Human Diversity in The Nature Conservancy and
Its Implications for Conservation: A First Look

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Abstract

Population demographics in the United States are rapidly changing, and increasing workplace diversity will become crucial for the survival of many environmental organizations. Although The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a global organization and employs many people in different countries, it is also interested in increasing ethnic diversity in its offices in the United States. The purpose of this study is to look at ethnic diversity in TNC offices in the U.S., examine diversity challenges and successes at other environmental organizations, and provide suggestions for increasing the ethnic diversity in TNC. My specific research objectives are to determine (1) why people of color are underrepresented in the environmental field, (2) what makes TNC attractive or unattractive to people of color, (3) what the current relationship is between employees at TNC who represent communities of color and those who do not, (4) how TNC can engage more people of color, and (5) what TNC can do to improve retention of employees representing communities of color.

I reviewed the literature on the demographics of the conservation movement, the history of people of color and the environment, and the challenges and successes other fields have had in trying to increase workplace diversity. I interviewed TNC employees, TNC high school and college interns, and employees at other environmental organizations to gather their opinions on how to enhance employee diversity in the environmental field. Suggestions for increasing and retaining diversity at TNC included short-term and long-term techniques to increase diversity. Short-term recommendations included active, rather than informal, recruiting, and better advertising of the wide variety of careers available at TNC. Long-term suggestions included increased outreach through a sequence of volunteer programs and internships involving students from elementary through post-secondary education, and fostering an inclusive atmosphere at TNC to attract more employees of color and improve employee retention. I conclude that a combination of both long term and short term techniques is best to increase diversity. The data will be used to inform TNC’s fledgling diversity initiative in the United States.
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Introduction

Overview

Ethnic diversity in environmental organizations is necessary to best achieve conservation goals. The protection of habitats, natural resources, and open space critically depends upon the support and participation of as many citizens as possible (Bay Area 2004). Furthermore, diverse group of employees are able to incorporate a variety of perspectives and experiences, thus creating a more effective workplace (Environmental Careers 2005). Research shows that diverse perspectives, heuristics, interpretations, and thinking can contribute to collectively better problem solving and prediction abilities (Page 2007). As United States population demographics change, increasing workplace diversity will become crucial for the survival of many environmental organizations (Summit 2005 and Whittaker 2003).

African Americans, Alaskan Natives, American Indians, Asians, Hawaiian Natives, Hispanics, Latinos, and other ethnic groups now represent roughly 25% of the United States population (Fig. 1; U.S. Census Bureau 2007). Interestingly, only 13% of environmental students and 10% of The Nature Conservancy employees in the United States represent these communities of color (Davis et al. 2002 and Hejmadi 2007). Limited research has been done suggesting that fewer students of color pursue environmental careers because they (1) lack role models, mentoring programs, or funding for education and internships; (2) have limited outdoor experiences; and (3) perceive environmental careers as low-prestige positions (Barbosa 1975; Lockwood 2005; Talbert et al. 1999; and Valdez 1995). In addition, difficulty recruiting and retaining employees
of color can also contribute to low levels of diversity in the environmental field (Kossek and Zonia 1993).

Figure 1. Percentage of Caucasians by state in 2006. Source: www.census.gov.

Employment opportunities in the environmental field are expected to increase over time; as demographics continue to change, the recruitment of people of color to environmental organizations must be increased to meet this demand (Adams and Moreno 1998).

The Nature Conservancy

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a non-profit private conservation organization. Its mission is to preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. Among TNC’s core values exists the statement “biological diversity conservation is best advanced by the leadership and contributions of men and women of diverse backgrounds,
beliefs and cultures,” which suggests that TNC supports the premise that increased
diversity can help conservation to work more effectively (TNC 2008).

TNC is a global organization and employs many people in different countries, but
according to Hejmadi (2007) of TNC’s human resources department, it is also interested
in increasing ethnic diversity in its offices in the United States. As of late 2006,
approximately 20% of TNC’s employees worldwide and 10% of the employees in United
States represented communities of color. Consistent with Affirmative Action Planning
Regulations and industry best practices recommended by the Office of Federal Contracts
Compliance Programs, TNC’s goal is for its United States workforce demographics to
mirror the nation’s demographics over time (Fig. 2; Hejmadi 2007). It is a federal
regulation that contractors who create Affirmative Action Plans set diversity goals, but
TNC’s human resources department also wants to ensure that there will be a sufficient
number of applicants for future job openings (Hejmadi 2007).

Figure 2. Percentage of TNC employees who represent communities of color and those
who do not. The first represents the diversity worldwide, the second represents the
diversity in the United States offices alone, and the third represents TNC’s goal
Purpose and Research Objectives

The Nature Conservancy engaged me in this project because it is interested in further addressing diversity issues in its organization. Although TNC recognizes there are many kinds of diversity, this report looks specifically at ethnic diversity in the United States. The purpose of this study is to gather baseline data about ethnic diversity in TNC offices in the United States, examine diversity challenges and successes at other environmental organizations, and provide suggestions for TNC to increase ethnic diversity in its organization. Despite the proven interest in nature by communities of color, they are not well-represented in environmental organizations (Bay Area 2004). This study aims to examine why, discuss what can be done to address it, and develop suggestions for engaging more people of color in TNC.

My specific research questions are:

(1) Why are people of color underrepresented in environmental organizations?
(2) What about TNC makes it attractive or unattractive to people of color?
(3) What is the current relationship between employees at TNC who represent communities of color and those who do not?
(4) How can TNC engage more people of color?
(5) How can TNC increase its retention of employees of color?

I addressed these questions by (1) conducting a literature review, (2) interviewing TNC employees to gather baseline data about ethnic diversity in TNC offices located in the United States, (3) speaking to TNC high school and college interns, and (4) examining diversity challenges and successes at other environmental organizations.
In this report, I will present the information I found in the literature and the qualitative data I collected from my interviews. In the following sections, I will address the related literature, methods, findings from my interviews, and then I will discuss their implications for TNC.

The next section discusses findings from the literature relevant to this study.
Related Literature

The first step of my study was to review the literature on demographic trends for ethnic diversity in environmental studies and environmental organizations, various complications that commonly arise when dealing with workplace diversity issues, strategies other environmental organizations have tried to increase ethnic diversity, successes and failures other professions have experienced while attempting to increase diversity in their fields, and various ways to increase employee retention.

Demography of Environmental Organizations

The conservation movement emerged in the 1850s. It began as a national movement to conserve and protect America's natural heritage (Library of Congress 2002). According to Fox (1985), many of its leaders were white, upper-class males because they had more time and resources to devote to conservation, which was considered a luxury. This, in turn, fostered a white, upper-class movement.

Environmental clubs and organizations had similarly homogenous memberships and were often viewed as social units. The Sierra Club, for example, required applicants to gain sponsorship from two current members in order to participate in their organization. This inadvertently excluded people of color, particularly first and second generation immigrants. The board later considered a resolution to prevent the exclusion of minorities, but the director Bestor Robinson stated, “This is not an integration club; this is a conservation club.” These attitudes changed over time, and by the 1970s, the conservation movement had attracted a wider audience as its focus shifted from strictly preservation toward improving the quality of life for all (Fox 1985).
Participation by people of color in environmental organizations, however, remained low. In 1992, The Environmental Careers Organization published a study of sixty-three environmental organizations (Environmental Careers 1992). A shocking 32% reported having no people of color on their staff. Furthermore, 22% had no people of color on their boards and 16% had no people of color in their memberships, despite over half of the organizations claiming that they were committed to diversity. Interestingly, the same study also found that students representing communities of color expressed interest in working for nonprofits and for the government, and that their salary expectations were well within the acceptable range (Environmental Careers 1992). A later study found that students of color represented less than 15% of the total number of students enrolled in agriculture, natural resources, and forestry programs, resulting in a small applicant pool of potential employees of color for environmental organizations to draw from (Davis et al. 2002).

Demography of Students in Environmental Majors

One potential explanation for the low enrollment rate in environmental education programs is because many people of color were historically involved with the manual labor aspects of agriculture and, therefore, young men and women of color tend to view environmental careers as low-prestige jobs (Talbert et al. 1999). Another study suggested that the lack of advising, internships, and scholarships targeted toward students of color affected their participation. It concluded that students representing communities of color should be presented with environmental issues at an earlier stage in their lives (Valdez 1995). A later study supported this finding by surveying a group of natural resource
professionals who represented communities of color and a group of natural resource professionals who did not represent communities of color. The results showed that people of color became interested in environmental careers later in their academic lives. They were influenced by personal experiences and concern for the environment, as opposed to encouragement from counselors and teachers as was the case of students who do not represent communities of color (Adams and Moreno 1998).

A recent study showed that people of color have had, and still have, significant interest in the environment. However, this interest often goes unnoticed by researchers because it does not occur in traditional environmental settings such as membership in popular environmental groups. Their interest can be better observed through voting patterns or through donations to environmental projects and efforts (Taylor 2008). As stated earlier, many environmental groups began as social units, and the historical lack of diversity may still discourage people of color from joining. They may perceive limited opportunities for advancement or feel overwhelmed by being the only representative from a community of color (Fox 1985). Unfortunately their lack of participation can also cause environmental organizations to believe that people of color are not interested in conservation, perpetuating the lack of diversity in environmental organizations (Taylor 2008).

**Attractiveness of Environmental Organizations to Potential Employees of Color**

Both people who represent communities of color and people who do not find many of the same factors attractive about working for an environmental organization. A study of nearly 12,000 men and women from diverse backgrounds in the United States
was conducted in 2006 and showed that employees desire adequate compensation and benefits, opportunities for advancement, sufficient recognition for their work, and an engaging work experience (Miller 2007). As stated previously, the perception of limited opportunities for advancement can be especially deterring for people of color entering a predominantly white workforce, and it is something employers should be conscious about (Fox 1985).

People of color can also be attracted to organizations that demonstrate a strong commitment and sincere interest in diversity. In particular, organizations that realize the connection and benefits of diversity to their organization’s purpose may provide a more welcoming atmosphere for potential employees of color (Clayton-Pedersen et al. 2007). However, employees of color can be overwhelmed by offers to participate in minority councils, mentoring programs, and other diversity programs. While employer’s intentions are usually good, expecting people of color to lead or participate in additional programs that foster diversity can actually be discouraging because they ultimately get assigned to more work than their co-workers who do not represent communities of color (Kossek and Zonia 1993).

**Strategies Other Environmental Organizations Have Tried**

According to Davis et al. (2002), The Wildlife Society developed an “Ethnic and Gender Diversity Committee” in 1998. In the Wildlife Society’s Bulletin in 2002, the committee suggested that environmental organizations need to inform, educate, and market environmental professions to new generations “whose demographics will be very different from today’s.” Since only 13.2% of natural resource students represent
communities of color, the committee recommended that The Wildlife Society establish new partnerships with Historically Black Colleges, Hispanic Serving Institutions, and The American Indian Science and Engineering Society. The committee also recommended that wildlife-related programs and professionals, both inside and outside The Wildlife Society, track the number of women and people of color engaged in their programs and assess the programs’ progress in increasing diversity every ten years. Finally, the committee recommended the use of web-based programs to link career centers to institutions of higher education.

Maughan et al. (2001) state that The Arizona Cooperative Fish and Research Unit established a “Minority Training Program” to help engage more students of color in its organization. The program works with biology teachers to recruit promising students in junior high and high school. The selected students are then matched with several advisors who help to guide them through undergraduate degrees, assist them in getting internships, and finally help them to find a job.

The United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service has a unique program which allows students of color to work through a multi-level internship program, ultimately leading to a permanent position. Students begin in the Student Temporary Employment Program. After successful completion of that program, they are eligible to join the Student Career Experience Program, which is the Forest Service’s primary source of recruitment for entry-level positions (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2008).

According to Talbert et al. (1999), The Minorities in Agricultural, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences (MANRRS) program was also developed to mentor students of color and get them involved in environmental careers. Its goal is to get past
the stigma of environmental careers being low-prestige jobs by providing students with mentors. Unfortunately the challenge this program is currently facing is that there are not enough professionals who represent communities of color to act as mentors. Talbert et al. (1999) define mentoring as “when significant career assistance is offered by a more experienced person to a less experienced one during a time of transition.” By this definition, mentors need not represent communities of color. However, having mentors who do represent communities of color helps to reinforce the idea that environmental careers are suitable for people from all ethnic backgrounds (Smith 2004).

Insight from Other Fields

Conservation is not the only field that has struggled with diversity. There have also been efforts to engage more people of color in education, medicine, and various other fields. Educators faced many of the same challenges as environmentalists because they too lacked diversity in their profession. Smith (2004) suggested that since students of color had little exposure to teachers of color, they felt the profession was better suited for white Americans. This lack of awareness and a lack of positive information and encouragement can deter students of color from teaching careers. Increasing awareness, providing scholarship programs, and actively recruiting have all helped to promote diversity in the educational field.

According to Cohen et al. (2001), the medical field has also faced diversity challenges. Changing demographics provided an initial impetus for more people of color to study medicine. Historically, people of color tended to receive lower quality medical care, and this disparity encouraged more people of color to enter the medical field. The
civil rights movement in the 1960s also helped to break barriers for the professional advancement of people of color. The movement forced academic institutions to take a closer look at their diversity and also brought in federal financial aid for disadvantaged students. Partnerships between ethnically diverse undergraduate colleges and healthcare institutions have been successful in encouraging more students of color to study medicine by engaging them in programs advertising the opportunities available in the medical field. These partnerships and programs were developed to identify promising students at an early age so that they could be provided with adequate mentoring and encouragement to pursue medical careers.

**Employee Retention**

Studies show that diversity initiatives are most effective when employers promote an “organizational culture change” instead of simply hiring more people of a certain group identity and expecting them to blend in (Young 2007). For example, Page (2007) recommends employers foster an organizational culture that views diversity as an opportunity to improve performance, instead of something that needs to be addressed to prevent a lawsuit. This type of atmosphere helps to ensure that employees of color are valued for their talents and not for their contribution to Affirmative Action regulations. Promoting organizational culture change is a significant task, but it is worthwhile because helping employees to feel appreciated at work will improve employee retention, and by retaining more diverse employees, employers can increase the effectiveness of their organization (Page 2007, Young 2007).
Additional studies suggest that employers also need to address barriers to employment selection and promotion, such as stereotypes, in order to retain diverse employees (Davis et al. 2002). For example, Young (2007) discussed an Asian employee who was never given a promotion despite consistently high performance. In this scenario, the supervisor held a stereotypical view of the employee that Asians are efficient workers but poor leaders. Employers who are conscious of racial and cultural bias can help to address these often complex barriers that may exist for diverse groups of employees. Continual professional development programs, strategies for upward mobility, career advancement and awards, and incentive and recognition programs should all be monitored to ensure they do not affect employees of color differently (Davis et al. 2002).

In the next section, I will present the methods for this study.
Methods

I did an internship at the request of TNC and chose a small-scale qualitative approach to gather baseline data about attitudes regarding ethnic diversity in TNC. Given my limited time frame for the project, I chose a qualitative approach because it would allow me to gather in-depth thoughts and opinions from a small group of subjects, as opposed to a larger quantitative study which would provide more statistically significant data, but less detail. While the outcomes of a small-scale qualitative studies are not always measurable with a number, they provide a more detailed look at human responses and thoughts, which was more appropriate for this first look at ethnic diversity in TNC’s offices in the United States (Rossman and Rallis 2003).

I studied five groups of people using semi-structured interviews: (1) TNC employees who represent communities of color, (2) TNC employees who do not represent communities of color, (3) TNC high school interns, (4) TNC diversity interns (ethnically diverse college interns), and (5) employees at other environmental organizations.

I asked all interview subjects their age, gender, ethnicity, length of employment, and educational backgrounds. However, in order to prevent the identification of any subject, I only used the data to broadly describe the range or averages of the subjects’ demographic information. I took additional care not to present any information in a manner that might inadvertently single out a particular individual or a few individuals due to unique demographic information.

I interviewed TNC employees who represent communities of color and those who do not to gather baseline data about ethnic diversity at TNC. I asked them about how
they became involved with TNC, what they felt would make TNC attractive or unattractive to people of color, and how they would describe the relationship between TNC employees representing communities of color and those who do not. I interviewed TNC high-school and diversity interns to see what brought them to the environmental field and to TNC specifically. I asked them questions about their experience with nature, how they became involved with TNC, and what they felt could be done to engage more students of color in TNC’s activities. Finally, I interviewed employees at other environmental organizations to see what efforts they have made to increase ethnic diversity. I asked them questions about the diversity at their organization and what efforts they have made to include more people of color. All of my interviewees were asked for suggestions for increasing and maintaining diversity at TNC. A complete list of interview questions can be found in the Appendix.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted whenever possible. However, due to the geographic extent of this study several phone interviews were necessary in lieu of face-to-face meetings. In some situations, the interview questions were answered via e-mail due to scheduling conflicts or preference.

I located interview subjects through a TNC intern retreat, through recommendations by Ms. Cynthia Smith (vice president of TNC’s human resources department) and other TNC employees, and through snowball sampling by using referrals from other subjects (Goodman 1961). Subjects included a group of TNC diversity interns working throughout the United States and various TNC employees in California, Minnesota, and other locations within the United States. I specifically spoke to TNC employees in California due to the high level of diversity there and in Minnesota due to
the relatively low level of diversity there. Employees in other locations were identified through referrals. I also surveyed high school students from New York City doing summer internships with TNC before and after their internships. Employees working at other environmental organizations were interviewed as time permitted.

During interviews, I carefully recorded all of the information provided by the interview subjects (called a “running record”) in a notebook and then typed up my notes immediately following the interview. I also made notes to myself and recorded my thoughts on the information provided (called “observer comments”) as time permitted during the interviews. Interview subjects were contacted to clarify the data after the interviews if I had any further questions about my notes. Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes (Rossman and Rallis 2003).

Throughout the data collection and once it was complete, I carefully read and re-read my running record and observer comments. I looked specifically for the main themes regarding each of my research objectives, and also looked for any patterns emerging by interview group. I kept notes of any unique comments and patterns I found amongst the groups in a separate notebook. I then used colors and numbers to code the typed interview notes. I chose several themes from the responses to each question and highlighted them with a colored marker, with one color representing a separate theme. I also wrote a number next to the highlighted section to prevent confusion. Finally, I compiled a list of quotations I felt best described common themes (Rossman and Rallis 2003).

In the following section, I will present the results from my qualitative analysis.
Results

I interviewed twenty TNC employees (ten representing communities of color), twenty-one high school interns, six college interns, and eight employees from other environmental organizations. My goal was to gather their thoughts on the following questions:

1. Why are people of color underrepresented in environmental organizations?
2. What about TNC makes it attractive or unattractive to people of color?
3. What is the current relationship between TNC employees who represent communities of color and those who do not?
4. How can TNC engage more people of color?
5. How can TNC increase its retention of employees of color?

Qualitative research is unique because the researcher is inevitably a major ingredient in the research (Rossman and Rallis 2003). Consequently, my worldview strongly influences my research. I am a twenty-three year old female masters student in the Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences at Duke University. My father is half Japanese and half Indian. My mother is Caucasian. I was born and raised in the United States but also have a strong connection to Japan because I spent a great deal of time with my Japanese grandmother and visited other family members in Japan throughout my childhood. I am interested in ethnic diversity in the environmental field because I believe there are tremendous connections between diversity and environmental protection. We all share the same resources that sustain us, so I believe conservation should be a global effort. I am writing this report in partial fulfillment of my masters project requirement and as part of my internship with The Nature Conservancy.
In the remainder of this section, I will present the qualitative analysis from my interviews.

Why are people of color underrepresented in environmental organizations?

When I first began to investigate this question, I thought that the answer might be derived from questions about how people became involved with TNC or their respective organization, or from stories about the experiences that inspired them to go into the environmental field. Instead, I found that this question was mainly addressed when I asked “What about TNC makes it attractive or unattractive to people of color?” Typically, interviewees responded with an explanation about TNC being unattractive due to its limited diversity, but then they almost always went on to say this was a problem with the environmental field as a whole.

One TNC employee of color pointed out “If you look at a map of where protected areas are and where conservationists work, and then if you look at a map of ethnic diversity, they don’t match up. We don’t really work in diverse places so what do you expect?” (Fig. 3).

**Figure 3.** Comparison of TNC preserves in relation to ethnic diversity in the United States. The map on the left shows locations of TNC preserves (represented by green and yellow dots). The map on the right represents the spread of ethnic diversity (lighter areas represent higher diversity). Sources: www.nature.org and www.census.gov
Another person representing a community of color at TNC suggested that “The environmental movement has a white face in America, due to its traditional disinterest in issues – social justice, civil rights, economic development, etc. – directly impacting the daily lives of communities of color.”

One diversity intern even shared a terrible personal experience about being a person of color in the environmental field, “[A few years ago] I was reported and ambushed while doing research! I was also reported stealing cars and randomly ambushed while doing a landscaping job. So in general, yes, there have been difficulties [being a minority in conservation].”

Overall, it seemed that the people I spoke to in California had stronger opinions about diversity issues than others because the demographics there have changed so rapidly. The first person I spoke to was a person of color working at another environmental organization. This person seemed quite discontent during the interview, and I struggled to get through my questions. Finally, when I asked my last question “Do you have any suggestions for increasing the diversity at TNC?” the person offered a very candid answer:

“The real answer is hiring people of color from the top down. It’s all just window dressing. Look at you. I mean, they hired an intern to do this! No offense. It’s complete window dressing. They need to diversify the board and be committed to affirmative action. Evaluate how you hire people, be conscious about it.”

After receiving such an honest answer, I asked if they had any additional thoughts on the previous questions. “Well that’s basically it. You have to go from the top down.
This is why we have a problem, why we’re not represented [in the environmental field]. People aren’t ready for it.”

What about TNC makes it attractive or unattractive to people of color?

Most TNC employees interviewed, both employees who represent communities of color and those who do not, said that TNC was a great place to work and that all potential employees, regardless of ethnic background, would find many of its characteristics attractive. However, consistent with the literature, the lack of diversity was cited as the most obvious deterrent for people of color. One employee representing a community of color seemed particularly happy at TNC and commented, “It is a wonderful organization. It’s prestigious. I love my job – I call it a lifestyle. It’s very appealing. In that sense, it’s colorblind and it’s a great place to work. But having more people of color would make it more attractive. Of course this has to do with conservation as a whole movement, not just TNC.” When asked to elaborate, this person said, “I go to [TNC] meetings with 500 other people and I’m the only minority. You know, maybe there’s one other Asian or something, but not a lot. It doesn’t make me uncomfortable personally – maybe because I grew up in such a multicultural environment – but the comfort level could be different for other people.”

Another employee of color also felt that TNC was a great place to work, but that the image of conservation as a whole could deter people of color from working there. “The organization attempts to be a fairly open-minded place but conservation in general is a very white, male world, and that culture is definitely reflected amongst a majority of our major donors and senior executives. This can easily make people of color
apprehensive about their career advancement opportunities within the organization.

That being said, TNC has several women and minorities – by using the term “minorities” I am including race, sexual orientation, and religion – in relatively senior positions throughout the organization.”

Employees who do not represent communities of color seemed to feel the same way. All but one of the interviewees I spoke to seemed genuinely concerned about the lack of diversity and offered many suggestions as to why TNC could be attractive or unattractive to people of color. One interviewee said, “[TNC] is viewed as an American, white, upper middle class organization. The membership also tends to be that way. It’s just not a diverse place, so that could put off some people of color.”

Another also stated, “Well I can’t speak for them, but I could see how being the only person of color at work might be discouraging. It’s not really a secret that TNC is not a diverse place. That’s unattractive right there.”

What is the current relationship between TNC employees?

Nearly all of the TNC employees I interviewed reported that the overall relationships between employees seem to be good regardless of ethnicity. When asked “How would you describe the relationship between TNC employees who represent communities of color and those who do not?” many of them simply exclaimed “Great!” or mentioned something like “Everyone seems to be treated the same.” However, many of the employees who do not represent communities of color also reported that they did not have much experience working with people of color, and most of the employees representing communities of color said that they were often the only person of color at
TNC meetings and events. Based on the contexts of our discussions, I assume that most of them were referring to the relationships between employees in their office or whom they interact with on a daily basis.

One employee of color did express some concern about the relationship between the employees at TNC as a whole. “There is a lack of diversity in the upper levels. Everything is lip service. On our evaluation form – ‘a performance appraisal form’ – you have to evaluate how you interact with other diverse people. It says ‘respect differences’ and you are supposed to evaluate yourself on that statement. This is a joke. The uppers recognize the problem but they don’t want to do anything about it. Because it’s a non-profit, racism gets dismissed because, you know, it’s ‘God’s work.’ There is a discomfort with trying to rectify this. You can tell there is resistance to change from the upper levels.”

There was also one report of an uncomfortable relationship with an employee of color. “We had an Asian secretary once. She ended up quitting, but I don’t think her heart was in it. She was in law school, and I think she just took the job to have a job. I don’t think she was attracted to our mission or anything so it was probably just a bad match for her. She was very quiet and didn’t interact with the other workers much. Later I heard some things came up during her review, but I think it was more of a personality issue than an ethnicity issue.”

How can TNC engage more people of color?

I received numerous recommendations for increasing the diversity at TNC from my interview subjects. In general, I found that almost all of the TNC employees and
employees at other organizations fell into two contrasting groups in terms of their recommendations for increasing the ethnic diversity at TNC. About half of the people I interviewed felt that the best way to promote diversity was to provide more opportunities for people of color via volunteer programs, internships, and other community outreach programs to help build a strong applicant pool for TNC employers to draw from in the coming years. The other half felt that there are already a sufficient number of qualified people of color and that TNC should simply devote more time and effort to finding them.

Internships were often suggested as a mechanism for building a larger and more diverse applicant pool. I had the privilege of both being an intern and speaking to the other TNC high school and diversity interns. TNC has a wonderful high school internship program based in New York City. The program was launched in partnership with New York City’s Friends of the High School for Environmental Studies in 1995. It gives many low-income, minority, and immigrant students the opportunity to live and work on TNC preserves for four weeks (Remer 2007a).

I visited with some of these students during the last week of their internship and was nearly brought to tears listening to their stories. Other people actually did cry. Many of the students had not been previously exposed to nature and their stories were heartwarming. They told us about how they left their friends, televisions, malls, cell phones, and city lifestyles to work on a nature preserve. They laughed about their initial fears and talked excitedly about the new things they experienced such as swimming in the ocean. They had clearly developed teamwork skills and proudly explained all the features of the nature preserve to us. On a final assessment of the internship, one student wrote “This was an amazing experience. It made me do things I never thought of doing, I
met wonderful people, I learned new plants and their common and Latin names, and to be able to explore more internships with TNC will be an honor as well as a privilege.”

TNC also has a strong college internship program, called the Conservation Science Internship Program. It was developed in part to engage more diverse people in conservation, and provides opportunities for interested and high-potential college and graduate students to gain skills and experience in real-life conservation. It also allows TNC to draw from a variety of socio-cultural experiences, build diversity in conservation, and increase its conservation science capacity (Remer 2007b).

I had the privilege of participating in this internship program, and spent the first weekend of my internship in Maine discussing project proposals and getting feedback from a wonderful group of TNC employees and professors from various academic institutions. Several of us were accepted to present our research at an upcoming conference, and an internal evaluation of the internship program showed that it met all of its original goals and highlighted many successes of the program. As one intern stated, “This has truly been the best job I have ever had. I have had so many wonderful opportunities of the years, but this is the first job I have had that really makes me think I could make a difference.”

One thing that was mentioned repeatedly during the interviews with regards to recruitment was TNC’s habit of informal hiring. Many employees, both those who represent communities of color and those who do not, cited this informal hiring as a barrier to increasing diversity. One employee of color said “TNC has an informal yet significant habit of hiring through private references and internally, even when TNC is making the appearance of conducting an objective applicant recruiting search. Due to
the predominantly white current social and professional network at TNC, it is logical and likely that people hired through this type of informal process will be white – even though I was hired through this network too.”

Another employee of color suggested that by simply better advertising the wide variety of jobs available at TNC, it could attract more diversity. “We need to help kids realize what kind of careers are out there. TNC is just as large as the ‘Bank of America!’ People just do not know there are financial, real estate, or other positions. People doing on-the-ground conservation have to have diverse educational backgrounds too! There are jobs in marketing, communications, external affairs, philanthropy… we need to make this known.”

Perhaps the best summary of the information reported to me regarding recruitment was offered by a TNC employee: “If TNC makes more of an effort to aggressively recruit talent openly and publicly, and also makes sure to advertise positions in a manner where qualified minority candidates will see them, then I think TNC will naturally become a place where diversity on all levels will mimic the percentage of interest in, and legitimate qualification for, conservation careers amongst minority groups.”

How can TNC increase its retention of employees of color?

My interviews provided countless recommendations for improving employee retention. The main concern among people of color was bringing unnecessary attention to the issue and creating awkwardness. One TNC employee representing a community of color commented, “We had mandatory diversity training in California and it was almost insulting... Recruiting can be good but it brings a lot of attention to [diversity issues].
We need to have a concentrated effort to finding local sources for recruiting. We need to develop relationships with local communities and hire from there.”

Other employees felt diversity training and a diversity council might be useful. A non-minority TNC employee suggested, “Diversity training could be useful for everyone right when they start work.” Later in the interview, this person added “There could be issues we don’t know about. Maybe some sort of council could provide a forum to bring up these issues in a comfortable setting. We have a hotline that you can call if you have a problem with your supervisor or something, but I don’t think people really use it.”

When asked about the attractiveness or unattractiveness of TNC to people representing communities of color, one person of color reported that “The corporate culture [in California], while open, tolerant, and affirming, is definitely white and middle class as far as values, interests, and communication style.”

It appears TNC has made some efforts to foster diversity in the past, but they were short-lived and sometimes ineffective. One person of color mentioned, “About eight years ago I was invited to be part of a diversity committee, but it just lasted for about one month.”

A TNC employees who does not represent a community of color also mentioned “We have a mentoring program, but it’s set up a little different. You have to work for a while before you are assigned a mentor. It might help to have that relationship early on.”

Another employee of color commented, “The fact that I am unaware of TNC’s efforts [to increase diversity] may itself be a warning sign.”
Discussion

After examining the results of my qualitative analysis, I found that they supported the literature in many instances. In this section, I will discuss my interpretation of the results, their connection to the literature, and the implications for TNC.

Nearly all of the TNC employees I interviewed felt that the present lack of diversity could be an obstacle for attracting diverse employees in the future, supporting the same idea presented in the literature that the historical lack of diversity in environmental organizations may deter people of color from joining. Many of the interview subjects, both those who represent communities of color and those who do not, felt that the lack of diversity at TNC was related to the lack of diversity in the environmental field as a whole. This result is consistent with the literature suggesting the conservation movement is primarily thought of as a white, upper-middle class movement. It seems people of color tend not to participate in environmental groups because they view them as elite, white organizations. Conversely, environmental groups tend not to hire people of color because they believe they are uninterested. TNC could help to resolve this problem and engage more people of color in its organization (both as members and employees) by making it more widely known that the organization cares about and embraces diversity.

In order to promote a culture that truly embraces diversity at TNC, it will be important for employees to realize the benefits of a diverse workplace and make a strong, united commitment to increasing diversity. It will be helpful for employees to realize that diversity initiatives go beyond meeting numerical quotas, and, more importantly, seek diverse experiences and talents (Young 2007). Realizing the connection between
diversity and TNC’s mission, as well as the importance of diversity for conservation, will help ensure that increasing diversity is viewed as an important goal for the organization as a whole (Clayton-Pedersen et al. 2007). As stated in the literature, human diversity in any organization can help it to run more effectively by incorporating a variety of perspectives, talents, and experiences (Environmental Careers 2005). Furthermore, promoting an inclusive culture at TNC will ensure that employees of color are valued for their talents and will ultimately improve employee retention (Page 2007).

I found that the literature and my interview subjects fell into two contrasting groups in terms of their recommendations for increasing the diversity at TNC. About half of the literature and half of the people interviewed felt that the best way to promote diversity was to provide more opportunities for people of color via volunteer programs, internships, and other community outreach programs to help build a strong applicant pool for TNC employers to draw from in the coming years. The other half felt that there are already a sufficient number of qualified people of color and that TNC should simply devote more time and effort to finding them. I believe that both of these ideas are valid and that a combination of them will provide help TNC to best achieve its goal of eventually mirroring the nation’s demographics in their United States workforce.

Some suggestions for increasing outreach efforts include partnering with more diverse environmental and educational organizations, funding a few projects specifically in diverse areas, and inviting the general public to attend TNC activities. TNC activities are typically open to members only, but simply inviting a wider audience may help to engage more diverse people. One unique – but very logical – comment from the interviews regarding diversity in the environmental field was that conservation areas and
ethnically diverse areas do not often overlap in the United States. Partnerships between TNC and other organizations in ethnically diverse areas could really help to alleviate this problem by allowing people of color to engage in TNC outside of the preserves, or even by providing mass transit to TNC’s preserves. As with any outreach effort, it is important to start small and build relationships with individuals. It is also important to acknowledge that relationships take time to establish and that increasing diversity through outreach efforts is a long-term commitment (Soto 2006).

During the interviews, I received a few recommendations suggesting a volunteer program for elementary and junior high school students. This would provide a way to engage students and, ultimately, their families. To my knowledge, TNC does not have a formal volunteer program for students, and such a program would be beneficial to all students regardless of their ethnicity. Many students, however, do not have transportation or access to TNC sites, nor can they afford to work without pay once they reach high school. My recommendation would be to provide after-school programs for students who do not get to experience nature in their everyday lives. An early study addressing diversity issues suggested that students require motivation, specific skills, academic skills, financial aid, self confidence, family support, and tutoring to best succeed (Clark et al. 1981). After-school programs would provide the majority of these requirements and possibly help to engage other family members and build support. If the students showed interest and promise, they could later be recommended for a summer internship which would provide financial support and countless other benefits. As discussed earlier, TNC already has two strong, yet small, internship programs in place.
Linking this volunteer program to those internships would be an excellent way to create a larger applicant pool.

Some interviewees felt that putting all of the effort into outreach simply buys TNC more time before they need to make actual changes. TNC has the potential to begin actively recruiting and moving toward its diversity goals immediately. It is widely acknowledged that informal networking and hiring processes occur at TNC. Research has found that referrers tend to recommend people of the same race and social background as themselves (Taylor 2008). By actively recruiting for qualified applicants instead of using informal techniques, this bias could be removed. Professional consultants are also available to assist with recruiting for diverse candidates.

Another suggestion to attract more diversity is to advertise the wide variety of jobs available at TNC. Many people believe that working for TNC requires a background in science, but TNC also employs people in law, accounting, philanthropy, human resources, political science, and many other areas. Simply making this more widely known could open up the applicant pool for more people of color who want to work for the environment but do not have an environmental degree.

When considering active recruiting, it is most important to seek qualified individuals to fill a variety of positions at different levels. There was some concern amongst the employees representing communities of color that bringing too much attention to the subject will cause more harm than good. It will be important for TNC to find the balance between taking too much action and taking too little action, which could be difficult. As mentioned earlier, negative attention can be counteracted by promoting an organizational culture change and fostering a healthy attitude toward diversity within
the organization. Most importantly, employers must make it clear that individuals are hired based on their talents and not on their ethnicity (Young 2007).

As mentioned in the literature, retention issues can affect diversity in the environmental field just as much as recruitment. During the interviews, I received many recommendations for improving employee retention. Again, there was the double-edged sword of ignoring diversity issues or drawing too much attention to them. While some interviewees felt that diversity training would be beneficial, others felt it would draw unnecessary and uncomfortable attention to the issue. I feel it is important to strike a balance between awareness and awkwardness. Some people recommended implementing mandatory diversity training and forming a diversity council. While these are excellent ideas, I think they should be woven into the existing training and council programs so as not to bring excess attention to employees of color. Furthermore, an interviewee mentioned that TNC has an existing mentoring program, which is a great idea; however, it requires employees to begin working before being assigned a mentor. This program could be easily improved to help all new hires, minority or not, by assigning all new employees a mentor immediately upon accepting a job offer. By drawing appropriate attention to diversity issues and making slight changes in the mentoring program, TNC could improve its retention of minority employees.

In the following section, I will present my conclusions.
Conclusions

Based on my literature and the interviews I conducted, I believe that multiple approaches are necessary to increase the diversity of TNC staff in the United States offices. Encouraging TNC’s demographics to mirror the nation’s demographics will require both a strong dedication by the organization and lots of time. As stated by an interviewee, “We need to plant seeds for long term development.”

Providing volunteer programs and internship positions for diverse students are an outstanding way to engage students of color, and TNC internships have proven to be very effective and inspiring. Linking the two internship programs would be a great way to train and keep students involved with TNC, resulting in a pool of highly qualified job applicants over time.

There are also several actions that can be taken immediately to help engage more people of color in TNC activities. Participation in more community outreach, such as giving presentations at schools and parks specifically in diverse areas, inviting everyone – not just members – to attend TNC activities, and partnering with more diverse organizations, could help to raise awareness about TNC in communities of color. Providing bilingual staff members at these events would further increase the chances of engaging people of color.

Throughout the interview process, there was much concern regarding TNC’s public image. Many interviewees suggested that the best way to increase diversity within the organization was to start at the top by diversifying the board. This would require a strong commitment from management, and I feel it could best be achieved by actively recruiting for qualified people.
It should be noted that this study is not entirely comprehensive, and further research would be helpful. It would also be useful to examine ways to increase awareness about diversity issues in the organization as a whole, not just in the human resources department.

By combining long term and short term efforts, TNC’s demographics will begin to mirror the United States demographics over time. Raising awareness about TNC activities and accomplishments in communities of color through outreach, internships, and recruitment seems to be the first step, and it is evident that TNC has already take great strides in that direction.
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United States Census Bureau. 2007. Profile of general demographic characteristics: 2000. Census 2000 Summary File 1, Matrices P1, P3, P4, P8, P9, P12, P13, P,17,


Appendix

Informed Consent Statement

My name is Yumiko Chattulani and I am a student in the Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences at Duke University. I am working with The Nature Conservancy to examine ways to engage more people of color in their organization. The purpose of my research is to specifically examine (1) why people of color are underrepresented in environmental organizations, (2) what makes TNC attractive or unattractive to people of color, (3) what the current relationship is between employees at TNC who represent communities of color and those who do not, (4) how TNC can engage more people of color, and (5) how TNC can increase its retention of employees of color.

I will be conducting an informal interview to discuss your thoughts on the ethnic diversity in TNC’s offices in the United States. The interview may take up to one hour. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw at any time, and you do not have to answer every question.

Any information you provide is completely confidential. I will be preparing a report for the Nature Conservancy, and I will also use this information for my masters project at Duke University. Your individual responses will not be presented in reports to TNC or in my masters project. I will also take care to report the results of the interview in such a way that you cannot be identified based on the demographic information you provide. Your name will not be associated with any information.

All of the information gathered will be used to help develop The Nature Conservancy’s diversity initiative. A written report will be turned in to Ms. Cynthia Smith of TNC’s human resources department in April 2008, and both an oral and written report will be presented for my masters project at Duke University in April 2008. All results presented in these reports will use broad demographic information to prevent the identification of any subjects. The names of the subjects will not be presented in any way.

If you have any further questions, I can be reached at yumiko.chattulani@duke.edu or at (616) 302-1588. My advisor, Dr. Lynn Maguire, can be reached at imaguire@duke.edu. Thank you very much for your help.

Introductory Script

Hello. Thank you very much for volunteering to participate in this study. Your participation will be very helpful for my project and for informing TNC’s fledgling diversity initiative. To clarify once again, your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw at any time, and you do not have to answer every question. If you still elect to participate, we may begin the interview.
Interview questions by category:

TNC employees who represent communities of color
- How did you become involved with TNC?
- What about TNC makes it attractive to people of color?
- What about TNC makes it unattractive to people of color?
- How would you describe the relationship between TNC employees who represent communities of color and those who do not?
- Do you have any suggestions for increasing the diversity at TNC?

TNC employees who do not represent communities of color
- How did you become involved with TNC?
- How would you describe the relationship between TNC employees who represent communities of color and those who do not?
- How many people of color have you interacted with at TNC?
- How has your experience been working with them?
- Do you have any suggestions for increasing the diversity at TNC?

TNC High School Interns
- How prepared do you feel for this internship?
- Did you have a particular experience or interaction that inspired you to become a TNC intern?
- What makes this internship attractive to you?
- What makes this internship unattractive to you?
- Do you feel nature is directly connected to your current life?
- Please list all the reasons you can think of to explain why nature is important for people.

Diversity interns
- How did you become involved in the environmental field?
- How did you become involved with TNC?
- Did you have a particular experience or interaction that inspired you to go into the environmental field?
- Were you involved in any programs for people of color that helped to prepare you for a career in the environmental field?
- Do you feel well prepared for your internship?
- Have you encountered any opportunities or difficulties that you would attribute to being a person of color?
- Do you have any suggestions for other students of color?
- Do you have any suggestions for increasing the diversity at TNC?

Employees at other environmental organizations
- How did you become involved with your organization?
- Do you feel your organization is diverse?
- Why do you feel it is attractive to people of color?
- Why do you feel it is unattractive to people of color?
- Have you made any efforts to increase diversity in your organization?
- Do you have any suggestions for increasing the diversity at TNC?