

A Personal View on the Importance and Imperative of Diversity Work

*Felicia Marcus, Executive Vice-President and Chief Operating Officer,
The Trust for Public Land*

SUMMARY

Mainstream environmental and conservation organizations have been talking about the importance and challenge of “diversity” for years now without tremendous progress. A sincere and sophisticated approach to diversity is essential to the current success and future relevance of the movements. The author gives both a personal and organizational perspective on the subject as an incentive to action and some thoughts on making that action effective. Her personal experience in diverse working environments leads to a heartfelt belief in the importance of diversity work for the land conservation movement as a whole and for individuals. One organization’s early efforts are described as an example that may be accessible and instructive to others.

KEY WORDS

Diversity, environmental movement, conservation movement, death of environmentalism, generational diversity, consciousness, Tom Bradley, Los Angeles, parks, community gardens, community, land conservation, diversity experts, multicultural

INTRODUCTION

For years, diversity has been a topic of discussion in, and about, the environmental and land conservation communities. There have been conferences, exhortations from the philanthropic community, and truly sincere efforts on the part of many good-hearted people in both communities. Those efforts include hiring some great individuals and expanding diversity on Boards of Directors. Unfortunately, all too often those hires have not stayed for long, and some organizations express frustration or regret over their inability to attract diverse applicants for jobs. There is, fortunately, a growing field of experts on diversity in environmental organizations who can give candid assessments of the problem and suggestions for success. Some are authors in this volume. There is also a growing list of organizations and individuals engaging in these efforts.

I write as a participant in the environmental community working on this issue for over 20 years in a variety of roles. I am currently a senior manager in an organization committed to being a place that truly embraces and celebrates diversity, while recognizing that there is much work to do to achieve that end. We are also committed to becoming an employer of choice for people who want to conserve land for people and want to do it with a diverse set of colleagues with whom they can collaborate effectively in making a difference in the world. We know that this is a long-term commitment and that we need to approach our work with humility. As such, what follows is more personal observation than expert “how to,” with our work being offered as one example of a work in progress. In my view,¹ unless the land conservation community, and the environmental community more broadly, embraces a more sophisticated view of “diversity” and acts to become more relevant to a multi-generational, multi-racial, and further multi-dimensional constituency, we will go the way of the

¹ The opinions in this essay are solely the opinions and observations of the author, speaking for herself. This piece is written as one person’s personal view and an organizational example. Neither the author nor the organization claims expertise. Opinion, observation, and experience are all that are offered. For those, a great measure of thanks are owed to the late Juanita Tate, Manuel Pastor, John Murray, Dennis Nishikawa, Red Martinez, Myrlie Evers, Ed Avila, Michel Gelobter, Carl Anthony, Laura Yoshii, Clay Bravo, Steve Etsitty, Wendell Smith, Sadie Hoskie and many others. I also wish to thank my many colleagues at EPA with whom I worked for years on developing a greater consciousness and trainings about race, gender, sexual orientation, and age in particular while working on real equity issues in the agency. I look forward to what my colleagues at TPL and I will learn together.

dinosaurs in the next decade or two, to be replaced by new organizations created by the next generation of activists who are tired of “waiting for the world to change.”² If, on the other hand, we do this work well and in earnest, we will become more vibrant and effective organizations with staying power.

In my view, unless the land conservation community, and the environmental community more broadly, embraces a more sophisticated view of “diversity” and acts to become more relevant to a multi-generational, multi-racial, and further multi-dimensional constituency, we will go the way of the dinosaurs in the next decade or two, to be replaced by new organizations created by the next generation of activists who are tired of “waiting for the world to change.”

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

In my professional life as a public interest lawyer, community organizer, and government official, I have had the opportunity to work repeatedly in multicultural environments. Those experiences have been fun, educational, humbling, and uplifting. They have been my happiest work experiences and my most rewarding. In some instances where I have worked with an already diverse staff, the issues have included communication, conflict resolution, promotion and retention. In other cases, increasing diversity, or making diversity an issue to even think about, has been the first threshold. Whatever the setting, this work has always required lots of intention, listening, and awareness.

These experiences have demanded that I be open to learning and open to questioning my own assumptions about what others think. They required more listening and question asking at times than talking (hard for me). They have required setting aside my assumptions about people, history, and how others would judge the same set of events. My experiences have left me with the firm

² Mayer, John. “Waiting on the World to Change,” *Continuum*, Aware Records, 2006.

conviction that working with colleagues who have a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences, and who are open to learning with *and from* each other, is the most dynamic and inspiring atmosphere to be a part of. It is also the best situation in which to develop personally and professionally.

My experiences have left me with the firm conviction that working with colleagues who have a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences, and who are open to learning with *and from* each other, is the most dynamic and inspiring atmosphere to be a part of. It is also the best situation in which to develop personally and professionally.

As a young public interest lawyer working in Los Angeles on environmental issues during an early period of the environmental justice movement in the mid-1980s, I had the opportunity to work in settings where racial diversity was a key issue. I also had the opportunity to work in collaboration with activists from South Central and East Los Angeles. It was not, however, until I had the privilege of working within the administration of Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley that I had the personal experience of working in an organization with a truly diverse power structure and diverse staff.

Mayor Bradley's administration was filled by appointees from widely varying racial, ethnic, religious, gender, age, class, sexual orientation, and physical ability backgrounds and experience. Diversity in appointments was a key priority of the Mayor's administration. He referred to LA as a wonderful "salad bowl" rather than "melting pot," where together we made a marvelous mix, retaining our unique characteristics rather than blending into one. It made a difference. The issues that rose to the top of our priority lists were different. The discussions on every given subject were different. How we talked about issues was different. In my department, where the leadership was completely diverse by race, gender, and age, we had conversations that went to the heart of why one person could see an issue so very differently from another based on experiences in the very same city.³

As my colleagues and I awarded contracts, mediated employee and community disputes, promoted and disciplined employees, honored employees and community members, and prioritized our scarce time, we struggled with each other at times to see why our reactions to things were so different, and changed our perspectives to take each other's into account. The result was a department that set environmental records, while also awarding contracts to women- and minority-owned businesses, assuring that promotions within the department were not unconsciously prioritizing white males, and putting environmental siting equity at the top of our priority lists.

In my department, where the leadership was completely diverse by race, gender, and age, we had conversations that went to the heart of why one person could see an issue so very differently from another based on experiences in the very same city.

Later, when at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), I worked with a very diverse staff and a management team that became more diverse in time. We had a critical mass of people working on these issues and we were able to have myriad cross-training events. We also had the opportunity to expand the agency's work to respectfully engage with sovereign tribes and environmental justice groups. We devoted full time trainers internally to help us work more effectively with tribes and communities of color where environmental justice was a very real issue. We did some very good work, learned from our mistakes, and made the agency more relevant to the people it serves.

At a very basic and personal level, working in a diverse environment is much more fun, life-enhancing, educational,

³ We served on the Board during a time when the Supreme Court was limiting when government could award contracts, among other things, to favor minority- and women-owned businesses and during the period encompassing the Rodney King beating, trial, and subsequent civil disturbances. We were also engaged in implementing one of the country's largest scale waste reduction and recycling programs in response to an early victory of the environmental justice movement, where a large scale plan for waste incineration starting in largely African-American South Central Los Angeles had been defeated by a coalition of environmental justice and traditional West Los Angeles environmental groups.

challenging, and engaging than working in one that is not. Each experience becomes more complex, but also more rich. In my view, having that kind of dynamic learning experience is the point of life's voyage. We spend far more than forty hours a week at work as professionals in this movement. We should strive to create dynamic, life-enhancing settings to work and mature in.⁴

WHY THIS WORK IS ESSENTIAL IN THE LAND CONSERVATION COMMUNITY

There is a long and noble history of land conservation in America. It has been bipartisan and bicoastal. It has been fostered by private non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dating back to the formation of the first land trust, the Trustees of Reservations in Massachusetts in 1890. Since then, the movement has grown to encompass national and international land conservation groups of great size, including The Nature Conservancy, The Trust for Public Land (TPL), and The Conservation Fund, along with more than 1600 smaller localized land trusts devoted to protecting a special geography or type of place.⁵ NGOs are now joined by a chorus of governmental agencies at the local, state, and national level. Collectively, we "save" landscapes ranging from a small community garden to several hundred thousand acre tracts of forestland. We protect these lands with a combination of public and privately raised dollars.

Members of this movement are both proud of past accomplishments and passionate about the race against time to protect places of biological, historic, and cultural significance. That pride and passion can work against us in truly seeing the need and opportunity to adapt to the present. Doing so requires holding on to that pride and passion and evolving to meet the needs of today and

⁴ In my experience, people who think there is only one way to be or to see things miss a lot and waste time trying to make the world and people fit into their idea of reality rather than being open to other ways of seeing things. They make the mistake of thinking that all they know is all there is. Anyone who sees it differently must be wrong, or mistaken, or somehow deficient. While this seems to make people feel safe, confident, and happy with themselves, it actually projects insecurity or lack of intellectual curiosity to outsiders who know better. It reminds me of someone who thinks they are on top of the world when they have mastered level two of a video game, and think there are only two levels when there are actually ten. There are always more levels.

⁵ These smaller land trusts are also supported by the national Land Trust Alliance. <http://www.lta.org>.

coming decades. Making the time, and making the mental space, to work on issues of diversity can prevent the movement from being so trapped in the pride of our past, and passion for our work, that we miss the opportunity to thrive in the future (or the present).

In the 100-plus years of the conservation movement, especially the last 40 years of organizational growth in the modern conservation movement, the world around us has changed. The movement started with people of means idealizing and protecting the wildness of landscapes and memory, or protecting key hunting areas. Then new organizations were created and grew to encompass objectives of biodiversity and other scientific principles, recreational objectives, viewshed protection, historic and cultural site preservation. In ever more cities, it includes creating or refurbishing urban parks, playgrounds, and community gardens. It now even includes clean up of toxic sites and demolition of structures to make way for open space for passive or active recreational use.⁶ Despite this disciplinary evolution, the makeup of the land conservation movement remains predominantly white.⁷

The demographics of the nation in the meantime are changing – with populations growing and diversifying rapidly across a range of income levels and geography. Moreover, voices of support for issues of both conservation and environment increasingly come from a diverse range of Americans – in some cases garnering greater support in communities of color than in predominantly white communities.⁸ Similarly, one should not assume that communities of color, or people of color, care more or only about inner city environmental issues. In my experience, the presumption itself is based on a lack of broad

⁶ E.g., demolition of the Richfield Coliseum outside of Cleveland to restore native prairie; clean-up of former rail yards to make way for urban parks in Santa Fe and Los Angeles and elsewhere; even cleanup of former military bases like the Rocky Mountain Arsenal in Colorado or Ft. Ord in California to turn over for wildlife habitat and housing.

⁷ The non-land conservation, more pollution based side of the environmental movement is different, with new organizations that are diverse or predominantly run by people of color, women, and young people growing in number. This could be in part due to the lack of diversification in the existing environmental organization infrastructure. It could be because those public health based issues are more compelling to a broader range of activists. There is also a very impressive array of organizations devoted specifically to environmental justice within the environmental movement. In this piece, I am referring more specifically to the field of land conservation. Fortunately, there are new land trusts or conservation advocacy groups or coalitions that are increasingly diverse or devoted to fostering diverse coalitions, and the number is increasing all the time. One example is the Verde Coalition in Los Angeles, a coalition of groups dedicated to meeting the park needs of LA's urban poor. The Center for Whole Communities (<http://www.wholecommunities.org/>) explicitly brings together a diverse range of people and organizations committed to land issues, economic development, and the health of communities.

experience with a diverse set of people, but instead is frequently based on limited experience with a relative few. It is wise in this field, as in life, not to assume too much based on too small a bundle of experience.

At the same time, local and state legislatures are becoming and will become more diverse.⁹ Partners in state and local agencies are also becoming more diverse. The elected officials we work with to generate support for land conservation, along with the voters we rely on to provide funding by initiative, also deal with a diverse group of people and issues every day. They will respond better to partners, like NGOs, that better reflect the concerns and the sensitivities of the broader public.

Similarly, one should not assume that communities of color, or people of color, care more or only about inner city environmental issues. In my experience, the presumption itself is based on a lack of broad experience with a diverse set of people, but instead is frequently based on limited experience with a relative few. It is wise in this field, as in life, not to assume too much based on too small a bundle of experience.

A couple of years ago an important dialogue took place within the movement over whether the environmental movement was losing traction with the American public. That debate, kicked off by the publication of a paper titled the “Death of Environmentalism” by Ted Nordhaus and Michael Schellenberger, centered on whether the environmental movement had begun to talk only to itself rather than connecting with people across the United States.¹⁰ Falling on the heels of the 2004 elections, where there was much written and discussed about the importance of “values” to voters, a critique was made that the movement was no longer connecting to values that real people cared about. Instead, the language was more cerebral, expert, and

⁸ To take just one example, exit polls in Proposition 40, a successful \$2.6 billion water and parks bond in California, showed greater support for the measure from Latinos and African-Americans than white voters. Los Angeles Times exit poll 3/7/2002. See also, “Building Relationships with Communities of Color,” Report for the Western States Diversity Project, prepared by Pyramid Communications for The Nature Conservancy, February 2005: 36-37.

⁹ See e.g., Baldassare, Mark, “Room to Grow? Demographic Changes May Foretell Struggle for Political Power,” San Jose Mercury News, April 1, 2001. See also “Building Relationships...” above, footnote 8: 8-9, 29-50.

geared toward the battles that were going on in legislatures, courts, and the regulatory arena. This is the kind of thing that can happen more easily in homogenous cultures, where a common language reinforces a single way of thinking or perceiving the world.”

While within the “conservation” movement there are some who think it very different from the “environmental” movement (the latter more often characterized as about advocacy, legislation, and litigation, or about pollution and struggle between the public and the private sector), we also are vulnerable to the charge of being disconnected from the realities of people’s lives. The more diverse our makeup, and the more we put in efforts to stay conscious of a variety of points of view and approaches, the less likely we are to be talking to ourselves in our own technical language or to miss opportunities to engage with a broader set of partners in improving our communities.

Another way the movement may be missing what is right in front of us may come from the fact that much of the current movement was created by “baby boomers.” In *Generations at Work*, authors Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak outline the basic differences between the successive generations of WWII Veteran, Baby Boom, Generation X, and Nexters (also called “Millennials” by other authors). In some ways, generational diversity and awareness may be an answer to some of the challenges of the existing, largely Boomer-led movement. One of the key issues the book points out is that the Boomer generation is so sure of itself and its progressiveness that it doesn’t truly appreciate or even recognize that there are different points of view, attitudes, work styles, interests, and skills in different

¹⁰ <http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2005/01/13/doe-reprint/>. There was a vigorous debate within the environmental community in response to the paper. See Carl Pope, “And Now for Something Completely Different: An In-depth Response to the Death of Environmentalism,” <http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2005/01/13/pope-reprint/>. See also other writings in this dialogue noted in footnote 12. Some could argue that the extraordinary rise in visibility and consciousness this past year on climate issues belies the paper’s critique. Others could argue that what made the difference was humanizing the issue, whether through *March of the Penguins* or through Vice-President Gore’s personal commitment portrayed in *An Inconvenient Truth*. My point here is not to re-engage the debate, but to make the point that we need to connect to real people. We need to do that not just by choosing better words, but by better connecting with the diverse array of people in this country who care about protecting public health, family, and nature. We will be better equipped to do this if we are aware enough to recognize there is more than one way to talk or to be. Diversity training, an ongoing commitment to working on these issues, and a significantly diverse staff provide an antidote to becoming disconnected to the broader public.

¹¹ Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, Paulist Press, 1977, 2002 edition: 32. I am particularly fond of one of my colleague’s way of putting this – he says that diversity work is important to keep us from committing “assumicide.”

generations in the workforce. Where Boomers struggle with issues of diversity, Nexters tend to be more multicultural in makeup and approach. They are also more able to see issues that are interconnected between environmental and social justice issues, where preceding generations see or practice them as separate “silos” of issues, organizations, and movements.¹²

So, in addition to all of the other reasons for engaging in diversity work and in diversifying the movement at the organizational level (see below), there is self-preservation to consider. The “Nexter” generation is more multi-cultural AND multi-issue than preceding generations. This is one reason for my strongly held view, expressed previously, that the land conservation community and the environmental community more broadly must develop a more sophisticated view of “diversity” and must act to become more relevant to a multi-generational, multi-racial constituency. If we do not, this next generation will simply have to create their own organizations, which they are doing. Those organizations will become the movement, and the existing movements will become a phase of history.¹³

Fortunately, there are efforts beginning in earnest to address diversity in the land conservation community.¹⁴ Some of these efforts are detailed elsewhere in this volume, and this endeavor itself is a fabulous step. This is good and has potential to assure the conservation movement’s present vibrancy and future success if we all take it seriously and truly follow through.

For those who like to think in bullet points, the following are some good reasons that the Trust for Public Land (TPL) used in developing our diversity initiative.¹⁵

1) Changing Demographics of the Nation

- Population trends in the U.S. are changing dramatically, with increasing diversity of population and age distribution.

¹² The environmental justice movement is a great example of an emerging movement that understands and is dedicated to bringing civil rights and environmental issues together. There are other voices as well that are calling for more of a blending of issues. See e.g., Adam Werbach, “Is Environmentalism Dead?” speech given at Commonwealth Club, December 8, 2004. <http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2005/01/13/werbach-reprint/> See also Michel Gelobter et al., “The Soul of Environmentalism,” www.rprogress.org/soul/soul.pdf.

¹³ This also suggests that engaging youth within our organizations and communities is even more important than we might think to our own vitality. At a minimum, it is essential to consider “age” diversity as applying both to older staff and to younger staff and understanding that both have something critically important to add to the mix in an organization because of experience, perspective, etc.

- Helps with engagement and trust from all the communities we serve (that we walk the talk).
- Enhances sophistication, understanding, and respect for the dynamics of an increasingly diverse population.
- Creates greater awareness and insight into how to effectively interact with individuals with differing backgrounds and views within and outside our organizations.
- Helps an organization be better prepared to engage effectively with elected officials at state and local levels of government.
- Honors the expectations of funders as well as our partners that we pay attention to diversity in a serious way.

2) Quality of Life Within the Organization

- Creates a dynamic and more open workplace where everyone feels comfortable being who they are vs. having to play an expected role to “fit in.”

¹⁴ I do not want to minimize the sincere past efforts nor the exciting current efforts going on by my exhortation to do more. My concern is that the efforts need to go beyond “tokenism,” i.e., to not just consider how to bring more of “them” into organizations, but to truly create organizations that are consciously striving to be culturally competent and are willing to put in the work that it takes to get there. This is a big deal – it is more than a numbers game. It is about how we view the world and about shedding assumptions about a lot of things. That said, there are some good efforts going on. The Environmental Careers Organization (ECO) worked for years to place interns, particularly diverse interns, in government agencies. As Jeff Cook writes elsewhere in the volume, it is also engaged in organizing and working with a variety of conservation organizations such as TPL, the Land Trust Alliance, the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, and the Trustees of Reservations, the nation’s oldest land trust, to encourage diversity within the movement. The Wilderness Society and the National Wildlife Federation have engaged in significant initiatives, as have other national and local land conservation organizations. The Nature Conservancy has also made some important contributions, particularly in outreach to diverse communities. There have been conferences and summits on the issues of diversity in the last few years, including Summit 2005: Diverse Partners for Environmental Progress, 2005 National Summit on Diversity in the Environmental Field (University of Michigan Minority Environmental Leadership Development Initiative), Diversity and Conservation (Conference, Shepardstown, W.Va held by Conservation Fund and Land Trust Alliance 2007), the Boston Environmental Diversity Collaborative, and more. See also Center for Diversity and the Environment, a website devoted to fostering and facilitating diversity efforts in the environmental community. <http://www.environmentaldiversity.org/aboutus.html>. Efforts abound; the challenge is to make our actions substantial, sophisticated, and effective. Diversity Matters is a relatively new organization devoted to expert and sophisticated approaches to this work. See chapter in this volume by Angela Park, founder of Diversity Matters. <http://www.Diversity-Matters.org>. Iantha Gantt-Wright, a pioneer in this work, also specializes in helping the environmental community on these issues. <http://www.keniangroup.com/>.

¹⁵ It is instructive that in constructing TPL’s diversity initiative (see below), our Diversity Council requested early on that we develop the “business case” for doing this work to be clear that this work was an imperative for the organization vs. a “feel good” or “politically correct” exercise. An initial list similar to this was used in paring down the reasons to a more public, and manageable number. The exercise itself was an important dialogue and affirmation within the organization at the Diversity Council and senior management levels.

- Creates an atmosphere and expectation of open learning from each other.
- Makes for a more dynamic, fun, and fulfilling place to work and grow.
- Empowers staff to create new connections in the community, bringing new inspiration and innovation to TPL and the communities we serve.
- Feel commitment and determination to achieve a more diverse and fair workplace because it is the right thing to do.
- Heightens sensitivity to the issues that concern many groups of people, which helps us be more effective together and in the world.
- Encourages an environment where people feel equipped to handle inappropriate behavior or are comfortable addressing situations with management when needed.

3) Competitive Advantage

- TPL is viewed even more strongly as an organization acting upon and valuing the “people” part of our mission; gives us “gravitas.”
- Creates new opportunities for TPL to fulfill its mission.
- Fosters atmosphere of “open-mindedness” and ability to effectively change when opportunities or challenges warrant it.
- Helps in the recruitment and retention of qualified staff.
- When managed and fully supported, an inclusive culture of people with varied backgrounds and points of view outperforms and is more creative than a homogenous culture.
- Supports our ability to attract diverse contractors and consultants that can bring new energy to TPL’s work and play a role in bringing fairness and equality in the communities in which we work.
- Responds to funders’ hopes and expectations.

4) Consistent with TPL's Long-Range Strategy

- Which is to be a dynamic force for more land conservation in America across a diverse array of landscapes.

TPL'S EFFORTS – A GLIMPSE AT ONE ORGANIZATION'S CURRENT EFFORTS

The Trust for Public Land (TPL) is a national non-profit land conservation organization devoted to conserving land for people across a range of landscapes from inner-city to wilderness. We work in inner cities with communities to create parks, playgrounds, and community gardens. We work with ranchers, farmers, and people who fish; we work with Native American Tribes to help regain lands that were taken from them over 150 years ago that are important to their economic and cultural health; we work with giant forest concerns and with individuals who want to see a special place preserved for others to enjoy beyond their lifetime. We also work to preserve places of historic or cultural importance to people whether African-American heritage sites, Civil War sites, tribal cultural sites, or even amusement parks or carousels that strike an important chord in people's sense of history and connection to a given special place. We work in concert with communities to decide what to protect or create. We focus on putting land into the public domain for access for people. Our projects rarely have "no trespassing" signs, though we do preserve land for biodiversity, as it is also important to people.¹⁶

Our work is based on the premise that connecting people with land is important to individuals, to our health as a species, and to giving people an incentive to want to save land and support other environmental causes. It is also about what happens between people when on the land, and when they are in the act of protecting or creating public spaces together. It is about the empowerment and inspiration of people as much as it is about the land itself. We are about 450 strong, in over forty locations across the country – some

¹⁶ TPL's current draft vision statement: "TPL is committed to helping protect and expand the magnificent and growing system of public parks, gardens, trails, protected ranches and farms, and remote natural areas that stretches from wilderness to inner city across the whole American landscape. These protected landscapes are critical to our physical, economic, and environmental health, and they provide us all with the places where we can form a deep and meaningful connection with the natural world and with each other. When it comes to our cities, TPL's work will not be complete until every one of us – in particular every child – can walk to a neighborhood park, garden or playground. We recognize that a healthy landscape is indispensable, not only for human health, happiness and inspiration, but for the survival of our fellow species in the web of life."

large, and some with a single person. We are very diverse compared to many other environmental/conservation groups. However, we are not nearly diverse enough to reflect the communities we serve, nor diverse enough to take full advantage of the opportunity to create an even better organization to work in.

Like many organizations, TPL has had prior efforts at “diversity work,” including creating a Diversity Committee in the past that made many recommendations, some of which were adopted and implemented. To the disappointment of many who had served on the Committee, other recommendations were not implemented, due in part to the press of business and lack of ongoing infrastructure. In late 2004, we embarked on a new initiative, one that we hope will yield a myriad of benefits for all TPLers. Instead of trying to do it ourselves, we engaged expert help to ensure that we would construct an initiative with help from those who had experience in the field rather than relying solely on the good intentions of those within the organization.¹⁷ We determined that we should start by conducting a focused assessment of our staff’s views on diversity issues within the organization. The initiative that followed was designed around and started with the issues that were most important to staff within the organization.

We were pleased to find strong staff support for doing an initiative – both from people typically considered “diverse” and those considered “mainstream.” In the assessment, we found that we had a strong culture, with people frequently staying at TPL for many years – or leaving and then coming back. The downside was that people were hesitant to point out challenges of communication or bias, for fear of being seen as a “whiner.” Many staff noted that they loved the people and work of TPL, but that we could and should be more enlightened and conscious of the perception (or reality) of a strong organizational culture that made assumptions about what personality types, etc. were better at doing our work than was actually the case.¹⁸ We also heard from the mainstream staff that they did not want to be unconsciously excluding others and wanted training. We shared the assessment with all employees and Board Members, and we currently

¹⁷ lantha Gantt-Wright of the Kenian Group and colleagues. We have also worked with other consultants in the field to help us locally and for specialized training, e.g., Angela Park of Diversity Matters (and author in this volume) and Amber Mayes of Amber Mayes Consulting. In the course of the initiative, we expect to rely on even more expert help to keep us on track and to assure a more sophisticated approach to the work. In addition to thanking lantha Gantt-Wright for her leadership and passion for this work with us and with the broader community, I’d like to thank Barbara Smith, Carrie Speckart and the TPL Diversity Council for their countless hours and heartfelt commitment to this work.

share it with all new hires and new Board Members, along with a briefing on our Diversity Initiative's goals, accomplishments and work plans.

We also determined that we wanted to devise an initiative that wouldn't look for instant results on numbers. We had seen other organizations move forward with diversity recruiting initiatives that tried to bring in "diverse" employees without working on the existing staff's attitudes about or skills in dealing with diversity, and we wanted to do better. We didn't want token efforts, we wanted successful efforts and long-term success that would lead both to increasing the diversity of our staff and to creating a more engaged and adept culture. And we decided to include the whole organization in our efforts vs. putting "diversity" into a small pocket of individuals working off on their own.

We didn't want token efforts, we wanted successful efforts and long-term success that would lead both to increasing the diversity of our staff and to creating a more engaged and adept culture. And we decided to include the whole organization in our efforts vs. putting "diversity" into a small pocket of individuals working off on their own.

So we focused on building a dynamic initiative, driven by a Diversity Council ("Council") that was drawn from diverse backgrounds, geographies, rank, and function within the organization. Senior managers are part of the Council alongside junior staff. Our yearly work plan and priorities are developed by the Council. Much of the work is done by the Council and monitored by it as well.

Our basic goal is not to simply change our "numbers," but to create a learning atmosphere in which developing "cultural competency" is the number one goal.¹⁹ At the same time, we also want to increase our diversity. We know we ultimately need both in order to be successful by any measure. To recruit successfully, we need to be a place truly

¹⁸ While we conduct exit interviews with all staff who leave TPL, we had not found through our formal interviews that race or other diversity was an acknowledged factor in a staff member's decision to leave. However, informal conversations outside the formal system indicated that some employees were leaving in some part to go to organizations that were more diverse, or because they were in part weary of having to always adjust to the prevailing culture, or to be the sole voice of diversity in a given setting. See discussion and bullets above re: working in a more diverse organization.

committed to a mindset about diversity rather than a numbers game (or tokenism). We want to be a place that people are drawn to versus one that people need be lured to. To successfully develop an organization that celebrates diversity, we need to have a critical mass of diverse staff within the organization so it is not just an intellectual pursuit. The two work hand in hand and will evolve together over time.

We started with an initial focus on mandatory baseline training across the organization. The training uses teaching, exercises, and discussion to get across the basic concepts of bias, and the “lenses” though which we see the world. Only by getting the basic concepts and language of diversity into a common understanding would we be able to evolve into more sophisticated trainings, discussions, and learning. We also decided to define “diversity” broadly to include race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, physical ability, age, etc., with an acknowledgment that race requires a special emphasis. Our goal is to be inclusive and to build a consciousness and a constituency for recognizing and embracing diversity. We are also hoping that by starting to work on whatever element of diversity resonates with individuals in a given geography, we can open a more constructive conversation on other elements. In some areas, gender resonates, in others, religion or politics, in others, race.²⁰

As noted above, one of the first requests of Council members was that we develop the “business case” for diversity so that was clear to the organization that this effort was not a feel good, “politically correct” addition to the usual course of business, but that it was integral and strategically essential to our business. Elements of the current statement of the case include:

- **Changing demographics of the U.S.:** The workforce is increasingly diverse, as are our clients in communities and the public officials with whom we work. We need to be relevant in the world we work in and competent to navigate and lead in it.
- **Quality of life at TPL:** A diverse workplace, with an awareness and commitment to cultural competence, is a more dynamic,

¹⁹ “Cultural competency” refers to the ability to recognize differences and work competently and respectfully across differences. The concept recognizes that this takes training, effort, and commitment.

²⁰ “Class” or “privilege” is also an issue that emerged from our assessment and has followed through in our work. It is a more difficult aspect of “diversity” to choose council members on, but it is an important part of our ongoing dialogue. For an interesting discussion of the issue of class in America, see <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/national/class/index.html>. Also see *Class Notes: Thoughts on Diversity in the Classroom and in Environmentalism's Past* by Matthew Klinge in this volume.

engaging, and effective place in which to work and grow. We want to have a culture that encourages people to stay and grow with us over the long term. Retention over the long run benefits the mission through maintaining experience.

- **Competitive edge:** To be able to recruit the most qualified staff requires an atmosphere of dynamism, tolerance, and engagement, particularly with younger recruits. Results of private sector research indicate that the companies that have done the most to foster and manage diversity are also the most successful companies overall in financial and other terms.²¹
- **Consistency with TPL long term strategy:** We are the “land for people,” “go to” organization. We need to be cutting edge on the “people” front, inside the organization and outside.

The initiative, currently in its second full year, has three main components, which are managed by “goal teams”: Education & Training, Management Systems (including recruiting and retention), and Research & Measurement. Our initial timeframe, based upon advice from a variety of experts in the field, is three to five years to institutionalize our diversity efforts into our ongoing work even at a basic level, recognizing that diversity work is something that needs to be constant and over the long run, rather than a quick initiative to “fix” a problem.

EXAMPLES OF OUR WORK

Education and Training

- All TPL staff have taken a full day of “baseline training” to understand the broad nature of diversity. Training includes examination of demographic shifts in America, experiential exercises to understand one’s own possible “lenses” or bias, and discussion on how to avoid having those biases unconsciously affect our reactions and openness to differences between people. That training is also now integrated into all of our New Hire Orientations.
- We are on our second round of mandatory training across the organization. This focuses on the importance of diversity work to TPL’s mission success, TPL’s own training on

²¹ Diversity Inc., *The Business Case for Diversity*, 5th ed. 2006.

recruiting and hiring in a bias-free manner, how to step up and constructively give feedback to individuals when they say something hurtful or inappropriate to you or another colleague, along with examples of case studies on behaviors, good and bad, that are based on TPL real experiences.

- A diversity portal has been added to our intranet site. It has materials on the initiative and will also become an important repository and access site for further readings and educational materials for self-study.
- We will be kicking off our Diversity Advocates program this year. This will involve more TPLers in hosting and attending brown bag sessions on a variety of specific topics of learning on diversity.

Management Systems

- To identify best recruiting practices, members of the Diversity Council conducted interviews of past and present TPLers, particularly those of color, to determine how they came to TPL and their experience with the recruitment process.
- Similarly, Council members later considered a retention survey and suggested doing an employee satisfaction survey, done by an outside vendor with ability to benchmark TPL with other organizations. The study will include all employees, with some elements specifically related to diversity. That study will be done in the upcoming fiscal year.
- We have implemented training for all hiring supervisors on how to conduct bias-free interviewing and have covered our most senior staff. The rollout to all supervisors continues.
- We have implemented a policy that requires all recruiting for hires above a certain grade level to conduct and certify outreach for diverse candidates. No hire is allowed until outreach efforts have been discussed with and reviewed by senior staff in our national office. Implementation will be evaluated in performance reviews beginning this year.
- Establishment of diversity friendly policies, including telecommuting, job-sharing, and extended leave. A compressed workweek is currently under review.

- We have had diversity intern programs, and are planning a new and more formalized program.
- We have a diversity incentive program that was implemented following the preceding initiative. The Diversity Associates program gives a short-term national subsidy that makes it possible to hire diverse candidates when there may not otherwise be adequate budget to fill a given position in a department.

Research and Measurement

- Early on, the group decided that whatever we did, it had to be more than just exhortations and words. TPL is a results-oriented organization. Its people are results-oriented. So we set about developing a “scorecard” where we would monitor our efforts both to keep us moving forward, and as a learning opportunity.
- Why a scorecard? The team believes that it will provide a strategic management tool that will help link our strategic thinking with the operation of the organization, capture both qualitative and quantitative data, allow us to better define and accept issues, help us recognize opportunities and challenges, and keep us honest in our efforts to make continuous progress as people and as an organization.
- The scorecard will be developed and implemented this fiscal year.
- Elements of the scorecard under consideration include:
 - o Equal Employment Opportunity category data on staff demographics, turnover/retention/promotion statistics by demographic group.
 - o Policies and procedures.
 - o Investments at the national and regional level.
 - o External efforts at community outreach, recruitment outreach, marketing efforts.
 - o Learning efforts: e.g., number of managers and employees trained.
- The scorecard will be evaluated, reviewed, and recognized, with rewards and realignment taking place on an ongoing basis.

- In addition, the diversity scorecard will be integrated into the overall strategic scorecard of TPL in the coming year.
- Diversity is an element of the organization's overall Long-range Strategic Plan, and will be evaluated annually as part of the plan's evaluation.

We are a work in progress and in process, but committed at the highest levels and across the organization to becoming an organization worthy of support and engagement across the diverse communities of America and to future generations. We know that it will require humility and hard work, as well as a commitment to engaging in this work constantly for many years. We also know that we are beginners and need to approach our work with an individual and collective commitment to constant learning, vigilance, and thoughtful action.

CONCLUSION

Working in diverse environments, where diversity is something valued and worked on, is a fabulous setting to grow as a person and as a contributor to the greater world. The more diverse we are, the stronger we are – if we work at it. The more competent we are to acknowledge and value differences, and understand our own biases, the smarter we will be as individuals and as organizations. Those differences encompass race, gender, sexual orientation, age (or era), physical ability, religion, even politics and personality. Some are visible, some are not.

There are promising signs within the conservation movement, but it is our obligation to increase the velocity and depth of this work if we are to retain our relevance and increase our impact. Our obligation and opportunity is to take “diversity” from talk and aspiration to long-term sustained action. That action is about learning and attitude as well as our “numbers.” Doing so will lead to a more dynamic, effective, and lasting movement. It will require hard work and a sincere effort but the rewards are priceless. Making a point of valuing people for who they are and for what they bring to our organizations creates more appealing organizations to work in, thereby enhancing our abilities to bring in and retain great staff. And, it can create organizations that are more nimble, resilient, responsive, and dynamic in a world that needs us to be as effective as we can be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Felicia Marcus spent years as a community organizer and public interest lawyer in Los Angeles involved in environmental, social justice, and environmental justice work. She worked as a volunteer in those fields when in a private sector law firm, and worked in public interest law firms (Center for Law in the Public Interest; Public Counsel). After years of litigation and subsequent monitoring of the City's sewage system's performance, Mayor Tom Bradley

appointed her to the City's Board of Public Works, responsible for the wastewater system, solid waste management system, street maintenance, water reclamation, and other essential city services. As President of the Board, she emphasized not only environmental protection and advanced waste reduction and recycling, but also effective MBE/WBE contracting, "siting equity" in siting city waste management facilities, and opening up government processes to the public. Later, while Regional Administrator of the EPA's Pacific Southwest Region during the Clinton Administration, she emphasized community engagement, environmental justice, and working with sovereign Indian Nations while also dealing with traditional issues of air, water, and waste regulatory issues. In both city and federal management roles, she prioritized diversity efforts as well as recruitment, retention, and promotion of diverse staff. She currently serves as the Executive Vice-President and Chief Operating Officer of The Trust for Public Land.

Felicia Marcus
 The Trust for Public Land
 116 New Montgomery St. 4th floor
 San Francisco, CA 94608
 Felicia.Marcus@tpl.org
<http://www.tpl.org/>

