

# Most Americans underestimate minorities' environmental concerns—even minorities

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A new study shows most Americans underestimate just how concerned minorities and lower-income people are about environmental threats, including members of those groups.

These misperceptions contradict significant research that shows racial and ethnic minorities and the poor are consistently among the most worried about [environmental challenges](#), said co-author Jonathon Schuldt, associate professor of communication at Cornell University.

"What really surprised us was just how paradoxical the results were," he said. "We found a very consistent pattern that if the American public thought a group was very low in concern, in fact that same group was reporting high levels of concern."

The study, "Diverse Segments of the U.S. Public Underestimate the Environmental Concerns of Minority and Low-Income Americans," was published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. It also found most Americans associate the term "environmentalist" most closely with whites and the well-educated.

Schuldt and his co-authors attribute the findings to stereotypes in American culture. For example, there's a misperception that people with lower incomes have more pressing needs and don't have the luxury to worry about [environmental threats](#). However, poorer people and [people](#) of color consistently report the opposite, perhaps because they are typically the hardest hit by environmental challenges.

The researchers conducted an online survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,200 Americans about their levels of concern for the environment, whether they identified as an environmentalist, and the age, socioeconomic class and race they associated with the term "environmentalist."

The findings could have practical implications for environmental advocacy and policy. If policymakers, scholars and practitioners endorse similar views, these misperceptions may influence which groups' perspectives get prioritized and may contribute to the historical

marginalization of minority and lower-income populations.

**More information:** Adam R. Pearson et al, Diverse segments of the US public underestimate the environmental concerns of minority and low-income Americans, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2018). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1804698115](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804698115)

Provided by Cornell University

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