



Climate Change and Systemic Environmental Racism

By Emily Sample and Regina M. Paulose



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The Stanley Center for Peace and Security and Women of Color Advancing Peace, Security, and Conflict Transformation (WCAPS) forged a partnership in 2020 to explore the systemic nature of racism in the fields of climate change, nuclear weapons, and mass violence and atrocity prevention. Black and Indigenous People and People of Color have experienced these global challenges on unequal terms and in ways exacerbated by the racism inherent to the institutions and multilateral processes built to address them. The Stanley Center particularly acknowledges that we have contributed to the perpetuation of this systemic racism and that only with intention, continued learning, and action can we become an antiracist part of the solution.

This series of discussion papers coauthored by WCAPS members considers the history of global systemic racism in each of the policy fields, offering specific examples of how racial injustice has manifested in the policies and policymaking processes and the ways Black and Indigenous People and People of Color have been and are subsequently impacted. The papers are part of the 61st Strategy for Peace Conference: Disrupting the History of Racism in Peace and Security and are intended to help ground in historical context needed conversations about more antiracist policy approaches to global peace and security challenges.

“We should have known
the end was near. How
could we not have
known? When the sky
began to pour acid and
rivers began to turn
green, we should have
known our land would
soon be dead. Then
again, how could we
have known when they
didn’t want us to know?”

—Imbolo Mbue,
How Beautiful We Were

The climate is changing. Our planet has entered the Anthropocene, a geological epoch defined by the human influence on the geologic, hydrologic, biospheric, and myriad other earth system processes.¹ As a result, we are experiencing unpredictable new patterns and intensity of weather and natural disasters. This process has been known and understood, to varying degrees, for over a century, and yet it continues today only mildly abated.² While there are numerous reasons why dire warnings have not translated to urgent action, this paper will focus on one key aspect of this discussion: the racism inherent in the creation of and lack of response to climate change.

The first codified definition of “climate change” is found in Article 1 of the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. “Climate change” refers to a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity which alters the composition of the global atmosphere and that is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods; “Adverse effects of climate change” means changes in the physical environment or biota resulting from climate change which have significant deleterious effects on the composition, resilience or productivity of natural and managed ecosystems or on the operation of socio-economic systems or on human health and welfare.”³ Utilizing these definitions, this paper will focus on illustrating three key issues: environmental racism, environmental justice, and climate justice.

Environmental racism is a form of structural violence in which the systems creating, allowing, and perpetuating the environmental harm are also actively supporting and supported by white supremacy.⁴ Much like other forms of racism, it can be difficult to disentangle issues of race from their relationship with class, geography, and intent.⁵ Some of the first discussions of environmental racism come from the establishment of the environmental justice movement. In the 1970s, the mostly Black community of Warren County, North Carolina, rallied against an attempt to relocate soil laced with polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) to their local landfill. This protest led to the first official study recognizing the relationship between known hazardous waste sites and majority Black or ethnic minority communities in the United States.⁶ It took 22 more years for the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to establish its Office of Environmental Justice. The EPA defines the office’s role in this field to be the “involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.”⁷ But this definition fails to address the “justice” aspect of environmental justice.

Environmental activism is not immune to white supremacy. The environmental justice movement has had to struggle against the pressures of racism from polluters, policymakers, and within its own ranks of the environmental movement. Most notably, in 1990, the “Group of 10,” a nickname for 10 of the major environmental organizations in the United States at the time—Audubon Society, Environmental Defense Fund, Friends of the Earth, Izaak Walton League, National Parks and Conservation Association, National Wildlife Federation, Natural Resource Defense Council, Sierra Club, Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, and Wilderness Society—were put on notice by a group of environmental justice activists who wrote a series of letters to call attention to the whiteness of these well-known organizations. They “called for the environmental movement to review comprehensively and address its own culpability in patterns of environmental racism and undemocratic processes, including its hiring practices, lobbying agenda, political platforms, financial backers, organizing practices, and representations of Third World communities within the United States and abroad.”⁸ While improvements have been made to diversify environmentalism, much of the visibility and leadership of the mainstream environmental movement remains dominated by white men.

Climate justice is a specific global offshoot of the environmental justice movement. Focusing more intentionally on the direct harm perpetrated on certain countries and communities within countries by the adverse effects of climate change, this movement highlights the disparities between who is causing climate change and who is feeling its effects most acutely. Climate justice recognizes the economic, infrastructural, political, and social inequalities that are and will be exacerbated by the adverse effects of climate change.⁹

How Did We Get Here?

From the early 18th century, colonialism and imperialism were based on the proclaimed superiority of white science, medicine, and fire power from the Global North.¹⁰ This transoceanic, international commodification of the land and its resources, as well as the people already living on that land, led directly to mass environmental destruction in the long and short terms.¹¹ This deadly legacy has impacted the global environment in innumerable ways; for the purposes of this paper, this discussion will highlight the exploitative colonial policies that paved the way for unsustainable agriculture, extractive industry, and the erasure and destruction of Indigenous people and knowledge.

Nowhere has colonial ecocide been clearer than in the destruction of the Indigenous people of North America. In the plains of what is now the United States, there was a clear and intentional campaign not just to move Indigenous people off the land but also to murder all the bison for the purpose of starving and eradicating the Indigenous people who relied on them.¹² In destroying the Indigenous people and cultures, settler colonialism also destroyed the environment. For example, the disregard for and erasure of

Indigenous forest conservation and fire-proofing methods has led to years of disastrous wildfires in California

Yet another colonial notion is that wildlife is a resource to be consumed or destroyed because it is a nuisance. This notion was played out by the British empire in India, as it saw the tiger as “vermin” and a threat that needed to be eradicated. After the colonial occupiers left India, the international community passed the burden to India to bring back the tiger species, completely neglecting environmental history in its discussions on how India got to where it was.¹³ The animals and insects settlers haven’t hunted out of existence have died because of habitat loss and pollution, and the people who relied on these things have had to change their culture around this colonial destruction.

In their very nature, capitalism and imperialism seek to exploit the resources available for the highest possible margin of profit. This is inherently unsustainable with a finite resource like the Earth. The horrors of colonial gold, diamond, and other mineral mining are well known. Yet these same extractive methods are still being used to mine minerals essential to feeding our appetite for new tech. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the same colonial-era system of extracting resources with enslaved or minimally paid laborers continues. One can draw a clear line from Belgium’s destruction of the rainforest for rubber to the coltan mines that fund conflict today. While the Global North is investing in the next new handheld device, these industries are destroying the land, air, and water resources where Indigenous peoples lack the political and financial capacity to stop them.

Mining is far from the only industry that survives on unequal extraction of resources. Monocrop agriculture is an efficient farming method, but after a few harvests it strips the land of the very things the crop needs to grow. The colonial model of agriculture utilized occupied land not for subsistence farming but to grow food, fodder, and luxury crops that were harvested for export to the occupiers’ homeland. This model was profitable because colonial occupiers paid little to nothing for the land or the labor, and when the land was stripped of its ability to produce crops, the colonists moved on, leaving behind barren, degraded soil. This extraction without reinvestment left countries economically, infrastructurally, and environmentally destitute, and this practice continues to this day. For example, palm oil and beef cattle production continue today in this legacy, clear cutting virgin rainforest to make room for monoculture that will strip the land with little to no reinvestment in the community.

By examining history not just of people and nation states but of environments themselves, we learn how truly destructive colonialism was and shed light not only on the root causes of environmental racism but also provide insight into how we are attempting to address climate change. The lenses of colonialism, race, and power dynamics are often overlooked threads that run across the climate change conversation.¹⁴

Where Are We Now?

Climate and Environmental Diplomacy

The majority of climate change-causing greenhouse gas emissions are and have been released by nations in the Global North and more recently the BRIC¹⁵ countries. When assessing the cumulative greenhouse gas emissions from 1751–2017, Europe is the highest emitter, followed closely by North America.¹⁶ Despite this, Europeans and North Americans continue to dominate the narrative of climate change mitigation, raising the question of whether they are part of the solution or are prolonging the problem.

As an unprecedented, global problem, addressing climate change has become a major project for scientists, activists, lawmakers, politicians, and technological innovators. Their ideas, policies, and inventions are not created in a vacuum and therefore must be investigated for their role in perpetuating and upholding the white supremacist systems in which they were produced. We must equally investigate the documents, charters, and diplomatic missions created by groups such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Climate diplomacy, like all international relationships, is based in power dynamics. There are certain aspects of diplomatic forums that inherently leverage this power. For example, most UNFCCC negotiations take place in English. Least developed countries¹⁷ (LDCs) are only given funding for two to three delegates to attend negotiations, so when a large number of parallel meetings occur—such as plenaries, contact groups, spin-off groups, drafting groups, and side events—LDCs are conspicuously and continuously underrepresented. Additionally, delegations from the Global North often have a dedicated negotiator or a team of technical experts dedicated to a single thematic issue, while delegates from LDCs have to juggle meetings for multiple themes and negotiate without expert support.¹⁸ Although it is in their national interests for concrete climate change mitigation and adaptation processes to take center stage in these discussions, engaging in international climate change negotiations poses greater financial and technical challenges to LDCs than to countries in the Global North. In addition, Global North countries have the capacity and power to influence what is published in IPCC and UNFCCC reports by refusing to sign them if certain passages, statistics, or figures are in conflict with their domestic policy. By designing, institutionalizing, and operationalizing the UNFCCC negotiations under Global North norms and structures, the effect is to uphold and perpetuate racist and white supremacist control over the means and levers of global decision making.

Another example of the higher burden placed on LDCs is exemplified by the IPCC *Special Report on Climate Change and Land*, which is a milestone document in many ways.¹⁹ This report points out “that yields of some crops (maize and wheat for example) have declined in the lower-latitude regions, while in many higher latitude regions yields of key crops have increased.”²⁰ This statement quantifies one

way in which poorer countries in the tropics (lower latitudes) have been and will be affected more severely than the richer countries in temperate zones (higher latitudes), thus increasing the existing inequality between these countries. Scientific reports like this one stand as an urgent call to action to decrease greenhouse gas emissions and provide support to those countries that are already experiencing the increased frequency and intensity of weather events and other adverse effects of climate change.

Within the same document, though, the key recommendations for limiting those emissions are focused on the development of expensive bioenergy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS) projects. LDCs and small island developing states will require major financial, technical, and capacity-building support from the Global North in order to build and implement these projects.²¹ BECCS projects also require vast amounts of land, which climate justice advocates worry will be mostly situated in the Global South. This concern grows out of the existing issues with ongoing carbon offset projects that have already raised red flags.²² These projects financially incentivize governments in the Global South to remove people and industry in order to create spaces for reforestation or bioenergy monoculture. Furthermore, in the larger dynamics of global development, this is increasing the divide between the economies of industrialized and agricultural countries by actively creating more undevelopable spaces in the Global South. These neocolonialist recommendations are in effect advocating for removing the natural resources from local use by sequestering parts of the land. Global North populations and institutions are so used to living in a destructive manner that their proposed solution is to further oppress other countries while continuing to live in excess.

Environmental activists and legal scholars are currently campaigning to establish ecocide as the fifth crime of the Rome Statute that the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague could prosecute. This movement has supporters, including Pope Francis.²³ As with other crimes tried by the ICC, a charge of ecocide would require the signatories of the Rome Statute to establish their own domestic laws against ecocide, but only after they had failed to enforce them could they be recommended to the ICC for investigation. Advocates are hoping to pressure leaders and corporate elites to make changes before facing prosecution. Unfortunately, China, the United States, India, and Russia—four of the world’s current top greenhouse gas emitters—are not signatories of the ICC, and therefore their citizens are not subject to the court’s jurisdiction if the crime were committed on national soil. In this instance, as with many others, the rules would thus not equally apply to those with power.

In addition, unlike domestic courts that rely on federal or local law enforcement to bring criminals to trial, the ICC does not have an arresting capacity, instead relying on the signatories to the statute to arrest and transfer criminals to The Hague. This, as noted above, has resulted in several of the world’s largest countries absenting themselves from the court’s jurisdiction, including three of the five permanent members of the

UN Security Council (United States, China, and Russia). As a result, this lopsided global justice has already led to threats from some African nations to leave the court altogether. If a corporation is operating in one of the countries that is party to the Rome Statute, though, its executives *could* fall under the court's jurisdiction.²⁴ If the crime of ecocide were added to the ICC's prosecutorial capacity, it could still backfire against the small communities fighting corporations for damage done to their areas. Corporations based in the Global North, which are the target of this campaign, could threaten prosecution of those advocates who the corporations claim cause spills and leaks through their use of sabotage and theft.²⁵

Hydropower and “Green Energy”

In response to climate change, many governments around the world are focused on creating and facilitating the use of renewable sources of energy. One such example is hydropower. While there are myriad other examples of more-harmful resource use (fracking, for example), hydropower is a unique example of a resource use that is simultaneously seen as a net positive for climate change mitigation and a massive potential negative for the people and environment directly around the development. Around the world, hydroelectric dams are touted as a source of “green energy,” however, often neglected in the conversation is the detrimental impact hydropower dams have on Indigenous peoples. As a result of contentious debates over the benefits of hydropower dams, the World Commission on Dams was asked to produce a report evaluating the merits of building dams.²⁶ Hydropower dams have benefitted from the perspective that all must be done to address climate change, and therefore “green energy” methods must be adopted. They are large projects that cost hundreds of millions of dollars to build. They are built along freshwater sources all over the world. However, hydropower dams do emit greenhouse gases and damage the environment in significant and subtle ways. They have caused significantly more harm than good in certain cases. Although some could argue the benefits outweigh these drawbacks, green energy projects have a history of replicating racial injustice where they are built, particularly on the lands of Indigenous peoples.²⁷

One such example is the Muskrat Falls dam. The Nunatsiavut Inuit are a First Nation people that have resided in the territory around Lake Melville in Labrador, Canada, for hundreds of years. Their traditional way of life was to migrate seasonally in order to obtain food from surrounding areas and practice their cultural traditions. Eventually, many cultural practices were eradicated because of forced assimilation practices.²⁸ Besides the impact colonialism had on destroying the Inuits' land and culture, several projects devastated their environment, their beliefs, and way of life. Among those were the introduction of hydropower dams in the 1900s. Canada is said to be the third-largest producer of hydropower in the world with an industry that is reported to have created 1 million jobs.²⁹ Canada uses green energy produced from hydropower for some of its energy needs but also exports it. This is celebrated by people in Canada and environmentalists who are advocating for renewable energy.

Although in 2005 Canada ceded control of the Labradorian coast back to the Inuits, a year later it was announced that a series of dams would be built along the Churchill River. It should be noted that the Churchill River is the largest water source for Lake Melville.³⁰ One project, the Muskrat Falls dam, is particularly controversial because of environmental injustice, racism, and health and environmental damages that have taken place prior to and since the project commenced. The corporation building the dam continuously took the position that no health or environmental damage would occur to those who live downstream.³¹ Yet independent scientific reports warn that the construction of Muskrat Falls dam will increase methylmercury, “a neurotoxin so dangerous the World Health Organization ranks it among the top ten chemicals of public health concern.” Lake Melville was not included in the environmental assessment carried out by the company constructing the dam. The wildlife in the area is impacted by the methylmercury, which in turn impacts sources of the Inuit food supply and culture.³² In addition to the health impacts to future generations of children, the impact to food will also lead to economic insecurity.³³ This is detrimental not just to the most vulnerable but to the global community, as these effects inherently spread outside the immediate communities. Despite these warnings, in 2013, construction of the Muskrat Falls dam began.

By 2019, the dam was already projected to be “billions of dollars over budget” which then resulted in a two-year inquiry to determine how public money was being spent. The inquiry stressed the need for having independent review boards for these types of large projects.³⁴ An independent review board would have also served an important purpose in protecting the Inuits from cultural destruction prior to the construction of the dam. The lack of consultation with and consent of the Inuits furthers environmental racism and raises questions about the mechanisms that deliver justice for those severely impacted by hydropower projects.

The impact of hydropower dams in the case of the Inuits is an example of the pattern of hardships and erasure of Indigenous peoples that are taking place all over the world. In Uganda, the Bujagali Hydroelectric Dam project followed a similar trajectory.³⁵ In 1999, the government of Uganda, in a bid to address the growing national energy shortage, commissioned AES Nile Power (AESNP) to construct and operate a hydropower plant on the Victoria Nile River. Just two years later, AESNP withdrew from the project, but not before involuntarily resettling those people expected to be directly affected by the dam. What followed was a decade-long cultural and legal battle that resulted in massive social disruption of the Basoga people of the area and the destruction of the sacred Bujagali waterfall.

In 2005, the dam project was taken over by the Ugandan government, with funding from the African Development Bank and the World Bank, and construction finally began in 2007. Within a year, a special investigatory panel was convened amid claims that the cultural and spiritual significance of the Bujagali Falls was ignored, and the project had proceeded without adequate consultations with all the relevant spiritual leaders of the Basoga. Nabamba

Budhagali, the 39th oracle of the Bujagali Falls, expressed particular concern that the destruction of the falls was proceeding without proper attention to all the necessary religious rituals and procedures. Despite these claims, and several environmental concerns vocalized simultaneously, the dam began operation in 2012. Budhagali and his followers sued and lost in Ugandan domestic courts. They were eventually invited for reconciliatory discourse after the construction of the dam, but Budhagali and his followers lacked the political, legal, or financial influence to procure a positive outcome.³⁶

Globally, there are many more existing or planned dam projects that displace people, dispossess people of their lands, cause the erasure of culture and religious sites, and in some cases cause the destruction of people and the local environment, all as a result of these “green” projects.³⁷

The Oceans, Climate Change, and Indigenous Peoples

Under colonialism, oceans were labeled under European natural law as *res communis*, meaning roughly the property of all humankind. As the Europeans dispossessed Indigenous peoples around the world of their lands, their laws eventually reached the coastal areas where many Indigenous peoples had particular customs, treaties, and practices regarding the seas.³⁸ Colonists enacted laws that restricted and displaced Indigenous people while simultaneously overharvesting and polluting the surrounding oceans.

The overfishing of our oceans continues to be a significant concern, not only for marine life and the stability of the oceans but also for people around the world who survive on fish stock. Overfishing is defined as “the taking of wildlife from the sea at rates too high for species to replace themselves.” In the mid-20th century because of the need to increase the availability and affordability of protein-rich foods, fishing capacity was increased.³⁹ Following this, fishing methods were introduced that eventually led to the decline in success among traditional fishing communities. These methods include bottom-trawling nets, mechanized forms of fishing, and fish farming, which have led to significant detrimental impacts on the ocean and coastal ecosystems.⁴⁰

In addition to the impact on wildlife, overfishing at current rates will have major negative consequences on Indigenous peoples, whose cultures, food, and traditions revolve around seafood. As discussed previously, the Inuits of Labrador are unable to sustain on the consumption of the fish in Lake Melville given the high amounts of poison in them. Indigenous peoples who live in coastal communities consume on average “fifteen times more seafood per capita than people in other parts of the world.” Despite this known significance of fish stock to Indigenous peoples, more high-powered fishing vessels are entering their coastal waters, chasing the fish closer to the shoreline, making it nearly impossible for Indigenous people to sustain their diets.⁴¹

Other issues that have continued to be problematic include Indigenous peoples’ loss of access to and control over marine

resources and marine spaces.⁴² In addition to the overfishing problem, it should not be forgotten that other issues radically impact the lives of Indigenous peoples, such as pollution and toxic waste that is dumped into waters eventually contaminating oceanic species. Further, it is already well established that the threat of sea level rise is a major forthcoming challenge for many people around the world. Countries such as Fiji and other small island developing states have expressed the “inseparable link” between their people and the ocean, including a “spiritual connection” that is the “lifeblood” of their society.⁴³ Climate change not only has a deleterious impact on the oceans but on those who depend on it, particularly Indigenous peoples.

The impact of climate change on our oceans cannot be overstated. Climate change, naturally, has a tremendous impact on our oceans because it disrupts the “physics, chemistry, and ecology of the ocean, with significant consequences on the life it holds.” Marine life will, as it always has, adapt to the changes in temperature, however, the warming of the oceans will “go beyond an organism’s optimal range,” which will “initiate physiological responses that may affect biological performance including growth, reproduction and survival.”⁴⁴ Conversation around the impact of climate change on our oceans is often reduced to a focus on what humans can consume as opposed to how the oceans serve as our greatest tool in addressing climate change. The oceans are considered to be a carbon sink, which means they provide over half of the world’s oxygen and absorb carbon from our atmosphere.⁴⁵ Whereas hydropower utilizes water to generate energy, our oceans are our greatest frontier in mitigating climate change.

Conclusion

As we examine the role of the “anthro” in the Anthropocene, it is increasingly clear how systems initiated by white settler colonialism and continued through today under the guise of progress and development have shaped not only our environment but our relationship to the Earth. Climate change continues to be portrayed as a behemoth task that we cannot mitigate due to our behavior and lifestyle. Yet those who purport to lead the fight against climate change do not appear to self-reflect on environmental history and the root causes of how we have gotten to where we are. From the political and diplomatic spaces to the environmental activist groups, climate and environmental policy continue to be dominated by white faces and colonialist mindsets. If the systems of white supremacist colonialism and racism, and the resulting global dominance of capitalism and imperialism, are what have led us to the brink of ecological disaster, then we must look to other forces to lead us out.

Endnotes

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About the Authors



Emily Sample is a Programs Director at the Fund for Peace, and a PhD candidate at the George Mason University Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution. Previously, she has worked as Associate Director of Education at Holocaust Museum Houston and for the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region Ugandan National Committee on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide and Mass Atrocities, as well as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. She earned her BA from the College of William and Mary and her MA in human rights and genocide studies from Kingston University London. Her research interests include sexual- and gender-based violence, climate change adaptation, and mass atrocity prevention.



Regina M. Paulose obtained her JD from Seattle University School of Law and her LLM in international crime and justice from the University of Torino/UNICRI. She has been a practicing attorney since 2004. She presents and publishes on topics related to international criminal law, transnational crimes, and responses to mass atrocities. Paulose has participated in different people's tribunals and is the editor of the 2019 volume *People's Tribunals, Human Rights, and the Law: Searching for Justice* (Routledge). She serves on the Executive Committee of the World Peace through Law Section of the Washington State Bar Association and was the 2019–2020 Co-Chair of the International Refugee Law Committee of the American Bar Association.



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