

**OneUpAction International**  
Healing the Earth, one action at a time.



# INTERSECTIONAL ENVIRONMENTALISM

*HOW A HOLISTIC APPROACH  
IS REVOLUTIONIZING  
ACTIVISM*

07

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# INTRODUCTION

2020 has marked a year of groundbreaking achievements, global difficulties, and multiple twists and turns. Citizens across the world have mobilized to unite and combat issues — Black Lives Matter movements, COVID-19 support, gender justice, environmental justice — and the momentum is still growing.

And the heart of many of these issues in the United States has lied in the pearly white structure and sealed papers: politics. With 38 million young people active in this election, and millions more older participating, much of the new generation has yet to completely grasp an understanding of the local and national political systems. During an era of mobilization and direct action, it is imperative that we educate, incentivize, and act.

This guidebook is split into four parts. First, we will cover the background of intersectionality and the issues it aims to combat. Second, we will discuss why intersectional environmentalism is important. Third, we'll highlight ways to get involved and next steps you should take to be involved. Lastly, we'll provide extra resources for you to build your knowledge on intersectionality.



(cottonbro)



# in·ter·sec·tion·al·ity

/ˌɪn(t)ərsekSHəˈnælədē/

The acknowledgement that different aspects of our identities interact on multiple levels, and that because of these intersections we may be targets of discrimination or systemic injustices.<sup>2</sup>

We consider the term intersectionality to be fairly new to popular vocabulary, after its addition to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2015. However, the term was originally coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a professor at Columbia Law School and the University of California Los Angeles.

“Intersectionality” was born from Kimberlé Crenshaw’s extensive research on critical race theory as both a student and a professional. Its existence as both a relatively obscure legal concept and a prominent notion in mainstream media both define intersectionality as the overlapping or intersecting of individual identities or characteristics, such as race, class, gender, ability, etc.<sup>1</sup>



(Time Magazine)



# intersectional environmentalism:

## how is it different from environmentalism?

The term "intersectional environmentalism" was coined by activist Leah Thomas (@greengirlleah on Instagram).

In 2014, Leah Thomas was a college student studying environmental science and policy when the Ferguson protests broke out in Missouri, close to her hometown.<sup>3</sup> Police shot an unarmed Black teenager Michael Brown, sparking protests across the state and nation. Throughout her studies, she became startled by the facts that **it was indeed harder for black, brown, and low-income communities to have access to clean air, water, and natural spaces.** Even worse, minority and low-income communities were statistically more likely to live in neighborhoods exposed to toxic waste, landfills, highways, and other environmental hazards. Her studies encouraged her to protect public lands, but seeing both her family being teargassed back home and studying the great life disparities in marginalized communities, **she wondered who these institutions and environmental policies were truly protecting.**<sup>4</sup>

During May 2020, Thomas called on environmentalists and climate activists to stand in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, defining it as "intersectional environmentalism". Thomas says that intersectional environmentalism **is a more inclusive idea of environmentalism that identifies the ways in which injustices that are happening in marginalized communities and the earth are interconnected.**<sup>3</sup> The well-being of both the planet and the people must be at the core of our activism, and this is something that Thomas's calls and many other activists have been pushing for.

# intersectional environmentalism:

## what issues does it address?

A significant issue that this branch of intersectionality is attempting to combat, as Leah Thomas mentioned, is **environmental racism**.

In 1982, **Benjamin Chavis**, a Black civil rights leader from the United States, coined the term “environmental racism”. Chavis defined the concept as:

“racial discrimination in environmental policy-making, the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of colour for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and the history of excluding people of colour from leadership of the ecology movements”<sup>5</sup>.

It is a form of systemic racism, not individual racism. This means that it is a result of institutional politics and practices, from a federal or local level, rather than individual actions and ideas.

Often, government, institutional, and corporate policies and practices will target land with low value to use for factories, polluting the surrounding area and the people that live there. Environmental laws and zoning are typically relaxed and unenforced, resulting in surrounding communities being exposed to hazardous and toxic waste. Because of practices like redlining and gentrification, **people of color have been historically pushed to areas that are taken advantage of by polluting industries**<sup>6</sup>. From the poisoned tap water at Flint, Michigan, a predominantly Black city where federal and state funds were abused or “lost”, to toxic waste dumps in the Lower Rio Grande Valley where many Indigenous groups reside, environmental racism is alive and growing to this date.<sup>7</sup>

More examples of historical and present-day environmental racism can be found in the following studies:

1. A 2016 study in Environment International revealed that long-term exposure to anthropogenic particles (automobile fumes, smog, soot, oil, smoke, ash, construction dust) is associated with racial segregation, with more highly segregated areas suffering higher levels of exposure.
2. A 2012 article in Environmental Health Perspectives found that overall levels of particulate matter exposure for POC were higher than for those of white people. The article also noted that, while differences in overall particulate matter by race were significant, differences for some key particles were immense. For example, Hispanic people faced rates of chlorine exposure that are more than double those of white people. Chronic chlorine inhalation is known for degrading cardiac function.
3. The National Center of Environmental Assessment concluded the following:
  - a. Black people are exposed to about 1.5 times more particulate matter than white people.
  - b. Hispanic people are exposed to about 1.2 times more of the matter than non-Hispanic people.
  - c. People in poverty had about 1.3 times more exposure to the harmful matter than people above poverty.
  - d. For Black people, the proportion of exposure is only partly explained by the disproportionate geographic burden of polluting facilities. The magnitude of emissions from individual factories appears to be higher in minority neighbourhoods.
  - e. Hydraulic-fracturing oil wells are more likely to be placed in marginalized neighborhoods as well.
  - f. The presence of benzene and other dangerous aromatic chemicals to be linked to race.

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(The National Psychologist)



# intersectional environmentalism:

## what issues does it address?

The Intersectional Environmentalism movement also attempts to combat **Eurocentrism and Whitecentric worldviews** in not just the climate movement, but in any activist space.

This is especially important for those living in North America (USA, Canada) to take note of in their activism as the history of these nations, their structures, and the dominant White population that lives here are all products of White supremacy and colonialism. Both of these systems thrive off Eurocentrism, and the racial hierarchy that exists here provides overwhelming power and privilege to white and white-passing people, drowning out the voices of marginalized people and their injustices even more.<sup>9</sup>

To help make the discussion and information provided on intersectional environmentalism clearer, here are a few definitions of the terms mentioned above:

1. **Eurocentrism:** Focusing on European culture or history to the exclusion of a wider view of the world; implicitly regarding European culture as pre-eminent/important/the greatest.
2. **White Privilege:** A term explaining how whiteness as a concept and construct have allowed people that are white or white passing certain privileges, opportunities, or protection that are not afforded to others (specifically people of colour).
3. **White Passing:** A person that is recognized as only being white—this often happens with people of Black and white parents, but also includes people with one parent of a different race/ethnicity and another that is white, or someone who has white features (light eyes, blonde/light hair, pale skin).<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, the systems of Eurocentrism and white privilege are widely present in activist spaces, both consciously and subconsciously. Because of this, white and white passing activists are afforded more funding, opportunities to speak or take action, more attention, and more respect than their counterparts. And because white people do not have the same complex experiences that POC have had with, for example, climate change and environmental racism, white activists are often unaware (willfully or accidentally) of the roots of these issues and how to solve them.

Thus, intersectional environmentalism attempts to tackle this issue by uplifting the voices of activists of color—it encourages Indigenous and Black activists to speak on health or social issues that have risen from environmental injustice and propose well-thought, knowledgeable, and culturally sensitive actions to combat the problems that are at the heart of this movement. It allows activists of color the platform to educate other activists or people in power on why and how to act, and revolutionizes the environmental movement to not just be about how White people can save us—it is about how we can save our communities and encourage worldwide knowledge, action, and compassion towards the earth and its people. Through intersectional environmentalism, Ancestral Knowledge is uplifted, post-colonial constructs can be addressed and tackled, culturally sensitive actions can be taken, and **the right kind of justice is provided.**



(Vox, 2016)

## why is this important?

During this year's World Economic Forum, five amazing climate and environmental activists were invited to speak from across the world. Out of these five, four were right. The fifth person was Vanessa Nakate, a prominent Ugandan youth climate activist, and she was cropped out of an Associated Press photo featuring Greta Thunberg and others. Why was she cropped? Why was her presence not allowed to be noted in the press?

**photo that was used in the press:**



**full photo that was taken:**



(Both photos from Associated Press, 2020)



## why is this important?

Audrey and Mara from Back to Zero described the reason perfectly:

“So many vigorous and enduring environmental campaigns have been facilitated by Black and Indigenous activists for decades, but so often, their voices go unheard. Their problems and experiences are “othered” because they don’t impact the dominant white group. Often, it appears that only once white activists join the movement and start speaking out against the same issues do they gain traction and attention.

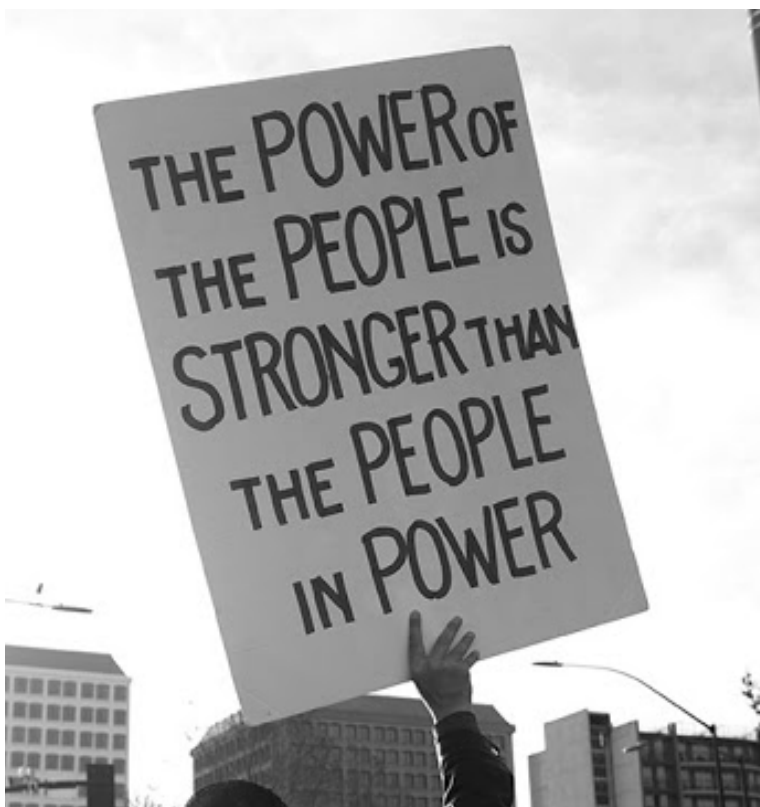
It’s really important to understand that the vast majority of environmental impact is created by the wealthy global 1%. We’re talking about corporate conglomerates, labour exportation, and globalized industries. As a result of these economic frameworks, Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour are disproportionately affected by climate change, environmental degradation, and pollutants”.<sup>9</sup>

Despite being disproportionately affected, Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour are not being given the attention, respect, and resources that they rightly deserve to resolve these horrible injustices. Time is running out for us to beg people, who so clearly do not want to listen to us after decades of action and peaceful conferencing, to take us seriously. It is not only degrading but it is **exhausting**. The intersectional environmentalism movement is here to address this disgustingly racist, xenophobic, and generally discriminatory practice that marginalized activists and communities are facing every century, decade, year, month, week, day, and hour.

## why is this important?

Intersectional environmentalism applies the diverse and different methodologies, ideologies, and ideas that we need. It uplifts the voices that need to be heard. It channels optimism, gratitude, passion, and hope in the communities that have been dying and been ignored. The intersectional environmentalist movement does not sprinkle in “Black Lives Matter” as an afterthought. It does not see the injustice of Indigenous groups across North America, and the world, as an afterthought. It does not see the lack of mental and physical assistance, the lack of clean water or clean air, or the lack of healthy and affordable food for people of colour as an afterthought. These injustices are at the movement’s core, and that is why this mindset is so important.

We must take action together, and this movement beckons that.



## next steps

**Join or lead demonstrations.** Although this may be avoided right now due to the COVID-19 pandemic, showing that you and hundreds of others care about a specific injustice or idea is an extremely effective form of activism.

- For example, from September 20-27 2019, approximately 6 million people joined global protests demanding climate justice and for world leaders to take action on the ongoing issue of climate change. Approximately 2 million people walked out of schools and workplaces. Disrupting the social norm creates disillusionment and the environment to systematic change.
- Direct action also generates community worldwide. The UN Climate Summit, which took place on September 23, 2019, was the byproduct of demonstrations and pressure on political leadership in over 70 countries which lead to the commitment to deliver more ambitious national climate plans in 2020 in line with net zero emissions by 2050 strategies. Finally, 75 countries agreed to deliver 2050 net zero emissions strategies by 2020. World leaders were forced to commit to reducing their carbon emissions due to the massive demonstrations hence showing their significance.<sup>10</sup>

**Take political action.** From letter writing, to campaign development, political actions are an effective way to persuade politicians and leaders to implement policies and regulations that protect our environment with an intersectional approach.



(The Nation, 2014)



## next steps

**Join movements.** An amazing intersectional movement to join is the one created by Leah Thomas, [Intersectional Environmentalist](#). The organization's mission is exactly the mission that the intersectional environmentalism ideology is about: "It identifies the ways in which injustices happening to marginalized communities and the earth are interconnected. It brings injustices done to the most vulnerable communities, and the earth, to the forefront and does not minimize or silence social inequality"<sup>11</sup>. Whether you join their executive team, council, one of their branches, or simply donate and uplift their movement, all of these actions are impertinent to nurturing success and justice.

**Educate yourself.** The learning does not stop once you hit the end of this guidebook, or any other guidebook. Continue to teach yourself and learn from activists of colour, disabled activists, and other marginalized activists on their experiences, their actions, and how you can support them. Learn more about the systemic issues that occur in your country and community, and speak with friends or organizations on how you can tackle them. Read research, watch documentaries, read articles and books, and be the best activist you can.



Left: OneUpAction LA. Right: Leah Thomas with Intersectional Environmentalist



## documentaries to watch:

The True Cost

There's Something In The Water

## YouTube videos to watch:

"Intersectional Approaches to Climate Change"

"What is Intersectional Environmentalism?"

"Climate Change is a Social Justice Issue"

## Books to read:

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson: As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance

Angela Davis: Freedom Is A Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, And The Foundations Of A Movement

***p.s. : action starts *here with you.****





# citations

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