

Petrice Jones (00:03):

What's up and welcome to 52 Hertz: The Lonely Whale Podcast. I'm your host, Petrice Jones. Twice a week I chat with the entrepreneurs, activists, and youth leaders going against the current to rethink our approach to plastics and environmentalism on a global scale. My guest today is Wanjiku Gatheru, better known as Wawa, an environmental justice advocate, a recent graduate of the University of Connecticut, and the first black person in history to receive the Rhodes, Truman, and Udall Scholarship. Wawa advocates for disrupting the status quo within the environmental group and calling for the movement to center experiences and expertise of the frontline people of color, especially black and brown people who have historically been left out. We'll be discussing food insecurity, environmental literacy, and how the ratio of BIPOC voices in the environmental community perpetuates racism and undermines the very goals environmentalists are trying to achieve.

Petrice Jones (00:53):

I'm your host, Petrice Jones. Welcome to 52 Hertz: The Lonely Whale Podcast. But first, some good news from around the reef. Now we all know that knowledge is power, but what we don't always consider is how access to knowledge is controlled and how that can be a form of oppression. And this is unfortunately the case when it comes to environmental studies. It's a field often inaccessible to BIPOC communities. But the good news is we're finally waking up to face these challenges. Journals like Nature are voicing the need for the enterprise of science to end anti-black practices in research. Organizations like The Slow Factory are launching equity centered, open education initiative taught by and for black, brown, indigenous and minority ethnic communities. Conservation groups like the National Wildlife Federation pledged to dedicate part of their fellowship and intern programs to young biologists of color, and programs like The Lonely Whale's very own Ocean Heroes Bootcamp founded in 2018 with the goal to empower youth to take action for our oceans has provided free in-depth training to over 900 youth from diverse backgrounds, spanning 40 plus countries, and representing all 24 time zones.

Petrice Jones (02:00):

Initiatives like these are a small but positive start because when people who have been traditionally excluded from this space become included, they can actually speak for themselves and lead us towards greater levels of environmental justice. And that's some bloody good news.

Petrice Jones (02:21):

Hello everybody, and welcome to 52 Hertz: The Lonely Whale Podcast. I'm your host, Petrice Jones. My guest is Wanjiku Gatheru, but her friends call her Wawa. So Wawa, welcome to 52 Hertz.

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (02:32):

Thank you so much.

Petrice Jones (02:34):

I would love to just hear about you and hear a little bit of your history. And why did you get involved with environmental justice? Where did this start?

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (02:42):

Yeah, so currently I'm 21, and I got into environmental work I'd say a bit untraditionally, but maybe in the more traditional route for other black and brown people. I see that to mean that I didn't really see myself as being an environmentalist, nor did I ever conceptualize the environmental movement as a place that I could go to or even call home. So I grew up in the quiet corner of Connecticut, and my family is a first-generation American family. My siblings and I were born in the States, while my parents actually immigrated here from Kenya. And the quiet corner is known for being a really, really beautiful part of Connecticut and being the last quote unquote forested area. So I grew up surrounded by wilderness in nature. Even though I had that experience, I still never saw myself in environmentalism because the people that were working at conventional environmental workspaces, the ways that people talked about environmentalism and the narratives that were attached to it didn't really mirror that of my own or those in my family.

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (03:52):

I always cared about the environment, but I never saw myself as being a part of it until I took an environmental science course in high school in my junior year. And we had an environmental justice chapter. And in that chapter, my teacher so eloquently started making those connections between race, gender, environmental justice. And I began to make those connections. And I was beginning to understand that today in the United States, race is the number one indicator of one's proximity to a toxic waste plant. I was really frustrated with that knowledge because it had never been expressed to me. So I kind of went into my college career wanting to make that a conversation, wanting to ensure that other black people knew how important it was for us to demand a space in the environmental movement, but also ensure that the environmental movement was and continues to be a space that is inclusive and really centers our lived experiences in the way that's really important. So that's really been my entryway and how I want to continue to occupy this movement.

Petrice Jones (04:58):

So do you feel as though that you're kind of going against the current now? You're disrupting the status quo by being versed in this area. Are you feeling as though this is something that needs to be reflected more and more through the system and more people like you to perpetuate the idea that black people in nature is important?

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (05:15):

Yeah. I think it's so important. I've been told this to my face in environmental spaces and rec places. "Well, black people just don't care about the environment." And I'm like, "Everyone cares about the environment." I'd have to take a step back and be like, "Okay, wait. I am the only black person in this space. I am the only person of color in this room. Why is that? And why is it that data tells you this?"

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (05:37):

But also my lived experiences tell me that we talk about environmental attitudes all the time. You care about clean air, clean water, culturally competent, healthy food every single day of our lives. We know that's essential to our experiences, yet when it's transferred into our representation and environmental decision-making, we simply aren't there. So what I'm really excited about in this present moment that I hope isn't a moment, is a fundamental change in our movement, is that we begin to one, recognize that we exist. There are some of us in this movement. We may not be as visible, but we are here. We've been doing this work. We talk about this stuff all the time. And two, we need to be providing more platforms for us to be visible, which not only helps us as a movement and really reframing our narratives, but also helps especially, especially young BIPOC folks see that there is a place for them in the movement. And that's so crucial to ensuring that we can really create a climate future worth fighting for.

Petrice Jones (06:41):

Wow, that's incredible. And how's that going? Is that a frustrating process?

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (06:47):

I would say it's frustrating, but frustrating is one component of it. Somebody that I look to a lot for inspiration is a climate justice essayist that maybe y'all have heard of. Her name is Mary Annaïse Heglur. She essentially talks about her experience as a black woman in the environmental movement and writes about climate change in a way that made me feel like my climate story was valid. A lot of the frustration that I have from having to force my narrative into spaces isn't just out of anger. It's also out of love, and it's out of love for my family and friends that are black and brown. It's out of love for my ancestral homeland, but it's also out of love for myself and knowing that if there's a future that I have to fight for, it has to not only involve me but center me and maybe my future offspring.

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (07:37):

So I would say it's not just frustration, it's love and oftentimes anger that drives me to be in this space. I can't imagine a climate future that doesn't center black people. Seeing what that looks like when we have environmental decisions and laws that don't center black people, you can look at Katrina and see the way that race was an indicator of how people were prioritized and who was getting resources and just the very violently racist things that happened in the

aftermath. If that's what that looked like in 2006, I can only imagine what impending climate disaster will continue to look like, not only in the global North, but in the global South as well.

Petrice Jones (08:22):

And do you feel that through this process, you've grown in your numbers of the community of people that are becoming involved with this?

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (08:31):

I think it's grown and not just grown in terms of people explicitly calling themselves environmentalists or doing explicitly environmental work. It's the reframing, right? I never really called myself an environmentalist. I never claimed that until I was maybe 19. And I did that really intentionally. And that was through reframing what environmentalism looked like. I began to reframe who I considered to be a part of this movement to even begin with. So I often look not just at climate policies or climate scientists, it's looking at social movement leaders. It's looking at abolitionists that may not explicitly call themselves environmentalist, but listening to the words and verbiage that they're using, when you think about abolitionists conceptualizing what a just future looks like, that's the very language that is the basis of a just climate future. I've been getting a lot of inspiration from those untraditional routes, which has really broadened up how I think about who is in this movement.

Petrice Jones (09:33):

In that vein sort of magnifying the thing I'm looking at, the big picture, how as a whole is racism completely undermining the environmental movement? What is this history that has been deleted, that's kind of stopped us from getting to the place where we're engaging at the same rate as the predominantly white environmentalists?

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (09:53):

Yeah. I mean, I'd argue that racism and specifically white supremacy undermines progress period, but in the way that it operates in the environmental movement, it feels for me very, very scary. And I hope it's very scary for everyone, right? Because the environmental movement arguably is a movement that quite literally should involve every one and every being. The fact that racism specifically in the movement's history often goes unaddressed is really troubling. I've been seeing just in that five years this reckoning with this history of the fact that a lot of the founding fathers, Madison, Grant, John Muir, Thoreau, were white supremacists that had very racialized conceptions of nature and were creating definitions for wilderness and nature that preserved whiteness and excluded black people, brown people, indigenous people and anyone that didn't fit their conception of who was worth fighting for. The thing that I think needs to be done

more is not just reckoning with that history and verbally acknowledging it, but actually understanding how that history continues to inform the present and continues to exclude people of color. Making that transition is really important to making a truly inclusive movement.

Petrice Jones (11:18):

And how do you feel like we go about that?

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (11:21):

That's a million dollar question. I'm still trying to figure out what that would look like. This is me exposing myself as a history buff, but I think it begins with reassessing history. We think about the founding fathers of the environmental movement that are still memorialized in our scholarship, in our classes, in the very organizations that we consider to be the big green organizations of our movement. Yet there were a lot of other environmental leaders in history that one, we did recognize as environmental leaders, and two, were already conceptualizing nature and wilderness long before those founding fathers even interacted with the land. When we talk about the history, why doesn't it begin with the indigenous first nation folks that were already living on that land for thousands of years. It's not about erasing history. It's about really understanding that history has erased others. It's from reframing that history that you can really begin to have an equity lens moving forward, which will begin to answer that very question you just asked me.

Petrice Jones (12:34):

I totally agree that it's not just in this realm that we've deleted stories from all around the world because it derails a narrative that has been serving for a very small few. But you mentioned there's some people who you think haven't had the light shone on them the way other maybe white environmentalists have. Is there anyone in particular who you listen to who people should be looking to to get an ulterior perspective and broaden their thinking?

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (13:01):

Someone that I look up to as an historical figure and as someone that I believe is one of the founding mothers of the environmental movement is Harriet Tubman. And it was really, really great to see actually the Audubon Society release an article recently acknowledging and celebrating her as an environmental leader. Her ability and her expertise to really navigate the wilderness in the face of white violence against black and slave people, I mean, is absolutely environmental work that required the utmost skill and dedication to everything that environmentalism is and should aim to be.

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (13:40):

And I would say most of our social justice movement leaders of the Civil Rights Era, most of them were environmental leaders. Most of

them and their language actually crafted the inceptions of the environmental justice movement. So without the language say of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and him talking about a beloved community that is grounded in justice, there's no such thing as a climate future that isn't grounded in beloved community. I can make those arguments that anyone that has fought for black and brown lives has been an environmental justice activist and has been an environmental leader because the environment isn't just quote unquote, nature wilderness, but it's ourselves. It's our bodies. It's the places we eat, pray, sleep, it's everything. And excluding that is detrimental to our integrity as a movement, but our survival as well.

Petrice Jones (14:34):

I think that is the missing link. The idea of oneness and all these problems are inextricably interlinked. I want to take it back to you and your scholarships, particularly the most controversial one, which is the Rhodes Scholarship. I want to know what made you decide, because I'm sure you thought about it very long and hard to decide to apply and to accept the Rhodes Scholarship, knowing the Cecil Rhodes was notoriously quite a racist colonialist.

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (15:00):

Yeah. First, thank you for asking me that. Oftentimes I think people hear the Rhodes Scholarship and they're like, "Wow, that's great." And I'm like, "Yes, it was a really strenuous process. And I'm proud of myself."

Petrice Jones (15:13):

Right. I probably should have said that actually. Congratulations by the way. Congratulations.

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (15:20):

No, no, no, no worries, no. I think the question you just asked should be actually said first, because I don't think you can be a leader without reckoning with the histories of the very resources that you are choosing to tap into. I really struggled with this and I think I should continue to struggle with this. And I will. I don't believe with clear conscience you can begin to even think of applying to something like the Rhodes Scholarship without beginning to reckon with that legacy. For me, receiving the Rhodes Scholarship completely binds me to social justice activism and public service for the rest of my life. Choosing to gain from resources that were built upon blood money, I have made the choice to do what I can in my lifetime to reframe and reimagine a legacy. And that's really important to me. That reckoning isn't just something that I have to think about now. It's something that I should continue to be challenged about for the rest of my life. And that's just something I think everyone that receives the Rhodes Scholarship should be held to that standard.

Petrice Jones (16:29):

Do you feel as though you're maybe owed something from this, that the amount that Cecil Rhodes may have taken from many African communities, this is almost the least they could do is give a scholarship to a smart young black woman?

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (16:42):

At first, I thought that winning the Rhodes Scholarship was just a win as a black woman, in thinking that he's probably rolling in his grave, thinking that people are winning the award that he quite explicitly gave characteristics for who he envisioned as being the folks to have that scholarship. So I'll claim that. I'll take that as a win, but I think the people that should be most centered in that conversation are black South Africans. I am a black Kenyan American woman, and my family's history has been directly impacted by British colonialism, but not necessarily directly by Cecil Rhodes in the exact ways that black South Africans have. I think that's really important to remember as say the Rhodes Trust begins to reimagine what they can do to specifically empower the direct descendants of the folks that were disenfranchised in the inception of such awards or resources in the first place.

Petrice Jones (17:52):

I've heard you say a couple of times about talking about centering black experiences. What does it mean to center black experiences rather than explaining?

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (17:57):

Yes, that's a very important distinction. Right now, we're explaining a lot, especially black people explaining our experiences, microaggressions, macroaggressions, not just in the environmental movement, but generally, and how that impacts our ability to be leaders in such spaces. So many black and brown activists, that's what we're looking for. We want to just be centered instead of explaining, and being often the only ones in environmental spaces or workplaces, we often have to be the ones that are doing our standard work requirements, but also on top of that, explaining the error in our eraser, talking about why it's important to dismantle say toxic work cultures. It's simply being able to do environmental work without explaining why it's important to center black lived experiences, narratives, and expertise, and doing that will create the movement that we need.

Petrice Jones (18:59):

You wrote in your Vice article that virtue signaling is not enough. What's really needed for the environmental community is to own up to the slow violence that comes with our erasure.

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (19:12):

So when I was talking about virtue signaling, I was more so being cognizant of the way that I've seen a lot of big green organizations

and hearing in those spaces, "Hey, we really, really care about having a diverse and inclusive workplace." Yet in practice, I will be standing in those meetings and hearing a lot of disparaging comments about black and brown communities. So right now I'm seeing a lot of statements that say, "We hear you, we see you," and that kind of stuff. And that's really important. However, it's really hard for me to know whether or not this is virtue signaling or if this is actually a longstanding, longterm commitment to anti-racism work. And that's what I hope is going to happen, but I'm also informed by the path and I hope that I'm proven wrong. And when I think about slow violence, I think a lot of times people hear the term violence and they're like, "Well, point to me about people that are directly being harmed by not being centered in the environmental movement."

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (20:14):

And I can point to history. I can point to Katrina. I can point to the global South, but the slow violence that I'm talking about is the fact that it's going to be encompassing as we move forward, as climate disaster continues to intensify. And in virtually every corner of the world, I fear that if we have a movement that doesn't yet have the language of equity ingrained in its solutions, that its solutions are going to miss the fact that black and brown people right now are getting hurt first and worst by climate change. What do solutions look like that aren't cognizant of that fact? Disaster, violence, death, catastrophe, and that slow violence is not going to happen right now, but if we don't address this right now, it's going to happen eventually. And the impacts are going to be catastrophic.

Petrice Jones (21:05):

I think that's one of the things that gets left out. And when we talk about people who are going to be affected the most by this, especially on islands, it's going to be the people who are global South, and they're going to need help. They're going to go to the places where there's safety and security, which is where incomes, the higher racial tensions, and get out of our country and this kind of mentality that we already see today. So I think your answer was beautiful just in how we need to be tackling these problems now. I want to kind of ask you what you would say to someone who thinks that these problems aren't linked, someone who doesn't think that ocean conservation or another environmental issue has nothing to do with race or social justice. How do you bring those two together?

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (21:48):

I understand where they're coming from and the reasons why is because... No, I understand. I think one is being empathetic, right? I talk about this a lot. I think that climate work, environmental work, is the ultimate form of love. Not just self love, but love in general, not just love for yourself, but love for say Dr. King's beloved community, which encompasses everyone. So I understand why making connections that people's lived experiences haven't made for them, I

can understand why that's scary. What I would tell them is we don't have to reinvent the wheel. I think a lot of the fear comes from feeling overwhelmed that they have to start to make all these solutions and connect these dots that feel like there's nothing related between these things. Well, the dots are already made and the dots are already made often in people's essence. Audre Lorde once said, "We don't live single issue lives." So if you translate that very framing to a movement in general, the scales will begin to fall from your eyes. And that reframing is just so important.

Petrice Jones (22:57):

Right. So I think a key one of those is food insecurity and hunger. The sustenance of life has a key impact on climate change. What we eat matters for our future. So how do you see food insecurity as an environmental justice issue?

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (23:16):

The access to healthy culturally competent food, that is absolutely central to environmental justice work. And what's been a bit frustrating is that that connection isn't necessarily always made, not just in academic spaces, but I've been told by different professors and mentors, "Wawa, you got to choose. Are you interested in food insecurity or environmental justice?" And I'm just like, "What are we both not seeing here?" Because food I feel like is the most direct interaction we have with the physical environment. The fact that that connection isn't necessarily always understood is really troubling to me. So my experience in food insecurity work was at the University of Connecticut. While I was doing that work and hearing the stories and interviews that we were doing with families experiencing this, the very things we were seeing and identifying as indicators of food insecurity were the very conditions a lot of my close friends were dealing with at school.

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (24:18):

That the definition for food insecurity wasn't quote unquote, applicable to them, and that had very disastrous impacts, right? If the definition doesn't encompass the very communities experiencing it. So I ended up spending a lot of my college career researching this with a good friend of mine and founding the UConn Access to Food Effort where we launched the first assessment of food insecurity at any public institution of higher education in the state and saw that students were going through that. And in doing that, we define this as being an environmental justice issue. Like I said, the environment is the places we eat, sleep, pray, all of that. A college campus is absolutely an environment. So students aren't getting sustenance that they need from food, and healthy and culturally competent food. Is that not an environmental injustice issue and should it not be framed as such?

Petrice Jones (25:13):

So what you're saying is essentially the issue of food insecurity as a whole is just far more diverse than maybe statistics and studies are leading us to believe.

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (25:23):
Absolutely.

Petrice Jones (25:24):
So I kind of want to talk about environmental literacy and how it's not part of the current curriculum and what your perception of that is? And firstly, what is environmental literacy to you?

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (25:37):
Fundamentally, I think it's just ensuring that our education system is equipping the next generation of leaders with the verbiage to talk about environmental issues, because you need that vocabulary to even have the ability to craft the language of solutions. If you don't have the words, you can't do that. And that's really what's important, but environmental literacy must center equity.

Petrice Jones (26:06):
And do you feel that there should be a fundamental thing that everybody learns from the get go?

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (26:10):
Oh, absolutely. Myself with several other student leaders, we were able to be a part of this push to actually integrate environmental literacy within our general education requirements. That should be done everywhere. And it has been done elsewhere. I mean, Italy, I believe last year integrated climate change education within-

Petrice Jones (26:34):
I heard about that.

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (26:34):
Yeah, within the education system. And that's absolutely central. When we know that climate change is our greatest existential threat, we need to ensure that young people have the vocabulary to talk about it, but create solutions.

Petrice Jones (26:52):
Is there any focal points that you advocated for specifically in your time at the University of Connecticut? What did you think should be taught and learned?

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (27:01):
I mean, I studied environmental studies, so my entire degree was centered around environmentalism and environmental justice. I had that privilege. However, there are so many other fields that will go their entire college career without having that exposure. They're business

students, nursing students, students that are going to go on to be lawyers and doctors, and really anyone, they're going to be going into these fields that has absolutely no vocabulary or understanding of environmentalism, climate change, any of it. That was very troubling to me because climate change is and will continue to impact every part of our lives. And it shouldn't just be the quote unquote environmentalists that have the ability to potentially create these solutions. But everyone should have that ability.

Petrice Jones (27:57):

Wawa, I cannot tell you how much I've enjoyed hearing you speak your mind and your heart. So thank you so much for being on 52 Hertz. It's been a real pleasure.

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (28:08):

It was such a pleasure. Thank you so much.

Petrice Jones (28:11):

Hey, listeners, just before you go, here's a quick ocean saving tip for you from our guest.

Wanjiku (Wawa) Gatheru (28:16):

So many different black women, girls, and fems from really all around the country were just messaging me and saying, "Hey, your story really resonated with me. I feel so alone in my classes and my workplaces in this movement. Do you have any tips?" So some friends and I have actually created this new organization called Black Girl Environmentalist. We're on Instagram, and that's going to be a platform that we're creating for and by us to really center our experiences and expertise as current and future leaders. So I would say go follow Black Girl Environmentalist and stay tuned to the things that we have coming up.

Petrice Jones (28:52):

52 Hertz is a podcast from Lonely Whale. Our show is produced by Emma Riley and Mindy Ramaker, with writing from Kyrsten Stringer and audio engineering by James Riley. Special thanks to Young Hero, Emmy Kane, Kendall Starkman, and Danny Witte. Subscribe to 52 Hertz wherever you get your podcasts. I've been your host, Petrice Jones. Thanks for listening. Until next time, tune in to 52 Hertz and tune out plastic.