

BLACK ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE TRUST

MISSION

The Black Environmental Science Trust (BEST) is a multidonor foundation established to increase African American participation in shaping the environmental future of our nation and our world. Its primary mission is to address institutional barriers that prevent the full participation of African Americans in environmental issues at all levels. BEST activities will include, but will not be limited to, supporting through its grantmaking program those efforts aimed at increasing the numbers of African Americans in the environmental sciences. As well, BEST will serve an educational role by functioning as an information clearinghouse on environmental issues, both national and international, that affect persons of African ancestry.

OVERVIEW/RATIONALE & NEED

African Americans comprise a unique category among environmental constituencies for several reasons. Foremost is the concentration of Black populations in American inner cities where many environmental influences negatively affect the quality of life for residents of urban areas. Those areas include air pollution, lead contaminants in older housing, industrial and medical pollutants and noise pollution.

At the same time, African Americans living in rural environments commonly confront pesticides (airborne and in groundwater) and land-fill pollutants and other toxic wastes. As well, Black Americans, as with all citizens, are impacted by the effects of chlorofluorocarbons and other artificial compounds in the atmosphere's ozone layer, the global consequences of the destruction of the earth's tropical forests and increasing carbon dioxide and other trace gases.

Taken together, all of these issues are especially cogent for African Americans who traditionally have not had a significant voice in critical environment-related discussions. Nor have they played a pivotal role in public-policy debates on the environment or in strategy formation and implementation.

A related concern is the low representation of African Americans in environmental science in particular, but also in all sciences. For example, although African Americans have made major contributions to science and engineering, they represent less than 2 percent of all scientists and engineers employed in those fields in the United States. According to the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment, Black Americans—who make up about 12 percent of the population and 9 percent of college freshmen—receive only 7 percent of the bachelor's degrees in science and engineering. Black students earned only 222 doctoral degrees, or 1.8 percent of the 12,480 doctorates awarded to United States citizens in graduate science and engineering programs in 1988. In grades K-12, Black students are under-enrolled in basic math and science courses, and many urban public schools have eliminated or weakened these essential curricula.

Not surprising, African American participation in a single-focus discipline like environmental science is particularly low. College faculties reflect paltry numbers of Blacks in environmental science. Among top environmental advocacy groups in the United States, only a few report even one African American at the managerial or policy-making level, or on their boards of directors. Many report no Blacks, either at the staff or policy-making level, and no Blacks on their boards of directors.

For BEST, the overriding conclusion regarding these various problems is twofold: (1) Effect-

ing greater participation among African Americans in environmental science will bring to the "global debate" a greater sensitivity and awareness of environmental issues confronting Blacks. (2) Increasing the numbers of African American scientists will increase the indigenous pool of individuals with technical expertise, resulting in a richer resource of talent and creativity for America's scientific community, which, in turn, will result in a positive influence on industry, government, education and centers of research.

Indeed, in light of demographic predictions that by the year 2000 one in three Americans entering the workforce will be minority—as well as indications that environmental sciences will become increasingly more important to the world's inhabitants—the need to add skilled African Americans to America's pool of environmental scientists seems obvious. This goal is attainable over future decades, but it can be met sooner with the focused attentions of organizations such as BEST.

BACKGROUND

About a year ago, a discussion began between two acquaintances regarding the establishment of a scholarship fund. Dr. Warren M. Washington, director of the Climate and Global Dynamics Division and senior scientist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado, had the idea of donating a sum of money that would serve two purposes: (1) provide funds for a Black student pursuing a degree in engineering at the University of Colorado in Boulder (as a memorial to his late wife), and (2) provide funds for a Black student interested in, or already pursuing a degree in, the atmospheric sciences.

He shared his idea with Michele D. Simpson, a program officer with The Piton Foundation in Denver. Simpson, who is also an attorney, was consulted because of her interest in efforts that promote science and engineering education for Black students and because of her legal background in, and knowledge of, the creation of charitable organizations. Simpson's suggestion, instead of a scholarship fund, was the creation of a multidonor entity that would allow Washington to leverage his dollars into something more substantial than he had originally envisioned.

Their next step was to seek the advice and opinion of Jean Fairfax, an African American and award-winning foundation expert (also named the 1988 Distinguished Grantmaker of the Year by the Council on Foundations), and obtain her ideas about the creation of a new, Black-inspired philanthropic effort.

A meeting between Fairfax, Washington and Simpson took place in Denver over a weekend in March 1989. Among their conclusions was a realization that Washington's original idea encompassed a larger mission—one that could best be carried out by a foundation.

Although Washington and Simpson realized that the establishment of a foundation would be a huge undertaking, they were emboldened by Fairfax's enthusiasm for the foundation idea and they trusted her knowledge and considerable foundation expertise. Washington and Simpson felt equally confident in their knowledge of the environmental field and its attendant resources. Furthermore, they determined through research that their effort would not duplicate that of any other group.

Simpson then shared the proposal with her employers at the Denver-based Piton Foundation who responded with overwhelming support, resources and encouragement. To further explore the proposal, a meeting was held in The Piton offices in August 1989 with the following participants: Warren Washington, Michele Simpson, Jean Fairfax, Mary Gittings (executive director of The Piton Foundation) and Grant Jones (program officer at Piton, and a steering committee member of the Association of Black Foundation Executives). The determination was made at that meeting to move forward with the creation of a foundation.

It was agreed that the timing was particularly sound in light of the move nationally, by the Council on Foundations, to promote the growth of organized philanthropy among Native Americans, Latinos, Asians and African Americans. As well, recent research has begun to illuminate the benevolent and helping traditions of various minority communities, African Americans among them. The evolution of that tradition—from "crisis giving" to giving with the intent of continuing it in perpetuity—holds a strong appeal to both Washington and Simpson. Further, they both support recent moves around the United

States to introduce more planned giving and organized philanthropy in the African American community.

To that end, Washington and Simpson were able to develop BEST's mission fairly easily. Best has been formed to create a presence in the evolving world of ideas, in this common province we call "the environment." And although there are a number of issues that affect the lives of African Americans, environmental issues certainly are no less important. We, too, inhabit the planet. We, too, breathe the air, drink the water, fish and swim in the seas and rely on threatened resources like other members of the world community. In this vein, African Americans must begin to look at those environmental issues that most impact our communities. We must also join the discussions that are already taking place about our nation's and world's environmental future. We cannot do this without the education, cooperation and involvement being proposed by BEST.

STRATEGY

BEST plans to raise the bulk of its funds from contributions made by members of the African American community. While we will be pleased to accept contributions from non-African American individuals and organizations, the rationale for Black-based funding is a belief that it promotes a climate of financial and spiritual maturity and independence that is sometimes lacking when an African American organization is financially dependent on others. It is also hoped that strong Black-based funding will result in greater ownership of the organization and its ideals among contributors.

It is with a cooperative spirit, however, that BEST is launched. To that end, the BEST founders have met with representatives of Robert Redford's Institute for Resource Management to discuss methods of securing initial seed money and long-range endowment options. Staff at the Redford Institute have agreed to introduce BEST founders to various members of the "foundation community" who have an interest in environment-related issues.

In the meantime, a number of businesses, along with the National Science Foundation, have indicated an interest in working with BEST on development of programs of joint interest.

STRUCTURE

BEST will be structured as a multiple-donor foundation and organized as a Colorado nonprofit corporation. The application for exemption as a charitable foundation has been filed, and transfers to BEST will be tax-deductible charitable contributions.

An initial board of directors has been created and includes the following:

- President, Dr. Warren M. Washington
- Vice President, Michele D. Simpson
- Secretary, Jean Fairfax
- Treasurer, Dr. Charles E. Anderson (Anderson is a Professor in the Department of Marine, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina.)

Dr. Walter Orr Roberts (President Emeritus of the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research) was a founding board member of BEST until his death in March 1990.

The foundation's operations will be handled on a day-to-day basis by an executive director, part-time clerical support person and volunteers.

A request for office space within the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado, was enthusiastically approved, and beginning March 1, 1990, the BEST administrative offices will be housed in that facility.

ENDORSEMENTS

BEST has been endorsed by the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research (UCAR), the "parent" organization of the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado. UCAR's members include 58 universities around the United States and a number of foreign affiliates that have Ph.D. programs in atmospheric sciences.

BEST has also received a strong endorsement from the American Meteorological Society's Board on Women and Minorities.

CONCLUSION

BEST has been developed to ensure informed and articulate African American voices and a significant presence of African Americans in policy-making, academic, research and industry positions in the environmental sciences.

Therefore, BEST will provide grants to support: scholarships to promote enrollment in underrepresented fields; efforts to increase Black faculty and researchers in the environmental sciences; programs to address institutional barriers to full participation in environmental sciences at all levels; multi-issue African American/environmental advocacy; and educational programs for African Americans about the importance of environmental issues in their lives. In addition, BEST will work cooperatively with existing environmentally based and community-based programs, many of which have already made clear their desire to increase diversity within their ranks.

BEST is at a stage in its development where we will begin our drive to secure seed money and work toward the creation of the endowment.

Our initial goal is to raise \$1 million in the next year. We are confident that the money is available in both the African American community and in certain segments of the non-Black community.

At the same time, we are well aware that more and more attention is being paid by Blacks to issues connected to the environment, and we take that to be a good sign—a sign that more African Americans are recognizing the dangers of global warming, toxic-waste dumping, air pollution and pesticide abuse, among other concerns.

Moreover, in soliciting opinions about the BEST concept, response has been consistently and enthusiastically high. No one we've encountered has had difficulty with the efficacy of this concept. Indeed, the time for African Americans to become more involved with the environment is now.

Our lives depend on it.

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