



Central and Eastern Europeans and Climate Change

We Central and Eastern Europeans have for many centuries lived with an awareness of, and in partnership with, the environment around us. Sustainable agriculture and livestock rearing, responsible forestry, and ancient handicrafts and rituals that connect us to the land and natural world are deeply embedded in our cultures.

Roma/Gypsy people have from the earliest times been an integral part of Central and Eastern European societies. The total number of Roma in Europe is estimated at 10 million. Roughly half of them (5 million) live in Central Eastern and South Eastern European countries. Roma are the only truly transnational people living in Europe. They have shared valuable knowledge—particularly about building, metalwork, medicine, connecting with animals, and nurturing communities and relationships—and their work has built much of our common civilizations. Because

Roma did not “move with the times” in the same way as the mainstream, they have often preserved the culture and science of the majority populations. In this way, Roma became the guardians of forgotten values of the dominant people, and then these values were “re-gifted” to the dominant people as music, dance, and connection to the land.

Along with Romani/Gypsy people, all Central and Eastern Europeans have ancient skills, knowledge, and ways of organizing communities that could make a big difference to environmental movements. But this knowledge and these abilities have often been ignored, rejected, and overtaken by dominant economies and cultures.

Central and Eastern Europeans have been oppressed by a number of large empires that surround us. Our traditional communities have been replaced by



societies modeled on global capitalism— societies based on greed, corruption, individualism, nationalism, xenophobia, antigypsyism,* and racism. This has

* Antigypsyism is the racism directed at Roma, Gypsy, and Sinti people; Travellers; and others who are stigmatized as “gypsies” in the public imagination. It is often used in a narrow sense to indicate anti-Roma attitudes, or negative stereotypes or hate speech in the public sphere. However, it includes a much wider spectrum of discriminatory practices, such as not valuing the contribution these groups make to society and to climate change activism.

divided us from each other and also from the majority of the world’s population (Indigenous people and people of African, Asian, and Latin American heritage), who are at the forefront of fighting against climate change.

All this has limited the effectiveness of the environmental movements in Central and Eastern Europe. It has kept us from challenging the degradation of our natural environments—the contaminated



Sustaining All Life (SAL) is an international grassroots organization working to end the climate emergency within the context of ending all divisions among people. *United to End Racism* (UER) consists of a wide diversity of people in many different countries, who are dedicated to eliminating racism in the world and supporting the efforts of all other groups with this goal. UER and SAL are projects of and use the tools of Re-evaluation Counseling. Re-evaluation Counseling (RC) is a well-defined theory and practice that helps people of all ages and backgrounds exchange effective help with each other in order to free themselves from emotional harm resulting from oppression and other hurts. By taking turns listening to each other and encouraging the release of painful emotions, people can heal old hurts and become better able to think, to speak out, and to organize and lead others in building a world in which human beings and other life forms are valued and the environment is restored and preserved. Re-evaluation Counseling currently exists in 95 countries.



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soil, polluted water, and destruction of wildlife habitat—and made us collude with extensive coal, gas, and mineral mining. Roma are the most marginalized communities. They are the most affected by the policies that do not place communities, nature, and wellbeing in the center of development, but instead concentrate on economic growth. Roma are also left out of development, although they use the least resources.

But still the situation is hopeful. It is possible to limit the effects of climate change and completely restore the environment.

Big problems require big solutions, and the people of Central and Eastern Europe can play a key role in finding solutions that leave no human behind; that do not pit one group against another; that do not allow one group to benefit by taking advantage of another; that focus on collaboration, not division; that unify more and more people; and that focus on decisive actions to sustain all life.

We also need to become aware of where we may have “benefited” from oppressive

policies and recover from the confusions that have led us to not challenge them.

Sustaining All Life offers tools—for example, telling our personal stories—that can help us heal from how we have been affected by

- war and other violence;
- antigypsyism and other oppressions;
- economic crises;
- poverty;
- reliance on fossil fuel;
- divisive policies of narrow nationalism and xenophobia.

With healing comes clearer thinking and more accurate perspectives that make it possible to build a united environmental movement and create big solutions. As a united force, the people of Central and Eastern Europe, including Romani/Gypsy people, can play a key role in sustaining all life on Earth.





The Work of *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism*

It is possible to limit the effects of human-caused climate change and restore the environment—if we make some very large changes in our economy, our energy systems, and our lives in the next five to ten years. *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* believe the environmental crisis can be resolved only if we simultaneously address racism, genocide of Indigenous peoples, classism, sexism, and other oppressions. The impact of environmental destruction and climate change falls most heavily on the groups targeted by these oppressions, and on other vulnerable populations (including populations of people who are elderly, disabled, and very young). Making the changes needed will require a massive movement, spanning the globe, of people of every background fighting the effects of climate change, racism, and exploitation.

In *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* we believe that the barriers to building a sufficiently large and powerful movement include (1) longstanding divisions (usually caused by oppression, and especially racism and classism) between nations and between groups of people, (2) widespread feelings that it's too late and any actions will be ineffective, (3) denial of or failure to engage with the climate emergency, and (4) difficulties in effectively addressing the connections between the environmental crisis and the failures of our economic system. *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* work to address these and other issues.

The role of oppression

The economic and political forms of our societies demand growth and profit with little regard for people, other life forms, or the earth. This results in exploitation and oppression. Oppressions (such as racism, classism, sexism, and the oppression of young people) target everyone, inflicting tremendous injustices, limiting access to resources, and damaging the lives of billions of people. Once targeted by oppression, we tend to act toward others in ways that repeat the hurts that we have experienced. Much of the mental and emotional harm we experience is the result of this passing on of hurt. Our experience is that though people are vulnerable

to acting in oppressive ways, oppressive behavior is not inherent, but arises only when a person has been hurt emotionally. Oppressive societies manipulate this vulnerability to establish and maintain economic exploitation.

The importance of healing personal harm

The mental and emotional harm done to us by oppression and other hurtful experiences interferes with our ability to think clearly and sets groups of people against each other. This makes it difficult for us to think about and respond effectively to the climate emergency.

Healing from the hurts that help to hold oppression in place and lead to other harmful behavior is neither quick nor easy work. Many of us resist this personal healing work. We may have survived by numbing ourselves to the harm done to us by oppression. Some of us assume that we will never be free of this harm. In *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* we have learned that it is possible to free ourselves from these hurts and address barriers to effective organizing. We can heal from hurtful experiences if someone listens to us attentively and allows and encourages us to release the grief, fear, and other painful emotions. This happens by means of our natural healing processes—talking, crying, trembling, expressing anger, and laughing.

By releasing emotional pain in a supportive network, we can stay united, hopeful, thoughtful, joyful, and committed. This in turn strengthens us in building our movements to stop the effects of climate change and racism.



For more information, see:

www.sustainingalllife.org or www.unitedtoendracism.org
or **write:** Sustaining All Life/United to End Racism
19370 Firlands Way N, Shoreline, WA 98133-3925 USA
E-mail: sal@rc.org Tel.: +1-206-284-0311