outside of the public sector who invested in cultivating the talent of emerging leaders of color yielded a diverse cadre of equity scholars and practitioners. These equity leaders—all beneficiaries of an environmental careers pipeline program and specifically its diversity initiative—are at the forefront of work across the American landscape. In their varied roles, they are all advancing environmental and climate justice; promoting diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in the corporate sector; and setting the conditions conducive to achieving health equity to improve the lives of the most vulnerable populations in our society.

While this report presents a unique story, it should not be the only one.¹ When considering today’s context, especially with increased, and consistent attacks on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA)² across many societal fronts, the need to reinvigorate efforts described within this report are more urgent than ever.

In June 2023, the Supreme Court of the United States of America (SCOTUS) struck down the use of race-based affirmative action in college admissions. This decision reverberated throughout the country, causing confusion about the fate of other diversity efforts, initiatives, and programs beyond higher education. Legally, this decision only impacts college admissions. However, many feared the decision would be interpreted as an umbrella ruling with broader implications across the private and public sector. Their fears were well justified as anti-DEIA efforts have gained traction in recent years.

More than two years prior to the SCOTUS ruling, on his first day in office, President Joseph R. Biden signed Executive Order 13985: Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government. Executive Order 13985 asserted that affirmatively advancing equity, civil rights, racial justice, and equal opportunity is the responsibility of the whole of the United States government. To advance equity within the federal government, the executive order elevated the Biden-Harris Administration’s policy to cultivate a workforce that draws from and represents the full diversity of this nation. A little over a year later, President Biden signed executive order 14035 (2021) to further diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in the federal workforce and to help ensure that the federal government reflects the growing diversity of the nation. At no other point in U.S. history had there been such a significant investment in closing the racial equity gap through policy. Through the American Rescue Plan, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, Inflation Reduction Act, and a host of executive orders, the Biden-Harris Administration’s whole of government approach to

¹ Workforce diversity is a topic of importance for many professional sectors, including urban planning, engineering, architecture, historic preservation, and the like.

² Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) refers to a set of practices intended to ensure people from a broad set of socio-demographic backgrounds are represented and able to thrive in a workforce; and an organization’s actions and services to the public consider the needs and desired outcomes for all its stakeholders.

advancing racial equity resulted in concrete and historic action to address the long-standing effects of systemic racism on Black communities, including climate change and its disproportionate, negative effects on environmentally overburdened communities of color. As of 2025, a second Trump Administration has put all of these gains at risk.

While racial equity had not been previously prioritized in the operations of the federal government through Executive Orders or policy in such a substantive way, we can learn from prior efforts by the federal government to commit resources to career pipeline programs that prioritize diversity, and we can still explore how such efforts translate into tangible support for racial equity in the years that follow. In short, public investments in diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility programs were not wasteful spending, and they should not be mischaracterized as unlawful.³ In fact, the legacy of past federal and philanthropic support for the Environmental Careers Organization's Diversity Initiative continues to yield outcomes that support environmental justice and racial equity more than thirty years following the initial investment.

This retrospective report offers findings that are instructive for the federal government, and it attempts to track benefits beyond the normal arc of engagement. The benefits described within outpaced the non-profit entity (ECO) that was once a primary conduit for ushering in a more racially diverse environmental workforce.

³ Speaking from the floor of the U.S. Senate, Senator Patty Murray of Washington reminded her peers "A program is not waste just because it doesn't help the richest man in the world. It is not fraud because he does not like it. A law is not illegal just because he disagrees with it."

Executive Summary

With each successive decade since the passing of contemporary environmental protection legislation in the United States, the need for a trained environmental workforce has become more evident. The environmental workforce is critical to safeguarding environmental quality, health, and well-being for human populations. For over a decade from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000's, the Environmental Careers Organization (ECO) was recognized as the leading environmental careers development organization in the United States.

In 1990, ECO launched the Diversity Initiative--an effort that played a pivotal role in diversifying the environmental workforce, both within and outside of the federal government. It provided pathways into environmental careers that shaped the experiences of thousands of ECO Associates, many of whom are now environmental professionals, environmental justice advocates, and racial equity practitioners in government, the private and public sectors, academia, philanthropy, and tribal councils and organizations.

Through the Diversity Initiative, ECO introduced over 4,500 undergraduate and graduate students, recent graduates, early career professionals, and career changers to funded internships and short-term work experiences focused on addressing the nation's growing environmental challenges. This represented roughly 35% of its annual intern placements after the establishment of the Diversity Initiative (Cook, 2007).

ECO's 4,500 Diversity Initiative alumni was unparalleled. No other environmental or conservation-related pipeline organization introduced as many people of color to environmental careers as ECO did during its 35-year tenure. The seeds planted through ECO's investment, specifically through the Diversity Initiative, bore fruit not only in the diversification of the environmental workforce, but also in terms of cultivating leaders who make meaningful contributions to environmental justice, racial equity, public administration and policy, and adjacent practices.

Before ECO, the environmental field was largely perceived as elitist. ECO disrupted this narrative, proving that diverse leaders belong at the center of the movement. Perhaps the most personal qualitative impact is how ECO alumni talk about identity. Many share that ECO was the first time they didn't feel like an "outsider" in the environmental space. That sense of belonging instilled confidence and persistence, which is why so many alumni stayed in the field long enough to reach senior positions. Belonging isn't easily measured, but it determines retention. ECO provided not just jobs, but affirmation that these leaders belonged in rooms of power.

When ECO phased out its operations in 2007, the environmental movement lost a key champion that managed a successful pipeline program for emerging professionals as well as a leader in workforce diversity and mentorship. However within fourteen years, the federal government returned to prioritizing the very issues that ECO championed. Past federal investment in ECO's Diversity Initiative is still paying off, and it goes beyond the diversification of the environmental sector alone. It extends to ensuring institutions do not underestimate the concern that low-income individuals and people of color have for the environment. Speaking up regularly and respecting diversity of thought creates the space for dialogue and policy interventions that are responsive to long-standing needs. Although encouraging a diverse environmental workforce is where it started, another positive outcome is supporting the expansion of racial equity leaders who are making a meaningful impact as practitioners.

Since ECO ceased its operations, there has not been another organization to completely fill the void created by its closure. In addition to internships, ECO hosted an annual environmental career conference and various environmental careers diversity roundtables. ECO also published resources on environmental careers, and it consulted on a range of workforce issues. Given that many environmental organizations are 'ill-equipped' to recruit, train and retain employees from diverse backgrounds, initiatives to bridge this gap remain critical.

ECO Diversity Initiative alumni are currently active in a range of career pursuits. Alumni work across multiple disciplines ranging from environmental health, urban planning, environmental justice, environmental policy, and philanthropy. Many former ECO Associates hold roles in the federal government as well as in state and local government, academia, non-profit organizations, and the private sector.

These outcomes would not have been achieved without the support of the federal government and philanthropy for

the Diversity Initiative. If the Diversity Initiative were an academic program, the network of alumni would rival many higher education institutions. The alumni ranks of ECO's Diversity Initiative include: a former Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; an executive vice president of the National Wildlife Federation; a tenured professor and researcher who created the Center for Community Engagement, Environmental Justice and Health (CEEJH) at the University of Maryland; a national thought leader on equitable development who chaired the Social Equity Taskforce of the American Planning Association; a co-chair of EPA's National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC); a former director of business operations for the Washington Commanders of the National Football League.

With a modest upfront cost, ECO generated sustained capacity, yielding tens of thousands of staff hours, regulatory decisions, and completed projects. Partners' output rose as ECO talent accelerated monitoring, data processing, restoration, outreach and more.

Federal agencies, particularly the EPA, invested more than \$20 million into ECO programs between 2001 and 2004, resulting in nearly 1,500 internship placements. As recently as the Biden administration, that investment continued to pay dividends, as some alumni administered billions in federal climate and justice funding. From a public-interest perspective, the return on investment is extraordinary, and it represents a finding that needs to be remembered in the DEI community; environmental-activist community; civil service community; philanthropic community; and the public at large.

A retrospective examination of ECO's Diversity Initiative serves as a reminder that anti-DEI arguments are baseless and despotic. As noted by the African American Policy Forum, there has been a persistent attempt to link any tragedy imaginable to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.⁴ Failing to pushback has resulted in a debate that is rooted in intentional misinformation. It is asymmetrical, and it distracts from performance and achievement. Specifically, where are the people who completed diversity pipeline programs, and why is this not being explored?

If past participants are underachieving, maybe skeptics have a legitimate argument. However, the findings from Race Forward's retrospective report reveal that past participants in ECO's Diversity Initiative are successful and highly accomplished. This evidence reveals anti-DEI attacks aren't about merit. Instead, anti-DEI attacks are clearly about the discrimination of hoarding opportunity from people of color who deserve a fair shot.

When reviewing the evidence, it is clear ECO's Diversity Initiative made a difference in the early careers of participants, and many communities are still feeling the benefit of its creation as demonstrated through the work of alumni who are now seasoned professionals. The current environmental workforce is more diverse than the generation that preceded it, and the ECO Diversity Initiative helped to cultivate this shift. As this workforce moves closer toward retirement, new strategic and sustained federal investments can undergird the creation of pipeline initiatives that intentionally produce a new generation of environmental leaders who develop the skills and competencies needed for responding to emerging trends and challenges in our society.

⁴ African American Policy Forum. 2025. Anti-blackness is the Point: Racism, Misogyny, and Donald Trump's Assault on Equal Opportunity. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PGDX4A3_zhrxzRgvQcarZ3nJlq9Zggl/view

Introduction

This report retrospectively explores the role, impact, and living legacy of the Environmental Careers Organization (ECO) Diversity Initiative. While ECO is not the only organization that has successfully developed an environmental careers pipeline program or other initiatives to reach individuals from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds in environmentally-related careers (SFI, 2023; GYF, 2022; NHEC, 2022; Taylor, 2014), ECO's impact is particularly notable with respect to its theory of change; offerings to students and job seekers beyond its flagship internship program; and the career trajectories that ECO alumni have charted in environmental justice, racial equity, and adjacent fields and movements. As a national non-profit, educational, training, and leadership development organization, ECO introduced over 11,000 students (at both the undergraduate and graduate levels) as well as recent graduates, career changers, and entry-level professionals into paid environmental internships and short-term work/learning experiences in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

The environmental workforce plays a significant role in protecting the planet as well as safeguarding quality of life for human populations. Environmental quality is critically important to ecological and economic stability. The environmental justice (EJ) movement brought unprecedented attention to a wide range of environmental, health, and economic disparities in historically underserved communities. This movement can be credited with translating environmental phenomena in a way that resonated with residents in these communities because low income populations and people of color saw their lived experiences and environmental concerns in the larger context of the civil rights and social justice movements in the United States.

In the early 1970s, noted scholars began highlighting environmental racism and injustice as well as the need for a more racially/ethnically diverse environmental workforce (Hare, 1970 & Funes, 2023). Environmental institutions have pursued efforts to diversify the environmental field for at least sixty years (ECO, 1992; Taylor, 2014). In a similar manner, researchers have documented the barriers that racially and ethnically diverse populations face in accessing environmental careers (Magner, 1990; Taylor, 2014, Balcarczyk et al., 2015; Haynes et al., 2015; Taylor, 2018).

From 2020 to 2024, there was a greater emphasis on racial equity and environmental justice in federal policy development and implementation than ever before. It cannot be overlooked that sound policy analysis and decision making must be undergirded by representative and equitable data and analyses carried out by a knowledgeable and skilled professional workforce (Harrington et al., 2022). A workforce that lacks diverse lived experiences and perspectives can contribute negatively to the issues that most affect diverse communities. In fact, a 2018 study published in the Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences of the United States revealed that many Americans underestimate the concern that low-income individuals and people of color have for the environment (Pearson et al., 2018). In reality, these same populations are often most negatively impacted by environmental hazards and pollution (Hendricks & Van Zandt, 2021; Johnston & Cushing, 2020; Morello-Frosch & Lopez, 2006; Tessum et al., 2021). Furthermore, the assertion of many environmental justice organizations is that those who are closest to the problems are closest to the solutions but furthest away from resources and power (Martin, 2021), therefore those who are environmentally overburdened deserve a seat at the table.

Given that many environmental organizations are 'ill-equipped' to recruit, train and retain employees from diverse backgrounds (Magner, 1990; Taylor, 2014), initiatives to bridge this gap are critical. Over 40% of ECO's placements participated in ECO's Diversity Initiative—the primary, but not the sole programmatic effort -- through which ECO recruited students of color and others from historically marginalized backgrounds.

Despite the success and reach of the ECO Diversity Initiative, there has been little research on its impact performed for over 24 years. No independently written history of this diversity-focused environmental careers pipeline program exists, and no evaluation of its impact on former interns' careers has been performed for nearly 20 years. No other publication specifically highlights the role that the ECO Diversity Initiative played in fostering opportunities that laid the foundation for leadership and careers in racial equity for individuals of diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. In this report, the perspectives of former ECO staff and alumni of ECO's Diversity Initiative illuminate the importance of this initiative and similar programs. Furthermore, the ways that ECO DI Alumni are engaged in a diverse range of professional and civic roles that contribute to and help advance racial equity are elevated.

Federal Engagement and Investment in Diversifying the Environmental Field

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) cites that providing paid internships is a strategy that helps remove barriers to equal opportunity for the broadest set of students (Federal Network News, 2023). Federal agencies, including those responsible for environmental and human health protection, conserving public lands, and safeguarding American security and prosperity through addressing energy and environmental challenges, have leveraged the federal internship program infrastructure for decades. These agencies have provided access to paid work and training experiences for students across the United States (OPM, 2024) with investment in environmentally-focused internships for students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds dating back to the 1960s.

In 1961 when President John F. Kennedy took office, he raised questions about the level of diversity in the federal government workforce prompting Department of the Interior Secretary, Stewart Udall to organize National Park Service recruiters and order them to recruit at approximately 30 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to identify two students from each institution who could be hired as summer interns at the agency. Udall's actions were a reaction to the discovery that the National Park Service only employed one Black park ranger in the entire agency, at that time, and he was stationed in the U.S. Virgin Islands (Taylor, 2014).

Despite these early attempts to recruit a more diverse internship pool at the National Parks Service, diversity at environmental institutions, including federal government agencies, grew at a much slower pace during this period (Taylor, 2014; Taylor, 2018). This slow growth of people of color in environmental roles in federal government agencies was indicative of a larger trend. The overall representation of people of color (Black, Indigenous, Asian Pacific Islanders, and Hispanic persons) in the federal workforce increased minimally until the 1970s—yielding only an increase of one-half of one percent from 1955 to 1970. The percentage increased by nearly a full percentage point from 1970 to 1980 and by nearly two percent from 1980 to 1990 (GAO, 1992).

As one approach to help diversify the federal workforce overall, the federal government has fostered opportunities for student employment since the 1990s through three primary avenues: 1) the Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP), 2) the Student Career Experience Program (SCEP), and 3) through internships and other student opportunities facilitated through third-party organizations. Both the STEP and SCEP programs were authorized by regulations instituted by the Student Education Employment Program (SEEP) as part of the “Reinventing Government” initiatives in 1994.⁵ In the following decades, the Pathways Program was authorized by Executive Order 13562 in 2012 and updated in 2014 as a vehicle through which students and recent graduates gain access to federal internships and potential federal careers. Despite investment in the aforementioned efforts for students and recent graduates, overall diversity in the federal government workforce continues to be a challenge.

According to a 2022 OPM study, white workers and men are overrepresented in federal government jobs in comparison to their overall proportion of the U.S. population. Just over 61% of the federal government workforce identifies as white, compared to 59% which is the overall percentage of Americans identifying as white. This phenomenon of overrepresentation is more evident at the senior executive level for which whites make up 75.7% of senior level positions (USAFacts 2023). While the overall percentage of Blacks in the federal government was 18.2% in 2022, an important distinction to note is that Blacks only comprised 11.7% of government employees at the executive level in 2022.

“Racial equity is a process of eliminating racial disparities so everyone can have the same outcomes. It is the intentional and continual practice of changing policies, practices, systems, and structures by prioritizing measurable change in the lives of people of color and other marginalized populations.”

—Race Forward

5 Through SEEP, four distinct federal initiatives were consolidated into STEP and SCEP: 1) the Cooperative Education Program, 2) the Federal Junior Fellowship Program, 3) the Stay-in-School Program, and 4) the Harry S. Truman Scholarship Program.

Furthermore, findings indicate that Black federal government employees are overrepresented in secretarial and clerical positions. When Blacks in solely administrative roles are taken out of the equation, the group is no longer representative. Overall, Hispanic Americans make up the most underrepresented group in the federal workforce with 18.9% of the U.S. population as compared to 9.5% of federal government jobs and 5.1% of executive level jobs in the federal government (OPM, 2022).

While the overall numbers of people of color engaged in the federal workforce are not as representative as the diverse American population, the traction that the federal government has gained is due, in part, to partnerships and collaboration with third-party organizations who are focused on workforce development and broadening opportunities for participation in fields of importance to federal government agencies. In addition to the aforementioned programs implemented directly by federal government agencies, a number of third-party organizations—primarily non-profit organizations—have partnered with agencies to provide exposure and access to students, recent graduates, early career professionals, veterans, and career changers. These organizations often use focal areas such as conservation, environmental protection, and STEM as entry points to invest both in an emerging workforce and efforts to broaden diverse participation in careers that align with federal priorities (GYF, 2024; NHEC, n.d.). Contemporary organizations funded by and collaborating with federal government agencies to help meet these mutual goals in the context of environmental career opportunities have used a range of strategies such as internships, volunteer and paid conservation corps experiences, environmental and STEM intensives and institutes, mentoring, and career conferences (GYF, 2024; ACE, 2024; TCN, 2024; NHEC, n.d.; MANRRS, n.d.; NWF, n.d.; USDA, n.d.). These efforts largely date back to the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, but one of the forerunners of this work started its efforts in the 1970s on the cusp of increased national attention to environmental issues. With a legacy that lasted over three decades, the Environmental Careers Organization offers important lessons for today's context in which more and sustained efforts are needed to not only help diversify the environmental workforce, but to also cultivate environmental leaders who are equipped to advance equity across a range of sectors in our society.

Overview of the Environmental Careers Organization

Founded in 1972 in Boston, Massachusetts and operating for 35 years, the mission of the Environmental Careers Organization (ECO) was to protect and enhance the environment through the development of diverse leaders, the offering of career opportunities, and the inspiration of individual action. Established two years after the formation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency (Lewis, 1985) and the country's first Earth Day (Earth Day Network, 2019), ECO was initially called the Center for Environmental Intern Programs (CEIP) and later evolved to the CEIP Fund, Inc. until 1992 when the name Environmental Careers Organization was adopted.

As environmental issues began to garner unprecedented national attention in the early 1970s, ECO's Founder John R. Cook, Jr. became frustrated with the lack of formal mechanisms to help bridge individuals' interests to engagement in the growing environmental workforce. Channeling that frustration into action, Cook established CEIP to meet two distinct yet interconnected needs: 1) connect organizations in need of environmental professionals with new talent and 2) cultivate interest in environmental careers in youth and young adults by providing them with work experience in the field. CEIP initially operated three key programs—the Environmental Associate Services (EAS), the Environmental Career Services (ECS), and the Environmental Grants (Cook, 1989)—from regional offices in Boston, Massachusetts; Cleveland, Ohio; Seattle, Washington; San Francisco, California; and Tampa, Florida.

CEIP's purpose with respect to developing the next generation of environmental leaders, managers, professionals, and citizens provided an opportunity for collaboration with a host of federal agencies who had overlapping goals. The EAS program was focused on paid internship placement and specialized in recruiting, evaluating, referring, and job placement. EAS was geared to college undergraduates, recent college graduates, and graduate students in a variety of sectors (e.g., government agencies, consulting firms, corporate entities, and non-profit organizations) in the environmental field. When qualified candidates were matched and placed with a sponsoring agency, CEIP staff also conducted site visits and consultations during the internship period with both the internship sponsors and the recruits' (thereafter referred to as associates) to monitor the associates' progress.

Within sponsoring organizations, CEIP associates worked on projects that addressed various environmental issues such as air and water pollution, hazardous and solid waste, toxic substances, energy, land preservation, housing, economic

development, environmental education, parks and recreation, and scientific research (Cook, 1989). In the latter years after CEIP's transition to ECO, its partnerships increased with associates working not only within government agencies, corporations, and nonprofits, but also with private foundations (ECO, 2000). By 2001, ECO associates also worked within community-based organizations.

ECO's Environmental Career Services program supported career development for students and early career professionals through an annual career conference, career-planning workshops, seminars, and publications such as *The Complete Guide to Environmental Careers* (1990) and *Beyond the Green: Redefining and Diversifying the Environmental Movement* (1992). Through the ECS program, ECO also offered individual career counseling and analyzed internship programs across the country with the goal of increasing the number and effectiveness of practicing environmental professionals (Cook, 1989).

The Environmental Grants program was instituted to assist prospective sponsoring organizations with limited budgets in engaging environmental associates in carrying out environmental improvement projects. Funding to support these projects was awarded competitively by committees of local environmental professionals in locales where the projects were carried out. Local selection committees included CEIP alumni, and grantee organizations were required to supply matching funds to leverage the funds awarded by CEIP (Cook, 1989).

History and Vision of ECO's Diversity Initiative

ECO's investment in operationalizing its core values led to some of its most impactful work, specifically with respect to reducing barriers to entry into the environmental workforce by people of color. These core values consisted of the following commitments: 1) A passion for people, community and the environment; 2) A dedication to equity for all people, a healthy environment and a strong economy; 3) A belief that a career should promote and support lifelong learning with participants taking personal responsibility for their own learning; 4) A commitment to diversity in all that we do; 5) A belief in partnerships and collaborative action; 6) A pledge to listen to [its] stakeholders in the delivery of quality customer service; and 7) A dedication to continuous improvement (J. Cook, personal communication, December 6, 2022). ECO's leadership in the recruitment and placement of associates from diverse racial and ethnic identities was particularly noteworthy.

ECO's elevation as a leader in introducing environmental careers to students and early career professionals of color was bolstered by the launch of ECO's Diversity Initiative (DI). The ECO DI was established in 1990 to advance the critical need to increase the presence of people of color in the environmental field. The CEIP Fund began the journey that ultimately birthed the Diversity Initiative as a response to the calls of partners and clients in federal government agencies, philanthropy, academic institutions (students and professors), and corporations, as early as the mid-1980's, to explore the lack of representation of people of color in the environmental field. With an initial \$25,000 grant from the San Francisco Foundation in 1988, CEIP tested out programming by placing seven interns in non-profit organizations in the Bay Area. Reportedly, CEIP considered its efforts a failure in that out of the seven internship positions, five of them worked on environmental justice issues, but only two of them were people of color. Learning a number of lessons from this initial pilot, the Foundation followed up its initial grant with subsequent funding that included a challenge grant of \$10,000, which several other foundations matched, toward a \$50,000 budget to conduct a national feasibility study that would bring together perspectives of funders, practitioners, and academics in the environmental field (J. Cook, personal communication, December 6, 2022; Cook, J., 2001).

ECO's predecessor, the CEIP Fund, conducted the Minority Opportunity Study (1989), a year-long effort that focused on the recruitment methods, training, and retention of people of color in the environmental field. The study concluded that there was a significant imbalance in the supply and demand for people of color in the environmental field and that human resource management within environmental organizations needed to be challenged along with increased recruitment and retention of students of color from higher education institutions. The study also called for expanded outreach into communities of color with respect to career opportunities in the environmental field (King & Doyle, 2001).

“With more than 4,500 Diversity Initiative alumni by 2007, no other environmental or conservation-related pipeline organization introduced as many people of color to environmental careers as ECO did during its 35-year-tenure.”

—Carlton Eley, ECO Associate, 1994

Key Findings of the Minority Opportunities Study

- ▶ Most employers in the environmental field attempted to attract qualified candidates of color, however, many were unsuccessful.
- ▶ There was a lack of exposure concerning the environment and environmental career opportunities among people and communities of color.
- ▶ There was no educational or career pipeline program in existence to encourage people of color to enter the environmental field.
- ▶ The supply of environmental professionals of color and recent college graduates in science and engineering was very limited.
- ▶ When provided with opportunities, people of color are interested in entering the environmental field.
- ▶ Extensive networks existed both in the environmental field and communities of color, but there was very little overlap between the two.

The aforementioned imbalance in the supply and demand for people of color in the environmental field didn't reflect a lack of interest, but a lack of exposure. Environmentalist and one of the organizers of the first Earth Day, Sydney Howe, remarked at a 1967 conference that, within the ranks of environmental professionals, “We are today a racially segregated profession, heavily populated by so-called rugged outdoorsmen.” He further asserted, “Conservation must now be of and for increasingly urban environments and their people,” (Stout, 1996). After serving on the staff of and later leading the nonprofit research and educational organization, the Conservation Foundation (1965-1973), Howe founded the Urban Environment Foundation (later renamed the Human Environment Center) in 1976. As executive director of the Human Environment Center, Howe focused attention on the intersection between poverty and environmental degradation and advocated for more access to environmental jobs by racial and ethnic minority populations (Stout, 1996; Howe, 2020).

Despite the call of early leaders and scholars to pay attention to environmental harms and their impact on communities of color and low-income populations, the energy and resources of environmental protection were not directed to communities with extremely large concentrations of people of color in the 1990s. The history of redlining⁶ in the U.S. normalized patterns of neglect that impacted people of color the most. This neglect was compounded by biased policy decisions that suggested working in distressed communities was a drain on resources. This resulted in a modern environmental movement that disproportionately had a conservation focus without regard for the ways that environmental degradation harms human health and well-being.

In the early 1980s, grassroots efforts began to change the tides within the field. For example, community-led protests in rural Warren County, North Carolina, challenging a hazardous waste landfill in a Black community was pivotal in elevating the environmental concerns of people of color. The Warren County protests are largely credited with sparking the current-day environmental justice movement, and a subsequent sentinel report, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* (1987),

⁶ Redlining is a discriminatory practice in which access to credit is denied on the basis of where one lives. Historically, mortgage lenders once widely redlined core urban neighborhoods and Black-populated neighborhoods in particular. The 1968 Fair Housing Act outlawed racially motivated redlining and tasked federal financial regulators, including the Federal Reserve, with enforcement.

cemented the environmental plight of people of color by demonstrating for the first time, in a national study, that the location of hazardous and toxic waste facilities was positively correlated to race. A few years later, the groundbreaking text, *Dumping in Dixie* (1990) was published, and the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit birthed the 17 Principles of Environmental Justice (1991).

As the environmental justice movement took flight, ECO was well positioned to address the talent supply and demand gap in the environmental field. As a response to the results of the Minority Opportunities Study, ECO initially launched its Diversity Initiative as a bold 5-year effort formerly called the Minority Opportunities Program (MOP), and it was designed to both attract and retain talented students, early career professionals, and career changers from historically underrepresented backgrounds to the environmental field and to focus the attention of all sectors in the environmental field on the environmental concerns of communities of color (ECO, 1992). With an ambitious \$5 million fundraising campaign, its success depended upon \$1 million in seed capital from philanthropy and the remaining funds from fee for service revenue. In late 1989 and early 1990, foundations, government agencies, and corporate partners began to support the work. The Program's \$5M budget was larger than ECO's overall budget and represented its most ambitious programmatic effort to date. Its scale was an indication of the importance that ECO placed on efforts to diversify the environmental field for both the organization and its external stakeholders (Cook, 2001; J. Cook, personal communication, October 23, 2023).

Publicly announced at ECO's first National Minority Environmental Career Conference, convened in collaboration with Howard University (Washington, DC) in April 1990 and held on its campus, the Diversity Initiative had three objectives: (1) broaden environmental career exposure, (2) increase career opportunities, and (3) build support services for a multi-racial/multi-cultural workforce (King & Doyle, 2001). Early endorsement of the program came from William Reilly, incoming Administrator of the U.S. EPA under President George H.W. Bush. Reilly expressed EPA's commitment at the conference, demonstrating that support for diversity initiatives have, at times, garnered bi-partisan support (King & Doyle, 2001).

Corporations such as the Ford Motor Company Fund and the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation supported associates who were placed with environmental justice organizations or who specifically worked on environmental justice issues with organizations serving communities in cities such as San Francisco, California; Atlanta, Georgia; and Boston, Massachusetts. In partnerships with organizations such as the Bay Area Open Space Council, ECO not only developed its traditional internship program, but also a Diversity Advisory Council. (ECO, 2001).

In the years following initial implementation, the Diversity Initiative became a primary focus of ECO. Outgrowing its initial vision as a five-year effort, in the first 10 years of the Initiative, it contributed approximately 33% of ECO's overall budget or \$5M annually and placed over 1,500 individuals from underrepresented groups from across the country in internships at more than 200 public, private, and non-profit organizations nationally. By the early 2000s, ECO had successfully developed several multi-year cooperative agreements with a number of federal agencies including the U.S. EPA, and it had written and published *Beyond the Green: Redefining and Diversifying the Environmental Movement* (King & Doyle, 2001). This publication was widely read and was the first to provide a road map for operationalizing a new vision for a more diverse environmental movement. It also elevated the critical need to engage more people of color in both environmental careers and decision-making.

An outgrowth of the MOP's "Focus on Nonprofits" project, *Beyond the Green*, presented findings and conclusions from surveys and interviews that ECO conducted with over 140 nonprofit staff members and volunteers designed to help identify approaches necessary to improve the MOP to address needs of the nonprofit sector to: 1) support mainstream environmental organizations in developing and advancing diversity agendas aimed at diversifying board, staff, membership, and programmatic emphasis and 2) support organizations led by and serving people of color to develop and advance environmental agendas (Cook, 1992).

Federal Engagement in the ECO Diversity Initiative

A host of federal agencies supported the ECO Diversity Initiative through cooperative agreements and internship placements at their headquarters, regional offices, research laboratories, and program offices across the country. These agencies included:

- ▶ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- ▶ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
- ▶ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)
- ▶ National Park Service (NPS)
- ▶ Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
- ▶ U.S. Department of Energy (DOE)
- ▶ U.S. Geological Survey (USGS)
- ▶ United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

Despite the range of federal agencies engaged with ECO and contributing to the growth of the Diversity Initiative, ECO's relationship with the U.S. EPA was of particular significance. Through a partnership with EPA's National Center for Environmental Research (NCER), ECO began managing the U.S. EPA's Minority Fellows Program in the mid-1980s. The program aimed to strengthen the capacity of minority-serving institutions and enhance the undergraduate educational experience through professional development opportunities that improved their competitiveness for advanced degrees in the environmental field (U.S. EPA, 2011).

Under the guidance of Dr. Clarice Gaylord, EPA's first African American Grants Director and former Deputy Director of the Office of Human Resource Management, several significant diversity initiatives took root. Starting in 1985, CEIP began collaborating with the U.S. EPA Minority Fellows Program for science majors attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Through ECO's engagement with EPA, academic-year fellowships were extended through the summer months via student internship placements at EPA offices and research facilities throughout the country. Participating students from HBCUs and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) also received full tuition scholarships funded by EPA. Alongside this effort, Dr. Gaylord also chaired an EPA-sponsored exchange program, the Minority College Diversity Initiative, in which, "... EPA program officers partnered with HBCUs and HSIs to exchange personnel, hire students, donate supplies and equipment, and participate in joint lecture series, (Taylor, 2014). Through the initiative, EPA administrative staff were also afforded opportunities for training and career advancement. Those without college degrees had the chance to earn them and to subsequently seek more advanced professional positions within the agency. A byproduct of the EPA and ECO's collaboration included joint efforts to sponsor the aforementioned first national minority environmental career conference (April 1990) at Howard University in Washington, DC. While this partnership preceded the launch of ECO's Diversity Initiative, for which EPA was a founding partner, this work became an important precursor to ECO's expanded portfolio of work in the diversity arena.

Eventually, Dr. Gaylord was named the first director of EPA's Office of Environmental Equity when it was created in November 1992. Within this role, her commitment to providing opportunities for students and professionals of color to gain access to internship experiences and hold leadership positions in government agencies and mainstream environmental organizations, continued (Taylor, 2014). In 1994, the name of the Office of Environmental Equity formally changed to the Office of Environmental Justice (U.S. EPA, 2019).

The Office of Environmental Justice (OEJ) invested in a variety of education and outreach initiatives that brought students from the high school to the graduate level into the agency and that intentionally provided opportunities for students from racially and culturally diverse backgrounds to become exposed to careers in the environmental field (U.S. EPA, 1995). In some cases, OEJ developed partnerships with consortia of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Tribal Colleges, and in other instances, it signed formal agreements directly with academic institutions such as Morgan State University (Baltimore, MD) and Elizabeth City State University (Elizabeth City, NC).

As the agency as a whole began to initiate efforts to diversify its workforce, OEJ was a significant contributor to its success. Under Dr. Gaylord's leadership, OEJ created a user-friendly approach to recruit undergraduate and graduate school students of color into the agency via paid internships. Just two years after this program was initiated in 1992, this program had provided over 400 students of color with environmental training in the agency—placing interns in all 10 EPA regions, the headquarters office, research and development laboratories, and EPA testing facilities. At this time, approximately 5% of these interns had been hired by the agency into full-time positions. In 1994 alone, EPA placed more than 250 interns of color through a grant to ECO. In its annual report for this same year, OEJ reported that its overall internship program had inspired about 25% of its participants, to that point, to change their original career paths and choose environmental occupations (U.S. EPA, 1995)⁷.

By 2000, there was plenty of living evidence that ECO helped to address an early goal of the environmental justice movement—to diversify the workforce—by giving students exposure to the environmental field through internships.

ECO and the EPA entered into five cooperative agreements between 2001 and 2004 to provide internship opportunities for college students. The investment from EPA to ECO totaled over \$20M which enabled nearly 1,500 internship placements. Internships at the EPA covered multiple topics such as air/water quality, brownfields, environmental health and justice, pollution and Superfund. EPA and other federal agencies made a clear and intentional investment in diversity initiatives because they worked.

Broadening Partnerships and Impact

In *Beyond the Green* (1992), the CEIP Fund concluded that people of color had been excluded from environmental careers. The authors of this informal study of 11 environmental nonprofit organizations found that a total of six people of color served on their boards of directors. In a like manner, people of color only comprised 1.8% of these organizations' professional staff (Ruffins, 1999). Over a decade later, a comprehensive study written by Dr. Dorceta Taylor, *The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations* (2014), examined the status of diversity efforts within mainstream environmental non-profit organizations, foundations, and government agencies and it revealed that while progress had been made, the results were not much better.

The first of several National Roundtables on Diversity in the Environment was convened in 2000 as part of ECO's 10-year anniversary celebration for the Diversity Initiative. A first of its kind effort, this day-long event held in Atlanta, GA focused exclusively on diversity issues within the environmental field specifically. The roundtables aimed to convene people who understood the value of diversifying the environmental workforce, assess the progress made as well as develop strategies and best practices for the future (King & Doyle, 2001). The Roundtable drew nearly 100 national leaders, environmental practitioners, and other environmental professionals from multiple sectors (e.g. government, corporate, nonprofit, and academic). Attendees collectively identified key barriers facing the field and developed practical recommendations for increasing diversity in the environmental field (King & Doyle, 2001).

Through the Diversity Initiative, ECO developed partnerships with like-minded organizations to bolster the number of students and early career professionals who gained work experiences through a wide range of environmental projects at sponsoring organizations in both the public and private sectors. ECO was able to utilize its expertise in internship placement and management to complement programs developed by federal agencies, academic institutions, and non-profit organizations that included an internship component. For example, ECO partnered with the Tufts University Environmental Leadership Program (ELP), an interdisciplinary graduate scholarship program created to, "...bridge the gap of diversity in environmental management," (ECO, 1999). Student participants matriculated through a curriculum focused on environmental engineering and policy and completed six-month internships

ECO engaged with several organizations to aid in efforts to fulfill its mission. For example, ECO also collaborated and engaged with the Environmental Leadership Program, Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences (MANRRS) (Taylor, 2014); as well as minority serving institutions (e.g. Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Hispanic Serving Institutions). Minority serving institutions represented (and they remain) a major underutilized resource

⁷ Many of the intern participants returned to college and conducted thesis projects on environmental justice. Education from the internship shifted into "independent study".

that strengthens the nation's ability to develop a competitive STEM workforce (National Academies, 2019).

ECO's Theory of Change

ECO's theory of change was exemplified through goals related to leadership and professional development, innovation and diversity. ECO was guided by its vision to "...(1) educate the new generation of environmental professionals to be leaders, (2) provide resources, networks, and learning opportunities for environmental professionals throughout their careers, and (3) identify and promote diversity throughout the environmental field."

In the context of its internship placement services, ECO developed six (6) qualities of excellence that they communicated to sponsoring organizations: 1) A job description, 2) Matching the skills with the job, 3) Excellent supervision, 4) Logistics and funding, 5) Creating a learning environment, and 6) Promoting societal values. ECO also required that internships be project-based so that interns would be able to demonstrate the completion of a cohesive project; thereby greatly increasing competitiveness for future work experiences.

A major distinction between ECO and peer organizations who were also engaged in pairing college-aged youth in environmental career experiences at the time, was ECO's investment in paid internships and short-term work/learning opportunities for its associates. Historically, ECO's peer organizations who were engaged in complementary work often offered unpaid internships to college students or operated with service-learning models associated with no to little compensation (The Corps Network, 2017). Such models limited who could engage in the experiences. Typically, those who could afford to work for no pay were best positioned to take advantage of these opportunities. Such models provided a significant barrier to low income populations and people of color accessing environmental work experiences. This challenge resulted in initiatives that had no significant impact on the diversification of the environmental workforce or movement. These other groups in ECO's ecosystem were often also not operating at the same scale and didn't have the same intentions with respect to cultivating diverse environmental leaders. As a well-established organization with a successful model operating from multiple sectors and offices across the country and deepening relationships with federal government agencies and the philanthropic community, ECO was well-poised to heed the call of employers and funders to activate its model to spur on diversification of the environmental field.

While the key component to ECO's work was its internship placement services—the flagship effort that the organization is most well-known for—its success was not limited to the internship program alone. There was a longer arc of engagement that didn't end at the completion of an associate's internship or other short-term work experience. ECO cultivated a learning network which it ascribed as one of its solutions to sustaining its work. This community of practice was made up of current interns, professionals, alumni, academics, and leaders in the public, private, and non-profit sectors (ECO, 2001). ECO staff maintained communication with alumni and helped cultivate a robust peer network. Offerings such as ECO's annual career conferences and diversity roundtables were open to all former ECO associates. These convenings provided networking and continued professional development opportunities for the Diversity Initiative's alumni. ECO provided programmatic highlights and updates to alumni through newsletters and periodic email outreach. Regional programming also offered opportunities for the engagement of ECO alumni in networking and community service efforts as well as to provide input on other upcoming ECO location-specific programming (ECO, 2001). The ECO Alumni C.A.R.E. Program linked alumni to current associates placed at the U.S. EPA to foster discussion about Career experiences, to offer Advice, to serve as a Resource, and to provide Encouragement. Alumni also supported ECO's efforts through staffing booths at conferences and speaking on ECO's behalf about environmental careers. ECO alumni also sponsored ECO associates at their places of employment (ECO, 2021).

Undergirded by its organizational vision to [cultivate], "...a dynamic network of committed, diverse leaders discovering and sharing sustainable solutions," ECO annually reached hundreds of thousands of young professionals through national career conferences, diversity roundtables, top selling books on environmental careers, research, campus visits and other college outreach programs, and through online engagement on their website, which received up to 70,000 unique visitors a month (ECO, 2001). Through other resources, ECO provided career advice to students and job seekers on multi-media platforms as well as through writing and disseminating guides to environmental career pathways and preparation. ECO also provided consulting assistance to the environmental community by conducting human resource and career development research studies on issues such as salary stratifications across the environmental field and strategies to recruit and retain a racially diverse environmental workforce.

A Living Legacy: The Immediate and Long-Term Benefits of ECO's Pipeline Efforts

The Environmental Careers Organization's (ECO) Diversity Initiative (DI) stood as both a door and a bridge. It opened paid, purposeful pathways into environmental work for talented people who had been standing just outside the room, and it connected agencies, NGOs, universities, corporations and communities that needed their skills, perspectives, and leadership.

The benefits of ECO's DI are anchored in what happens when people finally get to walk through doors and are given the opportunity to excel. The ECO DI replaced “who you know” with “what you can do,” offering paid, mentored pathways into environmental work for talented people long kept at the margins. The DI was a bridge: not just access, but connection; not just a first chance, but an enduring path that strengthens the work and widens who gets to do it.

The effects of ECO's landmark work have outpaced its operations. The effects live on in the careers it launched, the policies alumni now shape, the classrooms in which they teach, and the neighborhoods where environmental decisions feel more responsive because the people making them finally reflect the people living with them. These benefits are the result of a powerful program – but more than that, they represent a living legacy.

What follows documents both the measurable and the meaningful: quantifiable gains in capacity, retention, and project delivery, and the human shifts that numbers rarely capture: belonging, confidence, mentorship, and trust within communities.

ECO concluded in 2007 without publishing a unified, longitudinal Key Performance Indicators (KPI) set. To legitimize the long-term impact of the DI, it is important to identify benefits that are both qualitative and quantitative to illustrate the numerous gains that ECO Associates and partners consistently reported, and they are incorporated throughout.

Workforce Diversification at Scale

ECO directly shifted the demographics of the environmental workforce. Over its lifespan, the program placed thousands of Associates—more than one-third of whom were from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. Within a few years of launching ECO's DI, these placements accounted for a significant share of new hires into federal environmental agencies and beyond.

ECO's DI normalized diverse hiring and advancement in agencies, NGOs and beyond. Alumni now span careers in environmental health, planning, policy, justice, philanthropy, and inclusion, and alumni have gone on to occupy senior roles in the U.S. EPA, philanthropy, academia, nonprofits, and corporate leadership, demonstrating measurable impact on workforce diversity.

This pipeline effectively seeded a more representative environmental workforce where none existed before, reducing the historical underrepresentation of people of color in STEM and environmental sectors. Alumni remain embedded in agencies, nonprofits, and corporations, ensuring that today's workforce is more representative than in decades past. This shift has given institutions both legitimacy and access to perspectives that were once absent.

Quantitative Impact

- ▶ **4,500+** total placements
- ▶ **~1,500** EPA placements tied to **~\$20M** federal investment (2001–2004).
- ▶ Recruiting reached across **200+** colleges/universities, including HBCUs / HSIs and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs).

Qualitative Impact

- ▶ Alumni report ECO as the first professional space where they felt as if they “belonged,” increasing persistence and promotion.
- ▶ Presence of alumni in labs, offices and communities recalibrated peers’ mental model of “qualified” talent and attracted subsequent diverse applicants.

Beyond the raw numbers, alumni consistently shared how ECO was the first professional space where they felt seen and included, shifting their career trajectory toward long-term environmental service. ECO transformed their sense of belonging in the environmental field and that’s the moment they knew their perspectives were wanted, their growth was sponsored, and their work would change outcomes, not just check boxes. Belonging feels like being expected, not merely allowed. It’s the moment people lean in, share ideas earlier, ask for help sooner, stay longer, and become truly invested. Many were the first in their agency, lab, or nonprofit who came from their particular backgrounds. That visibility changed both how colleagues perceived what “qualified” talent looks like, and how future recruits saw their own potential. ECO’s placements didn’t just fill positions—they normalized diversity in professional spaces that had long excluded it. In the 1990s, white candidates had many routes into environmental roles (through universities, major NGOs, and agency pathways). ECO added routes for those historically excluded; it did not take opportunities away. Equity here was expansive, not zero-sum. Finally, all of these efforts contributed to the integration of the federal civil service — advancing President Truman’s goal. By recruiting, preparing, and placing professionals of color into EPA, NOAA, USDA, USGS and other agencies, ECO helped make the environmental civil service better reflect the public it served. This was not symbolic; many alumni built multi-year careers that permanently changed teams and leadership pipelines.

Dr. Mustafa Santiago Ali, Executive Vice President at the National Wildlife Federation and Founder of Revitalization Strategies, ECO DI Associate, 1992

A respected thought leader, renowned international speaker, policy maker, community liaison, trainer, and facilitator, Dr. Mustafa Santiago Ali serves as the Executive Vice President for the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) and Founder of Revitalization Strategies, a business focused on transitioning communities most vulnerable to social and environmental inequities from “surviving to thriving.” A social justice advocate since the age of 16, Dr. Ali’s long-standing work in advancing environmental justice began with his ECO internship which helped to launch a 24-year tenure with the U.S. EPA. A founding member of EPA’s Office of Environmental Justice, Dr. Ali worked for eight EPA Administrators, beginning with William Riley and ending with Scott Pruitt. In his last role at EPA, Ali served as Associate Administrator and Senior Advisor to the Administrator for Environmental Justice and Community Revitalization.

Prior to joining NWF, Dr. Ali was the Senior Vice President for the Hip Hop Caucus, a national non-profit and non-partisan organization that connects the hip-hop community to the civic process to build power and create positive change. In addition to spearheading the strategic direction, he also oversaw the expansion and operation of the Hip Hop Caucus’ climate, environmental justice, and community revitalization portfolio. Ali currently serves on the boards of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Union of Concerned Scientists, Rodenberry Foundation, and can be frequently seen on television, including appearances on MSNBC, CNN, and Black Entertainment Television (BET).

“When I worked there (Environmental Protection Agency), I had a chance to play a role in the first report that was ever done around Environmental Equity, and also in the founding of the Office of Environmental Justice. Both of those were critical because they came out of a set of recommendations from community organizations about the impacts happening on the ground, and the infrastructure that needs to be put in place.”

—Dr. Mustafa Santiago Ali, ECO DI Associate, 1992

Dismantled Historical Barriers

In the U.S., the mainstream environmental field has historically been represented largely by white, college-educated men from higher-income/elite networks, creating very few examples for people of color to see themselves in the work. By placing thousands of Associates into paid internship roles, ECO’s DI addressed numerous barriers that had excluded people of color from this sector.

Financial Barriers

A large majority of environmental internships were unpaid, which effectively excluded students from low-income households who could not afford to work without compensation.

- ▶ ECO paid stipends, ensuring participants could support themselves while gaining career experience. This allowed a broader range of students to access roles in Washington, D.C., and other high-cost of living areas.
- ▶ Alumni often reported that without ECO’s financial support, they would not have been able to pursue graduate school or professional entry into the sector.

Structural Barriers

Traditional hiring pipelines in environmental agencies drew heavily from a small group of elite universities. This limited the candidate pool and excluded talent from HBCUs, HSIs, TCUs, and public universities.

- ▶ ECO intentionally partnered with over 200 college and universities, broadening the reach and opening pathways for institutions historically left out. This included targeting student of color organizations at predominantly white institutions.

Informational Barriers

Many underrepresented students were simply unaware of opportunities in environmental careers. Job postings and internships were often circulated through networks that did not reach them.

- ▶ ECO acted as a bridge, recruiting directly from campuses and communities where awareness of environmental career pathways was low.
- ▶ This “exposure gap” was closed by providing hands-on experience and mentorship that made environmental careers visible and accessible.

Cultural Barriers

The environmental sector had long been characterized as “green, but mostly White”. The lack of diversity limited how the sector resonated with broader audiences.

- ▶ ECO helped to change this by placing students of color directly into agencies and nonprofits, where their presence itself challenged norms.
- ▶ Alumni recall ECO as the first time they saw others like them in the field, creating a sense of belonging and shifting the culture of environmental institutions.

Institutional Barriers

Agencies and nonprofits historically lacked systems to support or recruit diverse candidates. Hiring practices often relied on word-of-mouth networks or internal referrals.

- ▶ ECO served as an institutional partner, providing agencies with ready access to a diverse, prepared talent pool. This not only diversified staff but also modeled inclusive hiring practices.

Quantitative Impact

- ▶ Stipends offset costs and other high-cost placements; ECO distributed >\$20M in stipends/contracts at EPA alone, unlocking access for thousands.
- ▶ Diversified sourcing across 200+ college campuses broadened the candidate pool beyond traditional pipelines.

Qualitative Impact

- ▶ Alumni describe ECO as the moment they “saw people like me” in environmental work; that belonging effect underpins retention and leadership ambition.
- ▶ Agencies adopted inclusive practices learned through the ECO partnership (structured recruiting, mentoring, cohort supports).

Carlton Eley, Senior Director for Federal Strategies at Race Forward, ECO DI Associate, 1994

Carlton Eley is a nationally known urban planner and expert in equitable development. His ECO internship helped launch a 20-year career at U.S. EPA during which he held several roles in the agency at EPA Region 7 (Kansas City, KS) and at EPA headquarters in Washington, DC, where he served in the Office of Policy, Economics, and Innovation and the Office of Strategic Environmental Management.

In 2013, Eley became the first urban planner hired by the Office of Environmental Justice. As an urban planner, he made an indelible imprint on the agency’s approach to equitable development by organizing national workshops; publishing articles; working closely with minority professional associations; and nominating the ReGenesis Project for the American Planning Association’s (APA) National Planning Excellence Award for Advancing Diversity and Social Change. His Planning Advisory Service Memo “Planning for Equitable Development: Social Equity by Design” was circulated to APA’s 40,000 members.

After leaving EPA, Eley chaired the American Planning Association’s Social Equity Task Force and was later the Regional Equity Initiative Manager for the Miami Valley Regional Planning Commission (Dayton, OH). Eley was a community advisor, and he was an interview subject for the Emmy award-winning, ThinkTV/PBS documentary

Redlining: Mapping Inequality in Dayton & Springfield. Eley's unique work on urban planning and racial equity has been recognized by Fulbright New Zealand (Ian Axford Fellow); University of Michigan (Sojourner Truth Fellow); Harvard University; Yale School of the Environment (JEDSI); and the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA Fellow Nominee).

"Participating in ECO's Diversity Initiative was definitely a career defining moment. I was a student at Elizabeth City State University, and the associate position really opened my eyes to a whole new set of possibilities and opportunities. The Environmental Protection Agency was not on my short list of places to work. However, after my associate position, it became apparent that this was a place where I could actually fit in and work on the mission of helping to protect and safeguard the environment while doing some things that I really felt were important."

—Carlton Eley, ECO DI Associate, 1994

Improved Efficiency of Partner Operations

ECO turned a perceived scarcity of "qualified candidates" into a solved access problem, and partners felt it operationally. With ready-to-work cohorts and clear scopes, agencies and organizations consistently **found qualified candidates, filled roles faster**, and **avoided costly vacancies**, keeping projects on schedule rather than stalling while positions sat open.

Because placements were **paid and mentored**, teams saw **higher retention and lower turnover costs**, preserving institutional knowledge and reducing re-posting and re-training. These gains also strengthened employer reputation for **inclusive hiring**, boosting applicant yield—especially among mission-driven talent.

In short, ECO didn't just change who was hired; it made hiring, onboarding, and delivery **measurably more efficient**.

Quantitative Impact

- ▶ **Faster recruitment and lower vacancy costs**

Where partners tracked it, hire cycle time dropped by **~25–40%** when roles were filled via ECO's pre-screened candidate pools and funded placements (e.g., from ~90–120 days to ~55–85 days). ECO placements shortened hiring cycles for technical and policy roles, allowing managers to keep projects on schedule rather than carrying costly vacancies.

- ▶ **Higher retention and reduced turnover costs**

Because ECO DI alumni entered with relevant skills, mentoring, and clear career intent, they tended to stay longer than non-pipeline peers—stabilizing teams and cutting replacement costs.

- ▶ **Stronger employer reputation for inclusive hiring**

Partnering with ECO positioned agencies and NGOs as leaders on inclusion, improving employer brand and applicant yield—especially among mission-driven talent.

Qualitative Impact

- ▶ **ECO's DI placement process created smoother handoffs, fewer errors and reworks across business units due to cohort starts and improved operating procedures.**

ECO's DI placement process created administrative offload due to centralized recruiting and payroll, freeing managers for coaching, QA/QC, and stakeholder delivery.

Na'Taki Osborne Jelks, Assistant Professor, Environmental and Health Sciences at Spelman College and Co-Founder of the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance (WAWA), ECO DI Associate, 1994

Dr. Na'Taki Osborne Jelks is an Assistant Professor of Environmental and Health Sciences at Spelman College in Atlanta, GA and Co-Founder of the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance, a community-based, environmental justice organization that works to grow a cleaner, greener, healthier, more sustainable West Atlanta through authentic community engagement, organizing, education, community science, and participatory research. As a researcher, Dr. Jelks investigates urban environmental health disparities; the impact of climate change and cascading disasters on vulnerable populations; water justice, and greenspace equity within an equitable development framework. Jelks is particularly interested in approaches that engage environmentally overburdened communities in monitoring local environmental conditions, generating actionable data for community change, and developing effective community-based interventions that revitalize toxic, degraded spaces into healthy places. Her passion for environmental justice and health equity stem from both her personal experience living for part of her adolescence in Louisiana's Cancer Alley Corridor and from her first internship in the environmental justice field at the U.S. EPA through ECO's Diversity Initiative.

From 2018 until 2024, Jelks served as a member and Co-Chair (2022-2024) of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC), a federal advisory committee that works to integrate environmental justice into the Environmental Protection Agency's programs, policies and activities. A nationally recognized leader in engaging urban communities and youth of color in environmental stewardship, Jelks also co-founded the National Wildlife Federation's Atlanta Earth Tomorrow Program in 2001 and served as the program director from 2005 until 2017. Prior to her current role, Dr. Jelks also taught community health at the Morehouse School of Medicine and was a Visiting Assistant Professor of Environmental Health at Agnes Scott College.

“Participating in ECO’s Diversity Initiative was undoubtedly a career defining opportunity for me. I grew up for part of my upbringing, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in an environmental justice community. I saw the petrochemical companies. I saw the pollution around me. I and a family member experienced some health challenges that could be partially explained by our exposure to toxicants in that area. Even though I had that experience, I did not know that there were opportunities within the federal government or in any other sector to address those challenges. I didn’t know that I could pursue a career in environmental protection or in environmental justice. The opportunity to intern at the U.S. EPA through ECO completely opened the door for me. It substantially changed the trajectory of my career. Because of it --- because of my involvement in the Diversity Initiative, I’m doing the work that I’m doing today.”

—Na’Taki Osborne Jelks, ECO DI Associate, 1994

Leadership Development and Alumni Influence

ECO has cultivated laudable leaders who have since risen to positions of major influence. Alumni of the DI include an Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, executives at federal agencies, senior nonprofit executives, tenured professors, equity taskforce leaders, corporate DEI executives, a coveted Heinz awardee, and many more. These leaders shape federal investments in climate justice, develop policy on equitable development, guide philanthropic initiatives, advance opportunities for communities, and continue to make a difference across industries and sectors. Importantly, many alumni are now mentoring and sponsoring the next generation of leaders, ensuring intergenerational impact.

Quantitative Impact:

- ▶ **200+** alumni in executive or senior leadership roles.
- ▶ Alumni now manage or influence billions of dollars in federal climate, infrastructure, and equity funding.
- ▶ Dozens of alumni serve as faculty at universities, teaching equity-driven environmental curricula.

Qualitative Impact:

- ▶ Alumni describe ECO as “career-defining.” As they advance, they actively mentor and sponsor new talent, multiplying the original investment and extending ECO’s reach across generations.

Olivia Carpenter-Glenn, Chief of Staff and Senior Advisor for Equity, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 2, ECO DI Associate, 2000

As a seasoned environmental professional with over 20 years of combined experience in the non-profit and government sectors at the state and federal levels, Olivia Carpenter-Glenn is a changemaker who has weaved a narrative of protection of natural and historic resources as well as human health and the environment in a seamless way. In a full circle moment, Carpenter-Glenn finds herself today where she started her career working on environmental justice issues at U.S. EPA Region 2 in New York City. Her

ECO internship began two days after her graduation from Dartmouth College. During her time as an ECO DI Associate, Carpenter-Glenn “cut her teeth” on environmental justice issues by helping to finalize EPA Region 2’s first (an interim) environmental justice policy. This exposure to environmental justice issues after coming to terms with her own lived experience growing up in Camden, New Jersey, a community plagued with environmental challenges, impacted her subsequent work to protect natural and historic resources as well as advance environmental justice---areas that Carpenter-Glenn sees as interconnected.

Working at the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP), initially as a Special Assistant to the Commissioner followed by a role as an Urban Initiatives Coordinator within NJDEP’s Division of Parks and Forestry. Carpenter-Glenn later rose to the ranks of Director of the Division of Parks and Forestry before working in the nonprofit sector as the South Jersey Metro Regional Manager for the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, New Jersey’s largest land trust. Before joining the U.S. EPA, Carpenter-Glenn completed another tour of duty at the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection where she primarily advanced environmental justice and equity priorities in her role as Deputy Commissioner.

“I think one of the most powerful things about my ECO experience were the people I got to meet. One of those people was Lisa Jackson. I met her that summer. I think at that time she was the deputy director of the Superfund program. I met Mary Helen Cervantes and then Jeanne Fox, who was the regional administrator at the time. And there was a gentleman named Tim O’Donovan...when I came out of graduate school, I worked about 6 months for [then] New Jersey Governor McGreevey. Through that role I met the New Jersey Environmental Commissioner, and he ultimately hired me at the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). When I went into his conference room for the first time for a staff meeting, sitting in that room was Lisa Jackson, Mary Helen Cervantes, and Tim O’Donovan. I knew half of his senior staff. Lisa Jackson was then Assistant Commissioner for New Jersey DEP, and shortly after that she became the Commissioner. And then, she became the EPA Administrator. My ECO experience was just tremendous for me in terms of relationship building. These were people who really helped cultivate my whole career because of the connections I was able to make 24 years ago.”

—Olivia Carpenter-Glenn, ECO DI Associate, 2000

Enhanced Partners Outputs and ROI

With a modest upfront cost, ECO generated sustained capacity, yielding tens of thousands of staff hours, regulatory decisions, and completed projects. Partners’ output rose as ECO talent accelerated monitoring, data processing, restoration, outreach and more.

Federal agencies, particularly the EPA, invested more than \$20 million into ECO programs between 2001 and 2004, resulting in nearly 1,500 internship placements. As recently as the Biden administration, that investment continued to pay dividends, as some alumni administered billions in federal climate and justice funding. As equity criteria expanded in grants, the pipeline also improved funding leverage and award competitiveness, consistent

with apprenticeship ROI evidence on reduced administrative burden and stronger results. Net result: extraordinary public-interest ROI that merits tracking as a federal investment outcome and that seeded today's Environmental Justice (EJ) leadership bench.

Quantitative Impact

▶ Created a modest investment that keeps paying off

A summer placement often costs **\$10,000** or less. Many interns went on to **10+** years of public service—tens of thousands of staff hours, regulatory decisions, and projects for a tiny upfront cost. From a public-interest perspective, that's extraordinary ROI (and should be tracked as a federal investment outcome).

Qualitative Impact:

▶ Improved reputation

Partners cited improved reputation for inclusive hiring, stronger proposals where diversity is a selection factor, and smoother field operations through culturally fluent engagement.

▶ Expanded project capacity and output

ECO's talent pipeline enabled partners to take on work that otherwise may not have taken place or done so in an extended period of time—from monitoring and data collection to restoration and community outreach.

▶ Stronger funding leverage and grant competitiveness

As equity requirements became common in philanthropy and public grants, ECO partnerships made proposals more competitive by demonstrating credible, diverse workforce development.

▶ Successful pipeline that seeded today's EJ movement

ECO quietly built the “middle generation” of EJ leaders. The movement now spans: Founders (60–80+), Seasoned experts (40–59; many ECO-connected), and New arrivals (20–39). Without ECO, the sector would have far fewer seasoned EJ experts able to carry the baton from founders to the next generation.

Dr. Sacoby Wilson, Professor of Global Environmental and Occupational Health & Director, Center for Engagement, Environmental Justice and Health (CEEJH), University of Maryland, College Park School of Public Health, ECO DI Associate (1995)

Environmental justice scholar, environmental health scientist, and health equity practitioner, Dr. Sacoby Wilson works primarily in partnership with community-based organizations to study and address environmental justice and health challenges and to translate research into action. With a national reach and expertise in exposure science, a suite of community-engaged research approaches, the built environment and health, community resiliency, sustainability, and geographic information systems, Wilson conducts air quality studies, supports citizen and community science efforts through building hyperlocal air quality monitoring networks, and develops environmental justice screening and mapping tools to support environmentally

“My ECO internship through my EPA Fellowship program had a major impact on my early development as a scholar, a leader, a servant to the community, and a mentor.”

— Dr. Sacoby Wilson, ECO DI Associate, 1995

overburdened communities in their quests for environmental justice. Dr. Wilson’s experience as an ECO Associate opened the door to his long-standing work and accomplishments in advancing environmental and climate justice. After completing his undergraduate studies at Alabama A&M University, Dr. Wilson earned graduate degrees in Environmental Health Sciences and began his work in academia---first holding a Post-Doctoral Appointment with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation at the University of Michigan followed by faculty appointments at the University of South Carolina and the University of Maryland, College Park. Wilson is Director of the Center for Community Engagement, Environmental Justice and Health (CEEJH), an academic center focused on providing technical assistance and research support to communities fighting against environmental injustice and environmental health disparities in the Washington, DC-Maryland, Virginia region and across the United States through approaches that Dr. Wilson has coined as “inpowerment” and “liberation science.” Among many other accomplishments, Wilson also directs the Mid-Atlantic Environmental Justice Fund, the first large scale participatory fund established to provide financial assistance to frontline and fenceline communities experiencing environmental injustice and climate-related challenges in the Mid-Atlantic Region.

Policy and Institutional Change

ECO’s partnerships with agencies such as EPA, NOAA, and USDA institutionalized diversity into internship programs. Alumni were instrumental in founding or expanding the EPA Office of Environmental Justice and similar structures, embedding diversity and inclusion principles into lasting frameworks. ECO’s national roundtables on diversity became models for convening stakeholders around best practices and strategies still in use today.

The presence of ECO alumni inside agencies made abstract “equity” goals tangible. Alumni describe bringing their lived experiences into policy meetings—whether as the child of immigrants in industrial cities or as someone who grew up near polluted neighborhoods—and shifting conversations toward issues that had been ignored. Their advocacy changed priorities from within, making diversity and equity not a side project but a core consideration.

Quantitative Impact

- ▶ Alumni presence across policy units increased representation in permitting, enforcement, and rulemaking settings over multiple administrations.
- ▶ ECO convenings and roundtables propagated models later incorporated into agency/division programs.

Qualitative Impact

- ▶ “Lived-experience” perspectives reframed internal debates (e.g., cumulative impacts, equitable development) and helped normalize EJ as core—not peripheral—work.

Michael S. Regan, Administrator, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2021-2024), ECO DI Associate (1998)

As the 16th Administrator of the United States Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA), Michael S. Regan is the first Black man, second person of color, and first graduate of a Historically Black College and University to lead the U.S. EPA in the fifty-four-year history of the agency. Beginning his storied career in environmental protection after graduation from North Carolina A&T State University, Administrator Regan was introduced to the U.S. EPA through an ECO DI position. Following his time as an ECO Associate, he worked at the agency in several progressive roles for nine and a half years---eventually becoming a national program manager responsible for designing strategic solutions with industry and corporate stakeholders to reduce air pollution, improve energy efficiency, and address climate change.

Spending nearly nine years in the non-profit sector, Regan served as Southeast Regional Director and later Associate Vice President of U.S. Climate and Energy for the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF). In these roles, he brought together oftentimes diverging interests---energy companies, business leaders, environmental and industry groups, and elected officials across the country---to achieve practical solutions to the climate crisis. Prior to his return to the U.S. EPA, Administrator Regan served as the 17th Secretary of the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) where he oversaw the development and implementation of North Carolina’s seminal plan to address climate change and transition the state to a clean energy economy. Regan’s leadership at the North Carolina DEQ yielded the largest coal ash clean-up in United States history, and he established North Carolina’s first-of-its-kind Environmental Justice and Equity Advisory Board to better align social inequities, environmental protection, and community empowerment.

Cultural Reframing of Belonging

Before ECO, the environmental field was largely perceived as elitist. Complicating matters further was the long held assumption that communities of color have apathy concerning the environment. ECO disrupted this narrative, proving that diverse leaders belong at the center of the movement.

Perhaps the most personal qualitative impact is how ECO alumni talk about identity. Many share that ECO was the first time they didn’t feel like an “outsider” in the environmental space. That sense of belonging instilled confidence and persistence, which is why so many alumni stayed in the field long enough to reach senior positions. Belonging isn’t easily measured, but it determines retention. ECO provided not just jobs, but affirmation that these leaders belonged in rooms of power.

Quantitative Impact:

- ▶ Federal diversity data shows a noticeable increase in staff of color in environmental agencies after ECO’s peak years.
- ▶ Internal surveys show higher employee belonging and retention among ECO alumni compared to peers.

Qualitative Impact:

- ▶ Alumni describe no longer feeling like “the only one in the room.” Many have since institutionalized belonging practices in their own organizations.

Pamela Bingham, Principal of Bingham Consulting Services and Operations Manager at the University of Maryland Community Engagement, Environmental Justice, and Health, ECO DI Associate (1998)

With over 25 years of experience addressing environmental health and justice issues, brownfields redevelopment, emergency management, environmental compliance, and community engagement to advance equity, Pamela Bingham has been on the ‘road less traveled’ as an engineer, community leader, and environmental activist

With many progressive roles in engineering, policy, and community engagement, Pamela leads Bingham Consulting Services, a consulting practice in which she provides project management expertise and comprehensive environmental management and policy solutions that integrate environmental science, engineering, technology, education, and effective community communication and participation. She is also currently the Operations Manager at the University of Maryland Community Engagement, Environmental Justice, and Health (CEEJH).

In previous positions, Bingham has worked on projects to address urban climate variability, bioterrorism preparedness, environmental policy, and equitable development. Ms. Bingham directed and expanded a national GIS (Geographic Information Systems) consortium for historically Black colleges and Universities (HBCUs) located at Howard University for six years. In 2005, the challenges of post-Hurricane Katrina recovery in Mississippi and New Orleans led her back to her hometown: Jackson, Mississippi. For over 20 years, she has organized African American engineers, students and other professionals to aid in Gulf recovery and ongoing community organizing. After moving to New Orleans for two years, she was a subcontractor for the Unified New Orleans Plan and the Clinton Climate Initiative through which she provided technical assistance to local leaders; helped develop energy/environmental policy; and continues to organize minority efforts in emergency preparedness and management for the Mid-Atlantic/Southern United States.

“I certainly see the Diversity Initiative as a model for the Federal Government; for green nonprofit organizations and for people of color community-based organizations.... ECO is a model. Especially when agencies say stuff like ‘Oh, we can’t find...We don’t know where to recruit, you know, minority students. We can’t find them. ECO show[ed] they [were] always out there. And so, the living legacy is the model.”

— Pamela Bingham, ECO DI Associate, 1998

Alumni Network as Living Legacy

Perhaps ECO’s most enduring benefit is its alumni network. Alumni continue to share opportunities, mentor new leaders, and convene around equity and environmental goals. This living network is a force multiplier that sustains the program’s influence decades after its formal conclusion. Alumni continue to share opportunities, collaborate on projects, and support one another.

Alumni often credit ECO as the defining point when their career path shifted from uncertain to purposeful. Many recall that mentors they met through ECO became lifelong sponsors who opened doors to graduate schools, agencies, and nonprofits. Now, those same alumni have become mentors themselves. The qualitative impact is an intergenerational culture of sponsorship: leaders who were once supported through ECO are consciously paying it forward, actively seeking to hire and mentor staff from underrepresented groups.

Quantitative Impact:

- ▶ Alumni network comparable in size and influence to those of notable universities.
- ▶ ECO-affiliated convenings have drawn hundreds of alumni back together to influence new movements and strategies.
- ▶ Alumni now oversee multi-million-dollar philanthropic portfolios supporting equity in climate and health.
- ▶ Alumni manage sizable philanthropic portfolios; produce hundreds of peer-reviewed works; teach thousands of students annually—embedding equity into curricula.
- ▶ ECO scholars have produced hundreds of peer-reviewed publications on environmental justice and sustainability.
- ▶ Alumni teach thousands of students annually, embedding equity principles in curricula.

Qualitative Impact:

- ▶ Alumni note that they are “teaching what ECO taught us,” ensuring the initiative’s values persist across generations of students and professionals.
- ▶ This intergenerational network acts as an incubator for collaboration, ensuring ECO’s values remain relevant in today’s equity and sustainability movements.

Tamara Toles O’Laughlin, President & CEO, Environmental Grantmakers Association and Founder, Climate Critical, ECO DI Associate (2003)

A self-proclaimed, “environmentalist focused on equity, access and community,” Tamara Toles O’Laughlin is a veteran environmental and climate justice leader and the first person of color to lead the Environmental Grantmaker’s Association, a network of over 200 foundations globally, holding approximately \$200 billion in assets and giving more than \$2 billion annually to support environmental causes. Tamara is also founder of Climate Critical, a visionary new organization supporting the development of the next generation of climate leaders by building a multiracial, multi-generational climate movement.

Tamara has previously served as a state policy leader in the state of Maryland where she co-founded the Healthy Green Maryland Amendment to define healthy communities and provide generational protections against disproportionate climate impacts within the Maryland constitution. Tamara was the chief architect of the Baltimore City Climate Resolution, which passed in the City Council unanimously in response to the US withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accords.

She has also served in posts such as the North America Director at 350.org and 350 Action as the leader of programming. Before 350, Tamara was the executive director of the Maryland Environmental Health Network (MdEHN), in Baltimore, Maryland. As its leader, she promoted the elimination of environmental threats to human health through facilitation of coalitions led by community and supported by health practitioners and environmental advocates.

Tamara’s more than two decades of cross-sector environmental experience in government and the non-profit sectors was sparked, in part, by her internship at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency through the ECO Diversity Initiative.

Economic Mobility and Generational Impact

ECO reduced financial barriers by paying stipends for internships at a time when most were unpaid. This created pathways for students from low-income households to access professional careers.

Quantitative Impact

- ▶ Over **\$20M** in stipends distributed, directly enabling access for thousands of participants.
- ▶ ECO alumni report lifetime earnings in the environmental sector far exceeding what they projected possible prior to their participation.

Qualitative Impact

- ▶ Many alumni describe ECO as “life-changing,” enabling graduate education, home ownership, and career stability. The program’s economic impact extends to families and communities, producing long-term generational benefits.

Suganthi Simon, Vice President, Mid-South Region, JP Morgan Chase, ECO DI Associate (1998)

As a seasoned social impact leader with extensive private and public sector experience, Suganthi Simon joined JPMorgan Chase’s Global Philanthropy team in 2022, where she leads philanthropic grantmaking strategies for Georgia, Tennessee, and North and South Carolina. Suganthi coordinates cross-firm investments, collaborates with key public and private sector stakeholders, and engages the philanthropic community to drive an inclusive economy and lead the firm’s efforts to expand racial equity in her markets.

Prior to joining JP Morgan Chase, Suganthi served as Senior Program Officer for The Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation in Atlanta for over eight years where she managed a \$5 million annual grantmaking portfolio focused on community development in Atlanta’s historic Westside neighborhoods. She was responsible for community engagement and managing collaborative strategies in health, economic inclusion, workforce development, affordable housing, and civic empowerment and engagement.

Prior to entering philanthropy, Suganthi spent over 14 years in the federal government, working for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. She held multiple leadership roles in Washington, D.C. and in Atlanta, GA, with an interdisciplinary focus on environmental evaluation, green building, sustainable communities and development, and environmental justice. Suganthi interned at the U.S. EPA through the ECO Diversity Initiative while she was pursuing her bachelor’s degree in Environmental Science from Wellesley College. Suganthi later received her master’s degree in Industrial Environmental Management from Yale University.

Community Trust and Engagement

When community members are gifted with engagement from those who share their culture, and lived experience, credibility forms quickly and conversations start with trust—not skepticism. Trust is the gateway: without it, outreach is noise; with it, participation becomes consent, data becomes insight, and commitments turn into action.

One of ECO's most profound impacts is the trust associates and alumni built with marginalized communities. Their presence broke down barriers of skepticism, giving communities a reason to believe agencies and nonprofits could serve them. Trust is intangible, but it is the foundation of every effective community engagement program. It signaled respect and safety, lowering the perceived risk of engagement, and unlocking local knowledge that improved design choices.

Quantitative Impact:

- ▶ **Addressed EPA NEJAC recommendations of improved trust**
NEJAC long urged federal actors to engage EJ communities with representative staffing and authentic participation. By placing staff who reflected the communities affected, ECO increased legitimacy and cooperation in planning, permitting, and enforcement.
- ▶ Higher turnout and adoption rates in community processes facilitated by alumni with cultural/linguistic fluency.
- ▶ Increased delivery of resilience projects in frontline communities (air monitoring, stormwater, urban canopy, home energy actions).

Qualitative Impact:

- ▶ **Corrected 1990s misconceptions about environmental justice**
In the early 1990s, people of color were the most enthusiastic EJ advocates. At the same time, many young environmentalists were told “EJ isn’t environmentalism.” ECO helped change that by training practitioners who normalized EJ inside mainstream environmental work.
- ▶ **Stronger partnerships and faster project adoption**
With trusted, culturally fluent staff in the room, agencies and NGOs formed deeper local partnerships, saw higher meeting turnout, and moved projects with less friction.
- ▶ Community members reported “first time I’ve seen someone like me from the government here,” catalyzing cooperation and durable partnerships—prerequisites for EJ progress.

Carletta Tilousi, President, Red Rock Foundation and Member, White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council, ECO Diversity Initiative Associate (2000)

A life-long advocate for the protection of the Grand Canyon, Carletta Tilousi has worked for more than twenty-five years promoting social and environmental justice for the Havasupai Indian Tribe and indigenous people of the Grand Canyon. Born and raised in Supai Village located at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, Tilousi and her Tribe have fought against the development of uranium mines on federal lands located within the watershed of Supai Village and next to the Tribe’s sacred site Wii Giidwissa. Currently, Tilousi serves on the Havasupai Tribal Council and is the President of Red Rock Foundation, Inc., a Native American non-profit organization.

After earning a bachelor of science degree in Justice Studies from Arizona State University (ASU) 2001, during which time she served as an ECO Diversity Initiative Associate, Tilousi returned to Supai Village, and was elected immediately to serve on the Havasupai Tribal Council and has successfully served seven terms. While serving on the Tribal Council, she has confronted the major issues of the day by improving the legal and financial infrastructure of the Tribe to provide a better method to address societal and environmental threats. Tilousi serves as an ambassador for the Havasupai Tribe by presenting their environmental and justice issues to the world. Carletta served as a delegate to the United Nations in Geneva Switzerland, and has also

presented the Havasupai uranium case at the World Uranium Hearings in Salzburg, Austria. She assisted in defeating a proposed nuclear waste dump in Switzerland, which had direct ties to proposed mining activities in the Grand Canyon region.

Advanced Equity & Environmental Justice

ECO advanced environmental justice by moving it from a peripheral value to an operating norm inside partner institutions. By placing culturally fluent Associates in the rooms where projects are scoped, permits reviewed, data validated, and investments prioritized, partners shifted from one-way “outreach” to genuine co-design with frontline communities—raising trust, attendance, and follow-through.

This translated science and policy into lived-reality decisions (cumulative impacts, risk communication, siting) and accelerated delivery of equitable outcomes. The result is an enduring practitioner bench that aligns compliance with community priorities, reduces rework, and channels funding to neighborhoods carrying the highest environmental burden.

Quantitative Impact:

▶ **Countered environmental racism in practice**

With alumni positioned in permitting, enforcement, and planning, decision-making and community engagement processes were reframed through an equity lens, reducing the historic over-burdening of communities of color.

▶ **Benefits to the Office of Environmental Justice (OEJ)**

Alumni contributions strengthened EJ inside EPA—helping staff shape and carry forward EJ priorities as the office evolved (from Environmental Equity in 1992 to an elevated, national EJ program).

▶ **Created alumni at the forefront of new fields of practice**

ECO alumni became leaders in equitable development, park equity, climate justice, and related subfields—moving from observers to problem-solvers and decision-makers.

▶ **Dismantled exclusion in environmental governance**

ECO confronted the reality that many environmental institutions did not “look like America.” Diverse recruitment here was not “reverse discrimination” but self-correction—broadening who holds authority while not removing opportunity from others.

Qualitative Impact:

- ▶ Normalization of EJ inside mainstream environmental practice; alumni seeded new subfields (equitable development, park equity, climate justice).

Summation of Benefits

“We must prepare ourselves in every field of human endeavor...We need more ingenuity. We have been relatively content with the relatively material possessions such as medicine, teaching, and law. All of these are noble and gracious but we must prepare ourselves. Doors will be opening in all of these areas and we need people, we need more kinds who can qualify in the area of engineering, more architects and even more in the medical profession. We need to do more in the area of specialization now because the opportunities are coming and we must be prepared.”

– Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Birth of a New Age*

The ECO Diversity Initiative was more than a program—it became an enduring system of change. Its benefits are visible in the measurable diversification of the workforce, the creation of equity-centered leaders, the expansion of community and policy impact, and so much more.

ECO's ledger is written in both metrics and lives. Projects completed faster because the right hands were finally in the work. Teams that looked more like the communities they served. Alumni who turned a first paid placement into decades of public service, research, philanthropy, and leadership. The original investment—dollars, mentoring hours, placements—has compounded into a network that continues to open doors for others. That's what enduring impact looks like: not a single program year, but a generation of practitioners who carry the work forward.

ECO is no longer operating, but its promise remains within our reach: keep pathways paid, visible, and supported; keep recruiting where diverse talent lives; keep measuring what matters and honoring what numbers miss. If we steward this legacy, we don't just diversify a workforce, we improve environmental outcomes, strengthen institutions, protect the most vulnerable communities, and make policy more just and effective. The story that began with ECO now belongs to everyone it touched. This is ECO's living legacy and is ours to carry forward.

“At some point, it becomes a matter of engagement and taking it to the next level where you put yourself there...as a decision maker and policymaker...so you can advance your position and advance the type of progressive policies that you think are necessary, not just for the generation we are serving today, but for the generation that will follow us.”

—Floyd McKissick, Jr., Our Movement Starts Here

Conclusion: Diversity Initiatives are Legal and Rebuilding of the Federal Civil Service Requires a Diverse Workforce

Environmental quality is linked to ecological integrity, economic stability, and human health. Professionals in the environmental field play a major role in protecting the planet and quality of life for all people. The Environmental Careers Organization (ECO) was recognized as a leading environmental careers development organization in the United States and pioneered a successful model to diversify the environmental workforce. ECO's engagement of talent from low income and racially/ethnically diverse backgrounds, has better positioned the nation at this time for an 'all hands-on deck' approach to address environmental challenges.

A contemporary lesson that ECO's Diversity Initiative can offer the federal government and leaders within adjacent movements including "racial equity" is to invest in the career preparation for students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds as a key long-term strategy. Sustained federal investment in similar pipeline programs has the potential to produce the leaders needed to address not only the pressing environmental, climate, racial equity, and other challenges of our time. When intentional investments are made, both direct and cascading, benefits can be achieved.

DEIA initiatives are not racist or unlawful.⁸ They exist to address a clear need and to correct a clear deficit. As noted in the report, ECO's DI was supported by EPA officials associated with a Republican administration. This suggests diversity initiatives aren't flawed programs. Instead, some political parties have shifted too far in their political stances over time. In the process, good programs that align with the nation's democratic values are at risk of being dismantled. During the time that ECO began its strategic focus on diversifying the environmental field, the modern-day environmental justice movement had not fully taken root. In the years since, the idea of what it means to be an environmentalist has expanded to include environmental justice which is essential to environmental protection. ECO's Diversity Initiative helped to usher in that shift.

ECO was among the first organizations to intentionally engage higher education students (both undergraduate and graduate) from historically underrepresented populations in paid environmental internship experiences. Today the federal government, institutions of higher education, the nonprofit sector, community-based and grassroots organizations, and others are prioritizing the issues that ECO championed—specifically with respect to cultivating a diverse and representative workforce and by seeking transformative change based on resetting the socialization boundaries of public institutions. The need for diversity initiatives has not changed or diminished. Instead, the need has increased over time.

As the 1990s and early 2000s workforce inches to retirement, a critical question is whether sufficient preparation has been made to build on the foundation established by the ECO Diversity Initiative. The void left by ECO's closure has never fully been filled. While peer organizations existed alongside ECO that also engaged students and young adults in environmental and conservation-focused work experiences, many of these organizations have niches that focused largely on conservation and preservation of public lands (GYF, 2019; ACE, 2024) and not all of these organizations have a specific focus on diversifying the field.

⁸ On February 10, 2025, the United States District Court, Western District of Washington at Seattle, found that D.E.I. and anti-discrimination trainings are not unlawful. On February 21, 2025, a federal judge granted a preliminary injunction that blocked executive orders from President Donald Trump that seek to end government support for programs promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. According to Melody Barnes, Executive Director of UVA's Karsh Institute of Democracy, "executive orders cannot create new laws, appropriate funds or override existing legislation; those are powers reserved for Congress. Further, they must be rooted in existing constitutional or statutory authority, and they can be challenged in court or overturned by subsequent administrations."

Just as racial equity eliminates disparities so that people of color can have similar outcomes in life (Race Forward, n.d.), it also reduces barriers that strain environmental quality. The environmental justice movement brought attention to various environmental, health, and economic challenges in marginalized and environmentally overburdened communities. Investments in initiatives that support racial equity and environmental justice are an important strategy for our nation's competitiveness and stability.

The ECO Diversity Initiative journey describes a vision to intentionally seek talent from diverse backgrounds, invest in paid professional opportunities and enrich the educational experience of students who become trailblazers in the environmental field. In the same way that nature invests energy and resources to produce the air, water and soil that sustains all – investing in the full range of human capital supports our collective capacity. ECO Diversity Initiative alumni demonstrate a consciousness, leadership capability and scientific ingenuity that has supported their professional success and contributions. By continuing to learn and build on the ECO Diversity Initiative model, similar organizations can enhance the trajectory of environmental quality and the invaluable workforce that will support it.

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