



## Including Disabled People in the Environmental Movement

*Sustaining All Life* wants and needs everyone, in particular, disabled people.\* This is not about doing a favor—all perspectives and voices are needed as we work to sustain all life.

People with disabilities comprise ten to fifteen percent of the global population. Members of this group are found in all sub-populations. It is likely that there will be more and more disabled people with the increasing effects of climate change.

Disabled people are a resilient bunch. They are creative—they have often had to do things a bit differently. They have much to offer. They are excluded primarily because of discriminatory attitudes, not because of their health problems or physical or emotional

limitations. Those unfamiliar with disability sometimes fear disabled people, a reaction often based in ancient superstitions and irrational fears of contagion.

The United Nations, Red Cross, and other organizations often use the term “people with special needs.” This generalization does not acknowledge and address people’s *specific* circumstances—for example, their vision, hearing, mobility, developmental disability, possible chronic illness, or gender and ethnicity. There can be an attitude of “they need too much,” with triage as the result. Another damaging myth is “the professionals know best.” The disability community’s slogan is “nothing about us without us!”

Disabled people have organized and fought for progressive policies. For example, the United Nations Convention

\* We define disability oppression (sometimes called *ableism*) as prejudice against people with disabilities. Disabled people are assumed to be inferior, burdensome, unskilled, asexual; and unworthy of rights to, access to, and inclusion in mainstream society.



on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) got a number of countries and communities to institute not only disabled people's rights to medical and rehabilitation services, but also equal access to education, employment, transportation, and legal/social support.

People with disabilities are uniquely impacted by climate change. For example, in a disaster they can be neglected or even left to die.

Policy-makers are beginning to include their voices but still don't understand what disabled people actually need to survive in environmentally compromised circumstances. In reality we can think and care about everyone equally well.

### **Connecting with Disabled People**

Yes, there are things to learn in order to have disabled people in our lives. But it isn't about following rules or "being nice." It's about making friends. It is



*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.



[SustainingAllLife.org](http://SustainingAllLife.org)



[UnitedToEndRacism.org](http://UnitedToEndRacism.org)



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about connecting. It's about thinking flexibly. The best way to learn about accessibility is by having relationships with disabled people (not by acting as "do-gooders" and "helping *them*.") Children in integrated school settings can be good models—they often easily include their disabled peers. It's possible for us all to play together, have fun, and figure things out as we go.

You can find "disability awareness tips" on the Internet. Browse for "access and accommodation," "disability inclusion," "local sign language interpreters." There are helpful sites in hundreds of languages. Examples of "tips" are as follows:

- *Ask first* if a disabled person needs assistance. Don't grab the arm of a visually impaired person, or push someone's wheelchair without asking. *Ask for and listen to* instructions. Directly face a hearing-impaired person when speaking. When possible, include amplification at events.
- *Don't be afraid of "making mistakes."* Don't worry about saying the wrong

thing or using the wrong words. Relax—it's okay to connect and learn as we go.

- Disabled people will willingly teach us about their needs. They can help us become good allies.

In *Sustaining All Life* we work to (1) create awareness of the emotional damage that interferes with thinking about and acting to end environmental degradation, and (2) undo this damage on an individual basis.

We offer mutual support, engaged listening, and a process that frees people from the effects of oppression and other hurts. Using this process allows people to think more clearly about the environmental crisis, build and strengthen alliances, and enjoy working together to set the world right. It helps them build courage and stamina and the confidence that we can create a just, sustainable future for everyone.





## 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](http://www.sustainingalllife.org) or [www.unitedtoendracism.org](http://www.unitedtoendracism.org)  
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