

Important Black People in Conservation

Within the world of conservation, there's a long history of Black contributions. Here are some of those leaders whom we all should know and honor.

George Washington Carver

One of the most impactful conservationists in the United States' history, George Washington Carver healed land and uplifted farmers recently freed from slavery.

Born into slavery himself, Carver overcame race-based rejections from multiple colleges and became the first Black student at Iowa State University and later its first Black faculty member.

He helped found the agricultural school at Alabama's Tuskegee Institute. Upon arriving in the South, Carver noted how degraded the soil was from a long history of intensive cotton growing.

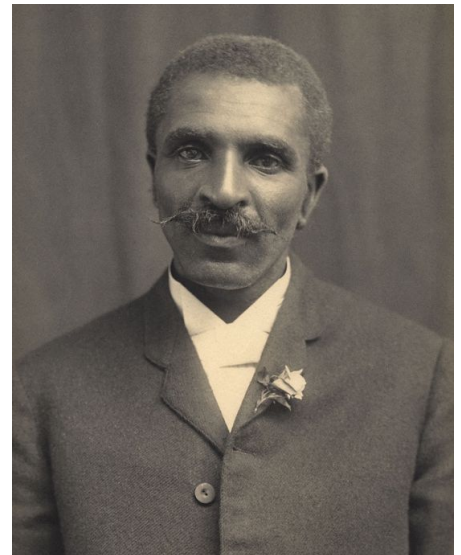
Carver experimented and perfected ways to bring nutrients back to the land: an idea that in modern times is embraced as regenerative agriculture, a powerful climate solution.

Carver's methods of rotating a variety of crops and turning some cover crops under the soil boosted the land's productivity. To create a market for diverse soil-fixing crops like peanuts and sweet potatoes, Carver invented hundreds of uses for them.

By demonstrating these lessons far and wide, Carver hoped to liberate the region's formerly enslaved Black farmers from a sharecropping system that kept them indebted and dependent on white landowners.

While his historical narrative is often tied to his promotion of the peanut, his tireless efforts to take on an unjust status quo through nature and ingenuity are now seeing the light of day.

Due to his contributions to the nation's agriculture, Carver was the first non-president to be honored with a national monument.



Hattie Carthan

Hattie Carthan had been interested in trees all her life, but it was her love for her home and her neighbors that sprung her to action. When her once tree-lined neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn started losing its trees at an alarming rate, she started replanting them herself.

At the age of 71, Hattie founded Tree Corps to inspire young people to care for and plant trees. Her passion helped build a grassroots movement for more green space in cities.

Carthan's acts of community engagement and environmental action live on through the Hattie Carthan Garden and the Magnolia Tree Earth Center.



Rue Mapp

As a child exploring her family's ranch, Rue Mapp realized that we're not separate from nature and that nature is best shared with others.

In 2009, Mapp started a blog called Outdoor Afro to reconnect more Black people to the outdoors. Since then, it's turned into a non-profit organization with over 100 leaders in 56 cities across the US.

Today, Outdoor Afro provides leadership training and community building, dispels myths about Black people and the outdoors, and generates enthusiasm for nature. Leaders organize trips from mountain climbing to kayaking to exploring city parks, where participants practice conservation stewardship, including environmental ethics and education.

For over a decade, Mapp has been changing the visual narrative of people in nature and helping create a future where nature and people of all communities thrive together.

Hazel Johnson

Known as the mother of the environmental justice movement, Hazel Johnson fought to improve living conditions in Chicago public housing from the 1970s until her death in 2011.

She began investigating high cancer rates in her neighborhood of Altgeld Gardens and discovered the problem was environmental. Altgeld Gardens was built on a landfill surrounded by toxicity, and the air, water, and land around it was highly polluted.



Johnson went on to found the People for Community Recovery and was committed to environmental change. A hallmark of her activism involved working with a team of activists to collaborate with the Environmental Protection Agency and urge President Clinton to sign the Environmental Justice Executive Order.



Dr. Robert Bullard

Robert Bullard is known as the father of environmental justice, a movement to promote a more equitable manner for how different communities experience environmental benefits and burdens.

Bullard's efforts began with *Bean v. Southwestern Waste Management Inc. (1979)*, a case in which an African American community in Houston rallied against the establishment of a landfill in their neighborhood. In his research, Bullard found toxic waste sites were often placed within Black communities in Houston.

He's since gone on to become an honored activist, author, and mentor in environmental justice. In 2020, he received the Champions of the Earth award, the highest environmental honor granted by the United Nations.

He is currently a Distinguished Professor of Urban Planning and Environmental Policy at Texas Southern University.

Colonel Charles Young

Born to enslaved parents in 1864, Charles Young was the first Black colonel in the US Army and the first Black superintendent of a national park, among many other accomplishments.

At a time when the military supervised all national park activities, Young was sent to Sequoia and General Grant National Parks (now Sequoia and Kings Canyon). His troops built roads that opened up the giant sequoia groves to tourism for the first time, an accomplishment previous superintendents had been unable to complete. Parts of these roads are still in use today.

Another lasting legacy was his recommendation that the government acquire more land surrounding the parks, and his early negotiations with landowners to sell.

In his report to the Secretary of the Interior, he wrote:

“A journey through this park and the Sierra Forest Reserve to Mount Whitney country will convince even the least thoughtful man of the needfulness of preserving these mountains just as they are, with their clothing of trees, shrubs, rocks, and vines, and of their importance to the valleys below as reservoirs for storage of water for agricultural and domestic purposes. In this lies the necessity of forest preservation.”



Will Allen

Will Allen is the son of a sharecropper, former professional basketball player, ex-corporate sales leader and now farmer. The founder and CEO of Growing Power Inc., he has become recognized as one of our preeminent thinkers on agriculture and food policy and is a leading authority in the expanding field of urban agriculture. Allen promotes the belief that all people, regardless of their economic circumstances, should have access to fresh, safe, affordable and nutritious foods. Using methods he has developed over a lifetime, Allen specializes in bringing healthy food to under-served communities using a unique growing system he developed himself. He trains community members to become community farmers, assuring them a secure source of good food without regard to political or economic forces. What started as a

simple partnership to change the landscape of the north side of Milwaukee has blossomed into a national and global commitment to sustainable food systems. In 2008, Allen was awarded a prestigious John D. and Katherine T. McArthur Foundation Fellow “genius grant” for his work – only the second farmer ever to be so honored. In May 2010, *Time* magazine named Allen one of 100 World’s Most Influential People.

Ibrahim Abdul-Matin

Ibrahim Abdul-Matin is a former adviser to Michael Bloomberg specializing in the field of environmental sustainability. On his blog, he says, “I was inspired to become a steward of the Earth when my father took me from the concrete jungle that is Brooklyn to Bear Mountain, a hiker’s paradise. I was five years old. I recall moss growing on rocks, mushrooms on rotting wood, and a freshness in the air. When it was time for the afternoon prayer, my father stopped to pray. I was used to praying at home or praying in a mosque. That day, my father told me, ‘The Earth is a Mosque. You can pray anywhere.’ From that moment on, I knew, if I could pray anywhere, then everywhere was sacred. It was my duty to protect the planet, to be a steward of the Earth.” Abdul-Matin is the author of the book: *Green Deen: What Islam Teaches About Protecting The Planet*.



Carl Anthony

Carl Anthony has spent his career working to solve social justice problems. His two passions are the battle for justice for people at the bottom of the economic ladder—particularly people of color—and working for an economy that is environmentally sustainable. He has been instrumental in expanding the environmental movement to include those most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. He is the founder of the Urban Habitat Program, one of the oldest environmental justice organizations in the country and is the former head of Earth Island Institute. He also started the only environmental justice periodical in the United States: *Race, Poverty and the Environment Journal*.

MaVynee Oshun Betsch

MaVynee Oshun Betsch was an environmental activist known as “The Beach Lady” for her tireless conservation efforts on behalf of Florida’s coastal environment. With her seven-foot long dreadlocks and colorful dress, Betsch made for an impressive figure and was hard to ignore. While she was raised in luxury she gave away her entire fortune to environmental causes. She was posthumously honored as an Unsung Hero of Compassion by the Dalai Lama in 2005.



Solomon G. Brown

Solomon G. Brown was the first Black employee at the Smithsonian Institution working continuously from 1852 until 1906. He held a number of roles during his 54-year tenure including preparing maps and drawings for lectures and working in the International Exchange Service. Brown was also self-educated and while at the Smithsonian obtained considerable knowledge in the field of natural history. He became well known for his illustrated lectures on natural history and lectured frequently at scientific societies throughout the Washington, DC area.



Majora Carter

Majora Carter is an internationally urban revitalization strategy consultant, real estate developer, and Peabody Award winning broadcaster who views urban renewal through an environmental lens. The South Bronx native draws a direct connection between ecological, economic and social degradation. With her inspired ideas and fierce persistence, Carter managed to bring the South Bronx its first open-waterfront park in 60 years. She was one of the first of six speakers on the prestigious TEDTalks series. Carter’s confidence, energy and intensely emotional delivery make her talks themselves a force of nature. In 2005, Carter was awarded a 2005 John D. and Katherine T. McArthur Foundation Fellow “genius” grant. Her company, the Majora Carter Group is putting the green economy and green economic tools to use, unlocking the potential of every place — from urban cities and rural communities, to universities, government projects, businesses and corporations – and everywhere else in between. Photo credit: MDavidLeeds.com

John Francis

John Francis is known to all as the Planet Walker. After witnessing a massive oil spill in San Francisco Bay in 1971, Francis gave up all motorized transportation. For 22 years, he walked everywhere he went – including treks across the entire United States and much of South America – hoping to inspire others to rethink the petroleum economy. As Francis traveled about on foot, he often found himself arguing with others about his decision, which led him to an even more radical decision – to stop speaking for one day and instead listen to what others had to say. This turned into a 17-year vow of silence. His charm and ingenious ability to communicate without talking earned him bachelor’s, master’s and doctorate degrees. The day after he ended his vow of silence on Earth Day 1990, he was struck by a car, but still managed to convince the ambulance crew to allow him to walk to the hospital. In 1991, Francis was named a United Nations Environmental Program Goodwill ambassador. “Part of the mystery of walking is that the destination is inside us and we really don’t know when we arrive until we arrive,” he said. He is the author of: *Planetwalker: 22 Years of Walking, 17 Years of Silence*.



Peggy Shepard

Shepard co-founded We Act For Environmental Justice (WAFEJ) in New York. Through Shepard's influence, WAFEJ helps address environmental protection and environmental health policy issues, including ecological health, both within the local Northern Manhattan community and nationally. The organization partners with people of color and low-income populations, working to ensure that healthy environments are available to everyone.



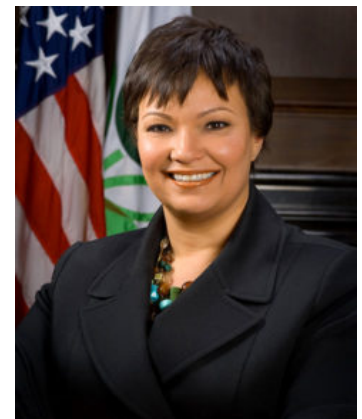
Abraham Lincoln Lewis

Lewis, who lived from 1865 until 1947, was a successful businessman who founded the Afro-American Life Insurance Company and realized great financial success throughout his life. With his wealth, he created many recreational and social opportunities for African Americans in the still-segregated south.

One of these ambitious projects was American Beach, which remains on the National Register to this day. Many beaches in Florida did not allow cultural mixing and were closed to African Americans. But more than simply creating a beach that was open to Black Americans, Lewis created an entire beachfront community. American Beach thrived for several decades as a safe and affordable vacation spot for Black families, and the beachfront was preserved thanks to Lewis's philanthropy.

Lisa Perez Jackson

Jackson is the first African American woman to be named as the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), a position she held during the Obama administration from 2009 until 2013. Her accomplishments during this period were significant, including the development of tighter standards for vehicle fuel efficiency and overseeing the US response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Jackson champions that, for the black community, conservation and environmental concerns are linked to civil rights issues more often than not.



President Barack Obama

President Obama, as our nation's first black President, had the power to protect vast swaths of land and did exactly that. His additions to national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and national monuments exceed even what Teddy Roosevelt—the founder of the National Parks system—allocated.

Obama created two very large marine reserves and the second largest desert reserve on the planet. He preserved the most natural habitats of any US president, including marine ecosystems and over four million acres of land, for a total of 22 new parks in the National Park system under his administration.

Obama also oversaw the EPA where Lisa Perez Jackson led the way, so he shares in some of the gains made there. Additionally, he continued and expanded anti-poaching efforts begun under Clinton and Bush.



An Enduring Legacy of Black Conservationism

The number of Black Americans who have broken barriers to contribute to conservation is far greater than this list. There are unsung heroes and lesser-known leaders in communities all across the nation who are working to create a future where people and nature thrive.