

Washington Environmental Council

Strategic Framework Outline 2021-2025



Vision

Through equitable structures and systems created by statewide, collaborative efforts, everyone in Washington lives in a healthy and just environment, community, and economy.

WEC Mission

To develop, advocate, and defend policies that ensure environmental progress and justice by centering and amplifying the voices of the most impacted communities.

Critical Grounding & Context

Washington Environmental Council cares deeply about the land, air, water, and communities that sustain us as well as fairness in our political system. These principles remain core to the ethos of our work. As we envision a future that carries these principles forward, this framework will serve as our guide.

To move forward holistically, we are confronting how this nation's history of dehumanization, division, extraction, and disconnection from the natural world is directly linked to pollution, degradation of natural resources, and environmental injustice. Understanding the root causes of these problems helps us advance solutions that mean a just future for all people in Washington.

We are working to dismantle unjust systems and seeking far-reaching, inclusive collaborations to build solidarity that benefits everyone across race, class, zip code, and identity. Through collaboration and authentic partnerships, we come closer to living in harmony with the land and its people and holding multiple truths.

Our democratic system was founded and shaped by colonizers and slaveholders. For centuries, those in power sought to expand control by attempting to exterminate Indigenous people and creating systems that exploited labor and stole resources from enslaved African and Black peoples, immigrants, laborers, and Indigenous people.

Here in Washington we must honor and reconcile that we are on the ancestral lands of Indigenous people whose treaties were presented in bad faith and have been repeatedly broken. As a nation, we must grapple with the ugly legacy of slavery, how Black people were brought over through the trans-Atlantic slave trade and were considered 3/5ths of a person for purposes of taxation and representation until Emancipation.

We must also acknowledge the economic forces and foreign policies that have led to immigration and multiple refugee crises - from military intervention in Southeast Asia and Latin America and a climate crisis, to incentivizing immigration from post-colonial countries through the unequal promise of a fair chance at the American Dream.

These oppressive forces are not external and faceless — they are perpetuated by the systems of power and exploitation we create and choose to uphold, harming us and alienating us from one another and the environment.

Liberation for all communities means directly addressing the harm and injustice toward Black/African Americans, Indigenous people, and exploited workers. The same tactics and tools used to oppress Black/African American and Indigenous people are used to exploit workers, immigrants, women, Asian people, Latinx people, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, people with disabilities, and others marginalized in society. Our oppressive systems create conditions that especially harm communities who have been marginalized through discrimination at all levels of society through scapegoating, xenophobia, and in many cases, violence. When it comes to environmental injustice, BIPOC communities are more likely to be exposed to harmful pollution than any other demographic group and often do not benefit from public support or resources at the same level as their white counterparts.

This strategic framework was developed with this critical grounding and the knowledge that the organization's internal and external operations are intertwined and inform one another. How we do our work over the next few years will be as important as what we are able to accomplish. Our environment, communities, and state require systemic change to meet the moment we are in. While we do not know what challenges will emerge beyond the horizon, we know that with this strategic framework we will be ready for the challenges and opportunities ahead.



Strategic Vision

Justice Internalized. Justice Realized.

Overview

Since 1967, Washington Environmental Council has worked to protect and preserve Washington's environment for people and future generations. This strategic framework may feel different, but our core values have remained the same: belief in the power of collaboration, a desire to work across our state, and a willingness to learn and change. We are uniquely positioned to work on things with a holistic approach—ecologically, societally, and civically—and create strategies that acknowledge and leverage these connections.

Underlying our values is our collaboration with Washington Conservation Voters (WCV). WEC and WCV share an office, staff, and a vision for Washington's future. The two are, of course, separate organizations; for tax reporting and purposes, WEC is a recognized 501(c)(3), and WCV is recognized as a 501(c)(4). This collaboration combines our respective policy and political tools to create lasting change in our state. WEC develops, educates on, advocates for, and defends policies; WCV works to create a political system where these policies are viable. WEC also works with the League of Conservation Voters Education Fund to maximize our impact at the Federal level and to bring national resources to our policy areas and efforts to expand our democracy.

To achieve progress, Washington Environmental Council uses a full range of tactics, including

- working with local communities and Tribal Nations;
- policy advocacy at the local, state, and federal levels;
- grassroots organizing;
- nonpartisan voter engagement; and
- litigation

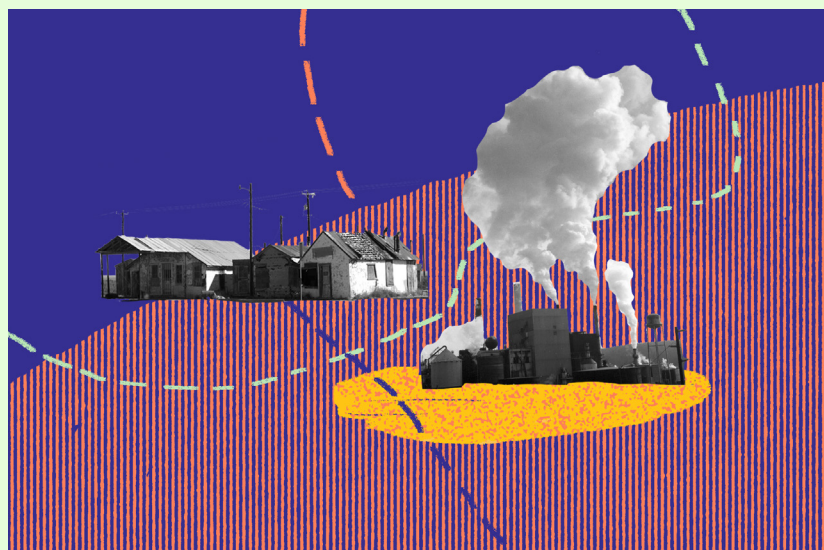
As we understand the current socio-political landscape we know that how and what we work on needs to evolve. Working in community, we have learned that environmental justice needs to direct what we do. Listening to and partnering with the communities most impacted means we can achieve more equitable and just environmental progress that benefits us all.

What does it mean to...

Pursue Racial Justice & Environmental Justice

Over the past five years, we have transformed our processes and priorities to center environmental justice and equity in the work we do. We recognize the systems and institutions that exploit and destroy the natural world, are often the same ones that burden and harm our communities. As a historically-white dominant environmental organization, we must acknowledge environmental issues at the root. We must address the legacy and impacts of institutional racism in our communities, political systems, and environment in order to restore our connections to ourselves, each other, and the environment.

The State's **Environmental Justice Task Force (EJTF)** was responsible for [recommending strategies to incorporate environmental justice principles into future State agency actions across Washington](#). The Environmental Justice Task Force defined environmental justice as “The fair treatment and meaningful 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. This includes using an intersectional lens to address disproportionate environmental and health impacts by prioritizing highly impacted populations, equitably distributing resources and benefits, and eliminating harm.”



Use data to understand where environmental harm is occurring

Our work must be grounded in qualitative and quantitative data that helps us understand where environmental harm occurs. Tools such as the [Washington Health Disparities Map](#) are essential to identify what communities across the state are being disproportionately impacted and by what environmental harms and stressors. This information will help us achieve our work by providing examples for communication, and information that can determine and drive our policy priorities.

Defining Black/African American, Indigenous, and other overburdened communities

The term **BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color)** often dilutes the experiences and historical harms people and descendants face today. As a result, we want to make it clear that:

- When we are referencing “**Black/ African American**,” we recognize the descendants of Black people who were stolen from their homelands and forced to come to America via the Middle Passage.
- When we say “**Indigenous**,” we are referring to native people who lived here when European colonizers arrived, including Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, and native people from US colonies.
- When we say **People of Color (POC)**, this broad descriptor includes, among others: Latino and Hispanic, Indian, Asian and Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders. This term also includes immigrants and refugees who bring with them legacies of migration and displacement. We also acknowledge putting all “People of Color” into one category, even when attempting to emphasize certain voices, can still effectively diminish their individual experiences and cultural identity.

Following the lead of the EJTF, we decided to use the term “overburdened” when referring to other communities facing environmental justice concerns. The EJTF defines overburdened communities as, “communities who experience disproportionate environmental harms and risks due to exposures, greater vulnerability to environmental hazards, or cumulative impacts from multiple stressors.” The term “overburdened” communities recognizes that certain communities face a disproportionate burden of environmental injustices. These communities are exposed to higher environmental hazards and receive fewer benefits compared to other communities and populations.

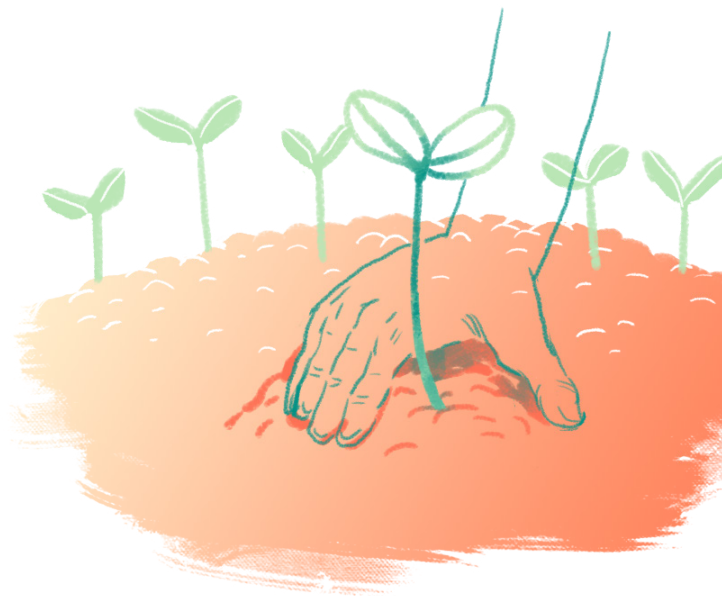
WEC has an opportunity, and an ethical responsibility, to support voices of communities who have been historically excluded in the environmental sector and ensure they are represented in decision-making processes moving forward.

Some definitions

Community Centric Fundraising

Community-Centric Fundraising (CCF) is a fundraising model that is grounded in equity and social justice. We prioritize the entire community over individual organizations, foster a sense of belonging and interdependence, present our work not as individual transactions but holistically, and encourage mutual support between nonprofits. CCF’s goal is to support fundraisers and other nonprofit professionals to re-examine every fundraising philosophy and practice they have known. The movement aims to engage in vigorous ongoing conversations, and explore new fundraising approaches that reduce harm and are grounded in racial and economic justice. More information about the movement and its 10 guiding principles can be found here:

<https://communitycentricfundraising.org/ccf-principles/>



What we learned from our last strategic plan



The 2016 - 2020 WEC Strategic Plan took place over the course of arguably some of the most consequential years in American history, including the Trump presidency, our climate reaching a tipping point, and a global pandemic. The previous plan created the pathway toward the new mission and vision we developed for this new strategic framework.

To make progress in our last plan, we focused on collaborating in broader ways that are more powerful, advocating and implementing policy changes, growing our organizational capacity, and deepening our commitment to racial justice and environmental justice.

Washington Environmental Council's origin story and work is rooted in collaboration and partnership. Over the course of the last plan, we learned who we partner with and how we work with them were just as important as collaborating. We shifted from collaborating mostly with the historically white-led and white dominant environmental community to engaging intentionally with impacted communities, including communities of color, Tribal Nations, and labor groups.



Over the course of the last plan, we were successful on a number of big policy wins:

- passing one of the nation's strongest clean energy laws;
- stopping 7 proposed coal terminals and 8 proposed oil terminals;
- embedding green infrastructure in the municipal storm-water permit update;
- unlocking financial resources for local governments, Tribes, and nonprofits to manage forestland sustainably; and
- made participation in the democratic process easier



During the last plan, we came to understand racial justice as environmental justice, and started applying this worldview to our external and internal work. We incorporated racial equity into our coalition building and policy advocacy as widely as possible. We learned that durable and effective solutions for people and the environment require collaboration with the most impacted communities to design meaningful policy and to build collective political power. The racial equity analysis we have honed over the last five years and our commitment to racial justice as environmental justice are foundational for this next strategic framework

Priorities



Partnerships & Coalitions

For nearly 55 years, the progress WEC has made for people and the environment was only made possible by the power of coalitions and partnerships. To be a truly statewide organization, we must partner with organizations that represent varied communities across Washington. We need to be intentional about building new relationships with communities we have failed to connect with in the past, especially Indigenous, Black/African American, and other overburdened communities. We need to strategically evolve current partnerships and coalitions to tackle the challenges we will face in the coming years. We also need to expand our connections in different communities and geographies than where we've traditionally worked in the past.

We know that partnerships are not just an agreement on paper, but actively leveraging all the available tools that our organization has to tackle our shared goals. By leveraging our abilities and resources, we will build mutual trust and collective power for communities and the planet. Building healthy relationships takes time and will be difficult. We know that for staff to build new and strengthen existing relationships, they will need the appropriate resources and time to forge those relationships for the long-term.

Priorities

- Be intentional about evolving existing coalitions and partnerships
- Form new partnerships with Indigenous, Black/African American, and other overburdened communities
- Invest resources and staff time to build trust, develop, and maintain aligned coalitions and partnerships
- Listen to partners and respond to their needs by investing in tools and resources we can share to support their work

Finances & Funding

We know that in order to accomplish our mission and vision we need the necessary financial resources to implement our bold plans for action. Over the past few years, we have grown our budget while navigating through the pandemic recession.

How we raise money and how we spend those precious funds reflect on our organizations. With that understanding, we want to intentionally integrate equity into how we raise and spend funds. We want to incorporate community-centric fundraising practices into our organizations to support the broader environmental community. For our budgeting process, we believe that our people are the strength of our organizations. Our budgets must ensure that staff, interns, and volunteers have the critical resources they need to be successful in achieving our plans for people and the environment. We also believe that our commitment to equity means that we have resources in our budgets that internally support staff education and externally support partners and the community.

Priorities

- Incorporate community-centric fundraising strategies and practices
- Build budgets that reflect our values

Environmental Justice & Racial Justice

This priority recognizes the intersectionality of our work because both well-intentioned environmental policies and unintentional hazards often disproportionately harm Indigenous, Black/African American, and other overburdened communities throughout the state. Our influence and power as a historically white-dominant organization requires us to employ an intersectional, anti-racist analysis on our existing framework to create lasting solutions that benefit all Washingtonians. This looks like fostering participation and collaboration with overburdened communities, transforming and examining our processes and priorities, and acknowledging how our work intersects with inequitable structures and systems. Sharing structural power, which we attained by benefitting from inequitable systems, will be essential to achieving this priority.

Priorities

- Evolve our input and feedback processes to elicit, center, and amplify the needs of Indigenous, Black/African American, and other overburdened communities throughout the state
- Examine how our programmatic and policy change work continues to uphold white supremacy, and identify how our work can become actively anti-racist
- Share power, resources, and information to actively build capacity in the EJ movement

Health & Unity

To carry out the work we do and adapt our practices to achieve our mission and vision, we must ground our organization in health and unity. In recent years, WEC and WCV have grown closer together. We can be most successful by ensuring the two organizations operate in collaboration, both working to achieve their shared vision. With a more unified approach, we can intentionally shift how we invest in improving our organizational capacity and culture in a way that prioritizes the wellbeing of staff, reduces redundancies, and better utilizes the strengths of each organization. When our organization works in partnership with historically underserved individuals, everyone can thrive. An organization that internally embodies just and healthy dynamics can better advocate for similar changes in external systems.

Priorities

- Bring WEC/WCV together to work in a more unified approach
- Implement processes and create a culture that respects and supports Black, Indigenous, and other historically underserved board and staff
- Actively foster an environment that supports staff health and capacity

Environmental Progress

Environmental Progress is what we are working towards as an organization. Each priority in this section guides how to drive our programs forward both internally and externally. The Environmental Progress priorities are built around people-power and ensuring that we are listening to, amplifying and centering those on the frontlines of environmental progress. Grounding our policy and political programs in humility, mutual learning, integrated solutions, and qualitative and quantitative data allows us to find new approaches and better serve people throughout the state. These priorities speak to the current and future work our organizations will be known for in the years to come by identifying where our policy expertise, knowledge, and power is most needed by listening and communicating, then selecting policy priorities that are responsive and demonstrate impact.

Priorities

- Integrate our policy work internally across the organization and externally through governmental, social, and economic systems
- Build our C3 democracy and nonpartisan voter engagement to empower the movement
- Ground policies and outreach in qualitative and quantitative EJ data



Process

We chose to develop our strategic planning process utilizing a diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) lens. Starting by convening BIPOC board and staff members to seek input on how DEI opportunities could be incorporated in the strategic planning process, we asked questions including:

- What does a racially inclusive planning work group look/sound/feel like?
- What racially equitable strategies should we consider to create this space?
- How does deficit modeling and saviorism show up in strategic planning?
- What are some policies, attitudes, and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race in strategic planning that we need to be cautious of/uproot?

We held staff and board focus groups early in the planning process. From these discussions, a number of common themes emerged, such as a desire that the process center racial and environmental justice, a plan providing direction for organizational growth, and flexibility.

We utilized this feedback and created the process and working group for our strategic planning efforts. The working group included BIPOC board and staff voices — of the fourteen members, 50% identified as people of color. The working group members also represented urban and rural experiences and staff participation came from all levels of the organization.

Early in the process, the working group faced a critical decision-point about the authority of board and staff members. Typically, boards hold the power in the strategic planning process but the working group decided that all members held equal decision-making authority.

The working group managed the process, developed the content, and solicited feedback from all board members and staff. This intentional effort resulted in more than 25 meetings with board and staff to continuously review the process and the content.



What We Heard

Washington Environmental Council gathered input from critical partners, elected officials, donors, and representatives from Tribal Nations through a survey. To center voices from Indigenous, Black, Latinx, and communities of color, we conducted one-on-one outreach and compensated participants with \$25 gift cards.

52 respondents completed the survey, and 19 respondents identified as Black, Indigenous, LatinX, BIPOC Womxn, Asian, and/or LGBTQIA+; Representatives from nine Tribal Nations participated. Although a significant portion of respondents were in the Seattle metro area, people across the state from Spokane, Twisp, Vancouver, La Push, and Bellingham provided insight, as well.

The results of the survey were shared with the Strategic Plan Working Group to inform their work.

We organized survey responses into four categories:

Knowledge of Washington Environmental Council

- Respondents had familiarity with WEC policy and lobbying work
- For WEC, some respondents were surprised to learn about interdisciplinary work such as legacy pollution, housing, and transportation

Knowledge and Relevance of Current Projects

- We selected three project examples (toxic cleanups/housing, clean and just transportation, and voting rights and voting justice) to test awareness and relevance of our work in these areas
- Respondents had awareness of our work on toxics and transportation, but a majority of respondents did not know about our work on voting rights and voting justice
- All respondents stated these projects' importance to their community

Partnerships – Experience, Feedback, and In Future

- Positive aspects of WEC partnerships include valuable policy expertise, strategic approaches, political insights, understanding differences and finding common interests, and leading a shift toward environmental justice
- Areas of improvement for WEC include the need to establish a formal relationship with tribes and Tribal Nations, communicating and consistently sharing information, engaging early in shaping a policy agenda, increasing equal representation of BIPOC staff and board, and avoiding competitiveness with other organizations

Community Needs and How WEC Can Add Value

- The survey engaged a wide range of communities (overburdened communities, native and Indigenous communities, rural communities)
- Some of the key themes and feedback we heard were:
 - Shape efforts designed to enhance economic development with a direct link to environmental progress
 - Communicate and collaborate early and consistently
 - Uphold tribal sovereignty and develop competency on treaty rights, reserved rights, and differences among tribes
 - Consider how we show up and avoid adding burdens and create authentic partnerships
 - Partner on mutual agendas and be clear on role we play (funding, supporting, leading)
 - Policy and civic engagement expertise adds value in many communities
 - Speak a language that meets people where they are at and is not Seattle-centric
 - Communities are not monolithic so identify areas that are ready for collaboration and where our organization can add value



Our Journey Forward

WEC is woven into the shared narrative of our state and as our state evolves we must continue to serve Washington. The needs of our communities are vast and time is running out for us to act for the future where people and the planet coexist. To address these needs, as united organizations, we place equity and environmental justice at the center of our work to protect Washington's land, air, water, and communities for generations to come.

A global pandemic, national racial reckoning, and the climate crisis have put our collective fears, needs and shared fate in acute focus. Now is the time for people and organizations to be bold, to redefine what “winning” for people and the environment means, and to work in collaboration. We plan to include more voices, partners, and data to help to deliver on our mission and vision.

We are partnering to build a movement to ensure healthy communities and a healthy environment. Over the next year, we will begin to operationalize this strategic framework. We intend to be open to the opportunities that present themselves as we evolve our partnerships. We will continue to widen our created spaces but double down on the effort to bring new voices and elevate those on the frontline to redress harm. We will lean into the spaces we do well and support the movement broadly. We will continue listening and having conversations with communities across the state to help guide our work.

Our communities each bring their experiences, cultural knowledge and worldviews that can inform the collective solutions we need for a thriving natural and social environment. As human beings, we are nourished by and made of the same elements as the environment — it is impossible to disentangle our social communities from the broader ecosystems of which we are just one part.

In the coming years, we intend to deepen our community relationships, working together to find inclusive and expansive solutions to our most pressing social and environmental challenges.

We also know it is important to look inward and challenge the limiting processes and systems that our work may be perpetuating. That is not an easy or straightforward endeavor but it is part of the responsibility we have towards our shared vision of justice for a thriving planet and people. There is room in this work for all our communities and this strategic framework is the bedrock of our commitment to finding collaborative solutions that hold space enough for us all.

Over the five-year lifespan of this work, we will use this framework to chart our course with a detailed workplan that incorporates this strategic plan into our bodies of work. We aim to identify the actions and opportunities needed to implement this innovative and forward-thinking framework for positive impact toward people and the planet.

