UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCES OF CAREER PROGRESSION IN ENVIRONMENTAL SECTOR ORGANISATIONS OF PEOPLE WITH RACIALLY/ETHNICALLY DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS

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About the research

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Two online focus groups were completed in October 2022 with 14 young people in the early stages of their careers in the environment sector.

The 90 minute text-based focus groups, facilitated by staff from SOS-UK and Action for Conservation and funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation included discussions on the following aspects:
- Challenges to career progression experienced to date
- Barriers to getting started in the sector (personal and professional)
- Support and skills development opportunities accessed so far
- Perceptions of the benefits, or disbenefits, from existing support/development
- Identification of gaps in support and development opportunities
- Ideas and preferences for a progression development programme, for example what elements and value should a programme along these lines have, and how they might be included in its design

Participants were recruited through communications to young people who had undertaken a Kickstarter placement through the Race for Nature's Recovery scheme, and also through organisations participating in The RACE Report diversity transparency campaign. Additional communications were circulated via LinkedIn. Participant characteristics included:

Ethnicity	
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British – Caribbean	3
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British – African	2
Mixed / multiple ethnic – White and Asian	2
Arab	2
Asian or Asian British – Indian	2
Any other Asian / Asian British background	1
Mixed / multiple ethnic – White and black African	1
Any other mixed / multiple ethnic background	1

Gender identity	
Woman	10
Man	3
Non-binary	1

Self-identify as being from an economically disadvantaged background	
No	8
Yes	6

Age	
18-22	3
23-29	10
40-49 (invited as in early stages of environmental career)	1

Thanks to the participants of the groups for sharing their experiences and perspectives so openly.

Reflections on racial/ethnic diversity in the environment sector

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Reflections on ethnic diversity in the environment sector

Throughout the groups, participants offered insight into their experiences of ethnic diversity whilst working in the environment sector. Their reflections can be grouped into the following themes:

- Experiences of being the only person of colour within their organisation, or when attending events in the sector
- Frustrations at the lack of pace of action to address underrepresentation
- Appreciation for action that has been taken, whilst at the same time acknowledging that issues remained.

The quotes below provide examples of these experiences.

Experiences of being the only person of colour within organisations or at sector events

"The lack of diversity was something I was instantly aware of, but having worked in mostly white organisations prior to this, it wasn't too much of a deterrent (I've kind of got used to this being the case) and I've always felt valued at my current organisation. It does sadden me that, when we go to industry/networking events, the rooms are overwhelmingly full of the same kinds of people."

"One frustration I've had was being at an organisation of 25+ people being one of few and at one point the ONLY person of colour, and they facilitated (and profited from) a diversity conference..."

"I normally am the only person of colour in meetings and where my work is now focussed on the whole countryside of the UK I want to be able to share the stories of people of colour enjoying nature."

"Moving from London to Kent was difficult due to the lack of diversity and this is particularly clear since working in the conservation industry. There are very few people from ethnically diverse backgrounds within my trust."

"Many of the people in the sector are middle class and white and it does make you feel uncomfortable as someone from a very different background."

Reflections on ethnic diversity in the environment sector

Appreciations for action taken, but issues remain

"It always feels a bit weird having an all white panel or group of individuals discussing this issue [EDI] in team meetings etc , with often the people with the least experience shouting the loudest and those with real life experience not getting a word in."

"I feel as though the first key thing is that EDI efforts should be run by people who have the same experiences as us and are listening to us and what we would like. All EDI training is also optional so doesn't really reach busier people in higher management/decision making positions."

"EDI efforts should be less about just discussion and more about material changes to company culture. My work does good stuff on recruitment for instance I would was told what the interview questions would be in advance and the interview task did not have any time restraints. This is inclusive for people who may have care responsibilities/higher work demands and do not have time to prep for a wide possibility of questions. POC may be feeling less confident and knowing the questions helps reduce that."

"I think my company did well in diversity but I think sometimes it felt like quota or tickbox for targets and funding. While working there, we had diversity and inclusion training where it was great to see the whole company's thoughts on different topics."

"Its funny as sometimes organisations can be really good, but still powerless as regards addressing the systemic issues at play. i.e. at events you can make sure your panel is diverse, next step up is making sure it is diverse without being tokenistic, but really what should be happening is them naturally being diverse without it needing a conscious focus. And that's where we're really behind. In senior roles sometimes you never see someone like you."

"For my company EDI training is required, but it often isn't emphasised enough, so it get left on the wayside – however, they do recognise this and are trying to change it."

"I think I'm quite lucky with my org as generally, everyone acknowledges the issue and is showing efforts to try and tackle it. But I have witnessed the odd thing, for example mispronouncing people's names and the way it was dealt with felt unsatisfying to me. But I don't come across those instances often at all and personally feel quite welcomed."

"There has been a new push for EDI networks and these are run by people who are not ethnically diverse at all and it feels somewhat forced."

Reflections on ethnic diversity in the environment sector

Frustrations at the lack of pace of action

"In my current job, you can tell that the mission to help diversify the sector isn't new but it could do with a faster pace, if that makes sense."

"It's been tricky in terms of recruitment though, and I feel like we could have moved quicker in terms of updating our recruitment language, and having more regular meetings to discuss these issues (and actually implement actions discussed in a timely manner)."

"As regards diversity, it has definitely been a challenge in former roles to feel like diversity was properly valued, and a lot of conversations around diversity focused just on gender, primarily because the space is so far behind. Let alone having an appropriate focus on gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class and so on. This said, I'm lucky in that I myself don't feel like I've experienced much in the way of disadvantage in the workplace (though I have definitely been on the receiving end of tokenism)."

Career progression challenges and existing support

Challenges faced in career progression

Participants were also asked about the challenges they have faced in progressing their careers within the environment sector so far. The response scan be categorised into the following themes:

- Perceptions of a lack of knowledge, leading to feelings of imposter syndrome
- Pay associated with roles in the sector
- Competition for roles and development opportunities
- Availability of opportunities in particular areas

- Longevity of employment contracts
- Resilience required when working in the sector
- Unclear progression options
- Lack of connections in the sector
- Diversity action taking a single-issue approach

The quotes below provide examples of these experiences.

Perceptions of a lack of knowledge, often leading to feelings of imposter syndrome

"Lack of knowledge on topics can often make me feel like an imposter and in turn make me an anxious facilitator. Its fine to read the script but hard to know how to answer questions when your background knowledge is thin. I think it could be great to have more training on facilitation, because of lack of knowledge it can be hard to feel like if you made a point it wouldn't be shut down."

"I think it was the knowledge gap between people who are more experienced at what they are doing and for me, who is not as experienced and knowledgeable as my peers."

"I feel like I have to "play my part" in trying to make sure that I that have this knowledge so that the seniors could take me seriously and sound like I know what I am talking about."

"Not coming from an environmental background has meant there is still a LOT of catching up to do with my colleagues in terms of knowledge. And there's always new developments to be aware of so it forever feels like I'm playing catch-up."

"At stressful moments I've definitely felt imposter syndrome, especially with my first job that took a step up in terms of seniority and really getting into the sector."

"A big challenge I am facing at the moment is imposter syndrome - I find it difficult with confidence speaking in meetings, having confidence in my decision making and feeling out of place because I am the youngest in my team."

"I do feel short-changed with the training I have received thus far from Uni and the organisations I engaged with to gain practical experience."

Challenges faced in career progression

Pay associated with sector

"I suppose jobs in the sector don't typically pay that well, which is why you need a real passion for what you do."

"I am also concerned about sacrificing my values for a salary or job security, which I have managed to avoid so far."

"Cost of living, additional pressures as person of colour to follow a more traditional path (home ownership, sending money back home etc) means I would be discouraged from campaigning/activist roles which are low paid/not permanent/not full time."

Competition for roles and development opportunities

"Fierce competition for roles and not 'fitting in' with the kinds of people who already work within either academia or conservation."

"I feel as though you need experience to do a lot of things nowadays, which is a bit annoying because if no one will hire you, how can you get the experience?"

"I think conservation as a whole is a very competitive industry. I feel like this sometimes makes it hard to get the opportunities that you need to learn and grow and stand out against others."

Lack of opportunities in particular locations

"Lack of opportunities within my local area (I live in a very urban area where green spaces are constantly destroyed)."

Longevity of employment contracts

"In my previous position my job was very unstable - continuously employed but had 6 contracts in 2 years."

Challenges faced in career progression

Resilience associated with the issues the environment sector is seeking to address

"I think it's also easy to fall into a trap of feeling ineffective or sometimes entirely powerless against the direction that things are heading in."

"I'm feeling overwhelmed by the scale of climate issues, wondering if what I'm/we're doing makes any difference/frustrated with growth mentality and capitalism."

"I have to stay on top of news all the time, and as we all know, it's rarely ever good news. And it takes a toll on my mental health, so it's been challenging trying to keep those feelings at bay (though my org are conscious of this and have begun climate cafe therapy sessions to help)."

Unclear progression options

Lack of connections in the sector

Diversity action lacks impact due to a focus on single issues

"I worry about getting 'left behind' in a job with limited day to day opportunities for growth learning - niche and competitive sector - not sure about opportunities for myself for career progression based on my background."

"A lot of getting into an industry is through 'who you know' (nepotism) and people with connections tend to have more experience on their cv to apply for those opening/entry level jobs, beating out those who might benefit more from those opportunities."

"I feel like even if racial diversity is factored into hiring, there is often an unspoken barrier in the form of educational experience and class-based exclusions that are affected by systemic racism anyway."

"EDI efforts often fall short - they can be superficial and leave out class related exclusionary factors"

"Generally not feeling like there is a path for progression in some of these organisations."

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Experiences of existing support to enable career progression

As well as the challenges faced, participants contributed their experiences of support they had drawn on so far in progressing their careers in the environment sector. Themes in the discussion included:

- Accessing knowledge or skills-focused training, often through their employers
- Participating in mentoring programmes
- Accessing traineeships

- Receiving personal support from previous managers
- Joining ethnicity focused networks

The quotes below provide examples of these experiences.

Mentoring programmes

"I had a mentor assigned to me at some point while in Uni and I did not benefit much from the relationship as the mentor was into building construction and was oblivious of my aspirations...so even though my background was clear and his also...we were mix matched and if I opted out, there was no guarantee I was going to get a well-suited mentor."

Traineeship schemes

"The traineeship scheme I was part of which aimed to give underrepresented groups an opportunity to work in the sector was actually quite poor at supporting my development and didn't really provide anything other than paid work experience to help my career. What was useful, was making myself familiar to an organisation which could hire me, but other than that I thought it lacked a structure which gave me the skills to be employable or help me stand out from the crowd. I often wonder whether some of these schemes set up to help under represented groups often do well in securing funding from funders , but once they have the funding, don't actually do much to support the individuals."

Personal support from previous managers

"I have independently applying for roles myself but when I get an interview I'm able to call me ex-manager and she'll run me through interview questions to make sure I'm feeling confident for the interview. I feel really lucky to have that kind of support even though I don't there I know that I can still ask for help from her."

Membership of ethnicity-focused networks

"I became a part of an organisation that worked to get more Black people into geography and environmental jobs. Which has helped open up so many needed conversations about decolonising the study of geography like many subjects. Its helped me meet fellow black geographers who are now friends. This in itself feels like you have a support system and allows us all to want to stay in the sector, knowing that we have each other."

"My organisation are quite good with training budgets and allowing time for us to go on that training. I've been able to take a 4-week public speaking course to allow me to better communicate during tours (I give regular guided tours of a sustainable development my org initiated). I've also taken a carbon literacy course to make sure my basic understanding is all there lol. Any built environment/sustainability webinars happening I try to watch as well. My organisation runs regular project seminars too where colleagues present on different pieces of work or sustainability initiatives we should be aware of, which I've found very helpful."

"I gained a few training opportunities while working in my role, which can be transferable not only to the environmental sector but to other practices too."

"I've had some task and time management course that were relatively useful (though tbh it felt like generic techniques and more of a box ticking exercise), media training that has been SUPER useful, and actually really helps you avoid getting flustered in debates or even social arguments), speaking training, which was good for confidence, and some subject matter training that really helped me expand my knowledge. I'd really like to become a more effective communicator, but I mostly feel like that can only come through understanding my subject area better and feeling very confident with it, rather than learning 'effective techniques', but I suppose I'm ready to be corrected!"

"I didn't have anything formalised, but my supervisors in my previous role were good in giving me lots of opportunities in areas that I was interested in. I had the opportunity to go on field missions, interview stakeholders, give presentations, work on interesting projects."

"Part of my role we are doing an A Level equivalent accreditation in community organising. I was also given 5 weeks training in social science. My manager has been very supportive of my goals and has offered project management training and is allowing me to shadow whoever I would like to within the trust if I feel it could help me achieve my goals."

For more of SOS-UK's research please visit our website.