

An Environmental Justice Analysis of Protected Areas in Connecticut

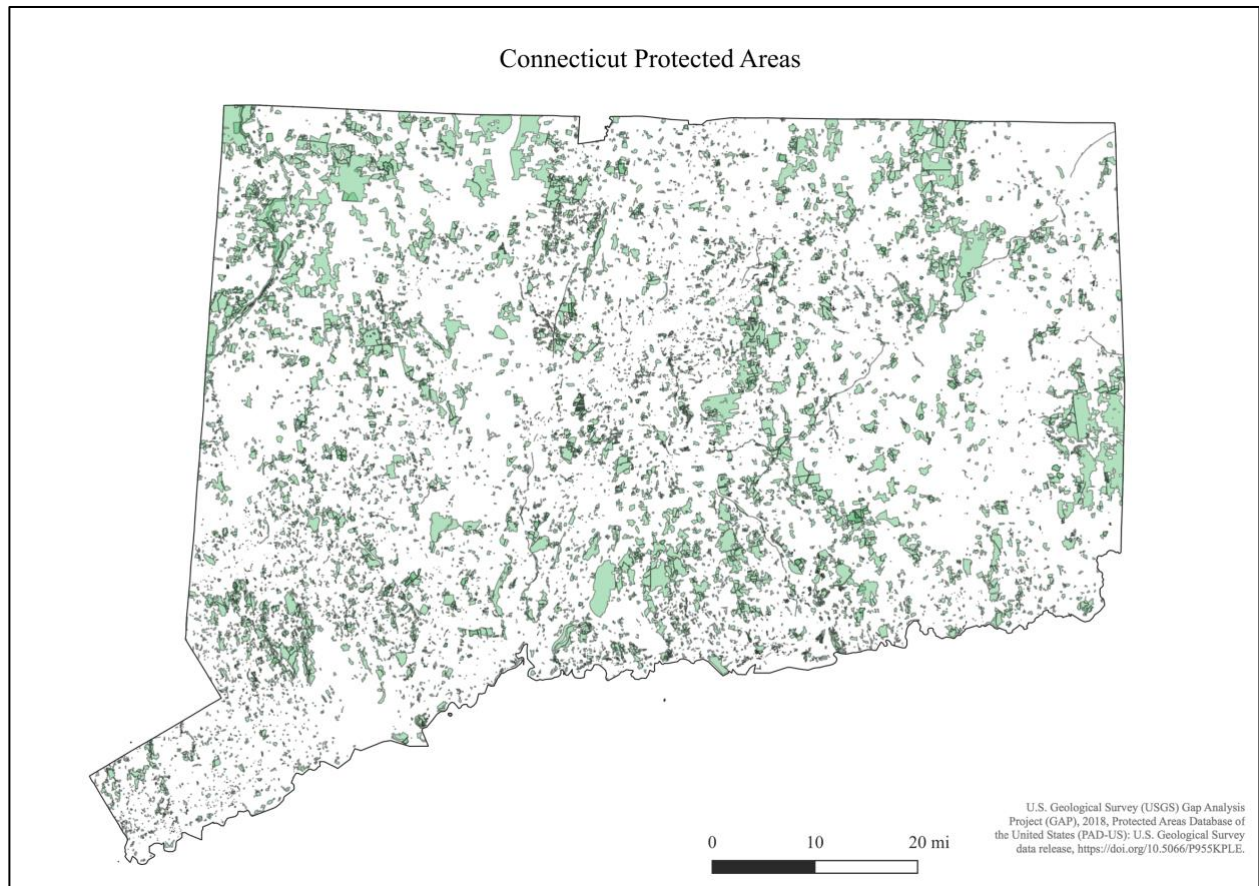


Figure 1. All the protected areas of Connecticut, including fees, designations and easements, derived from the U.S. Geological Survey’s (USGS) Protected Areas Database.

Connecticut is 17.86% protected land, as derived from the USGS Protected Areas Database. With Connecticut’s proximity to New York City and its many suburban communities, in addition to urban communities such as Bridgeport and New Haven, this amount of protected land is impressive. With 13,095 different parcels of protected land, Connecticut’s natural landscape has been preserved by hundreds of different towns, land trusts, public and private organizations- representing a broad mindset of appreciation for protected lands among residents of Connecticut. Although 17.86% is far from the Wildlands & Woodlands Initiative’s goals of at least 70% of New England landscapes as forests by 2060¹, for a small state with over 3.5 million people, this is an accomplishment.

Although at face value, Connecticut has done an excellent job providing protected lands to its citizens, there are important questions to be asked about *who* has access to these protected lands, and *who* has the ability to benefit from the many ecosystem services provided by protected lands. These questions are motivated by critical race theory, with the mindset that if policies and

¹ Foster, David, et al. “Wildlands and Woodlands Farmlands and Communities Broadening the Vision for New England.” Harvard Forest, 2017.

actions are not explicitly anti-racist, their outcomes will be because of the prevalence of white supremacy, and its corresponding structural racism. A cogent example would be the Clean Air and Clean Water Act, both written with no attention to the uneven burdens faced by poor and minority groups in exposure to pollution.² Racism has always been part of the history (and present) of conservation, beginning with the fact that almost all preserved land was at one point or another stolen from indigenous Americans. The conservation community thus has a responsibility to enact explicitly anti-racist policies, or their efforts of preserving lands will have racist outcomes. This environmental justice analysis of protected lands in Connecticut seeks to answer these important questions, and identify areas that have been left out by Connecticut's conservation organizations.

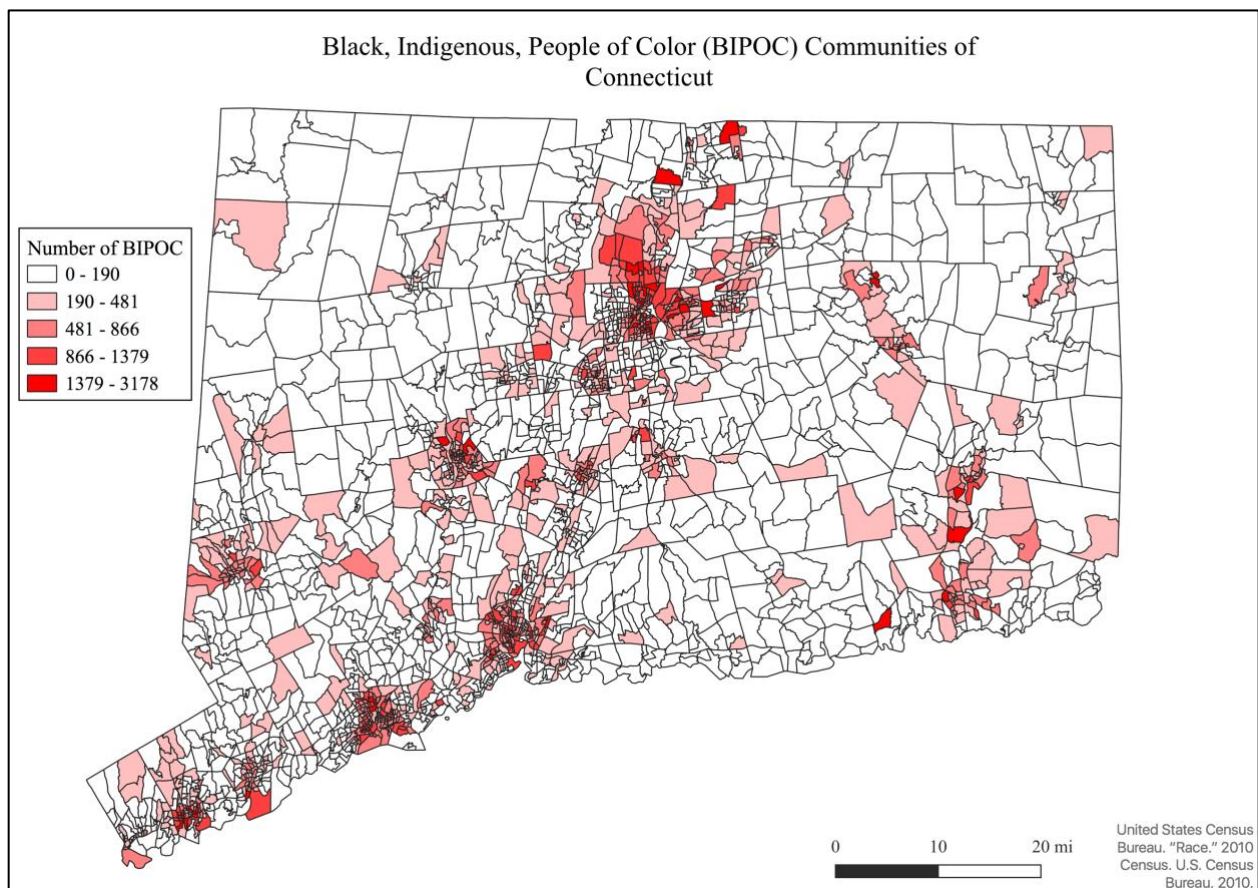


Figure 2. A map showing the Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities of Connecticut. The number of BIPOC is classified into five different groups by the natural breaks (Jenks) method, with communities represented by brighter reds as the number of BIPOC individuals increases.

² Purdy, Jedediah. "Environmentalism's Racist History." *The New Yorker*, August 13, 2015.

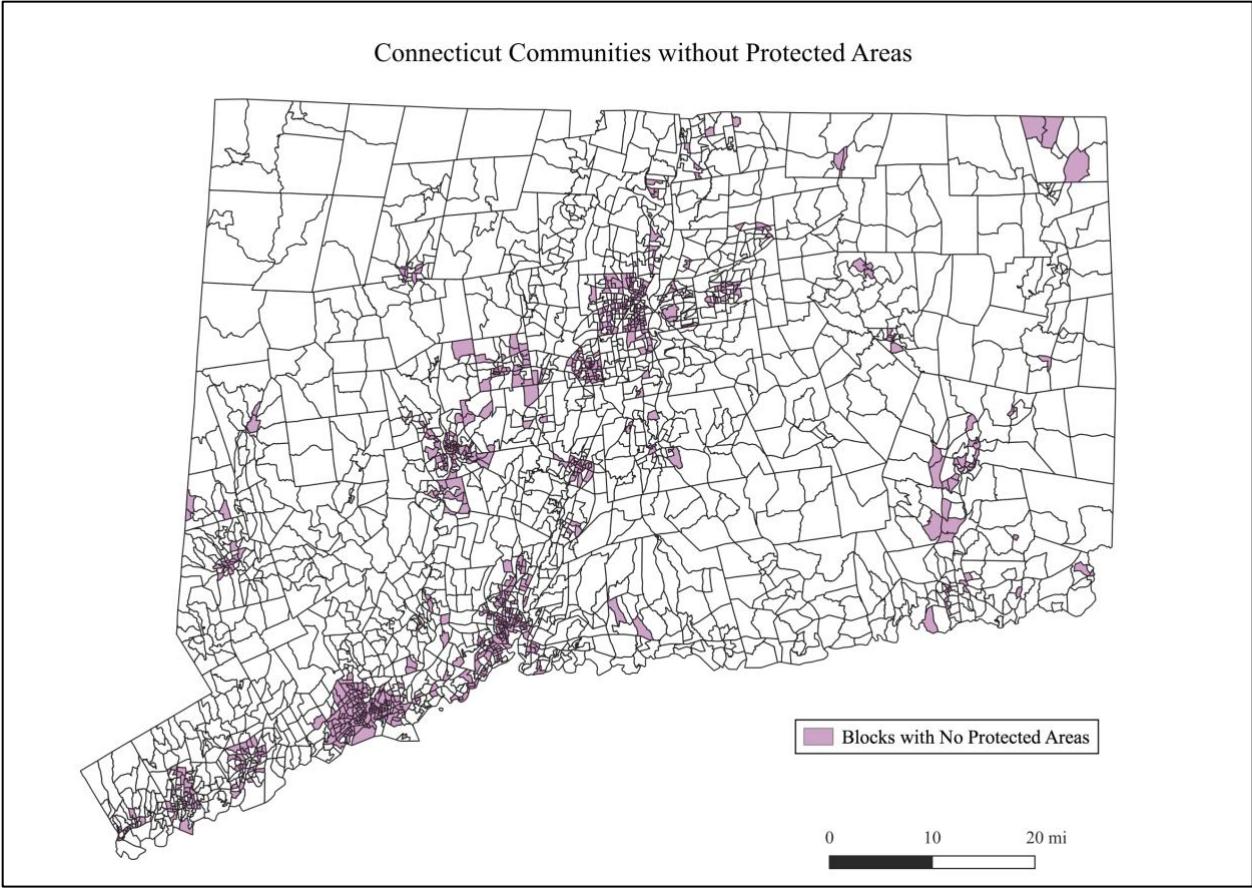


Figure 3. The purple areas of the map all represent Census Block Groups with no protected lands within them. There are a total of 774 communities without protected areas, out of 2581 block groups. Communities without protected lands are thus in the minority, making it important to understand *who* lives in these communities, and why they do not have access to protected lands.

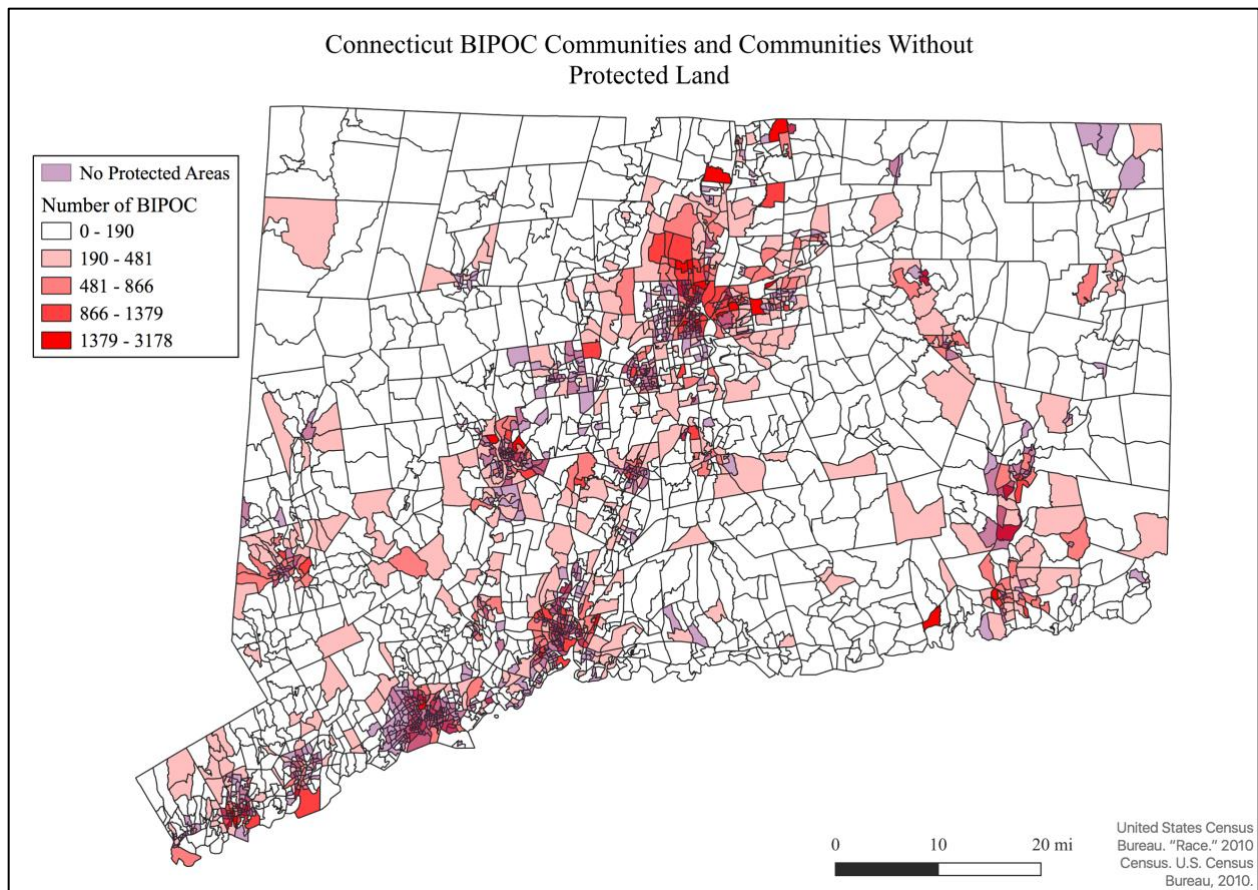


Figure 4. An overlap of BIPOC communities and communities without protected areas begins to show a pattern of communities of color without access to protected lands. The communities without protected lands, highlighted in purple, show overlap with communities of color by shading the red gradient darker.

Race	Total Population	% of Population	Total with Access	% with Access
White	2795926	78.85	2190743	78.35
Black	342764	9.66	161912	47.24
BIPOC	749911	21.15	398624	53.16
All	3545837	--	2589367	73.02

Figure 5. This table shows the results of a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) analysis of which communities in Connecticut have access to protected lands. A disparity based on race is clear, as although 73.02% of the population has access to protected lands, only 47.24% of the black population, and only 53.16% of the BIPOC population has access to lands, while 78.35% of the white population does. This table also includes general demographic information for Connecticut residents.

After performing a GIS (Geographic Information Systems) based analysis, a clear environmental injustice appeared based on race and who has access to protected areas. Access was determined by whether census block groups had any kind or size of protected land within them. A majority of block groups had access to protected lands, and the ones that did not, most

often, were communities of color. Of Connecticut's white population, 78.35% had access to protected lands, which is above the total access of Connecticut residents to protected land at 73.02%. These statistics are an example of white privilege, as being white increases one's likelihood of having access to protected lands. Only 47.24%, about half, of the black population of Connecticut has access to protected lands. Similarly, only 53.16%, about half, of the BIPOC population has access to protected lands. While the majority of white people in Connecticut, about three quarters, have access to protected lands, only half of BIPOC residents have access to protected areas. There is thus a clear disparity of who has access to protected lands based on race.

Although it is unlikely that conservation groups in Connecticut purposefully, and with maleficent intent, excluded communities of color from conservation goals and projects, the outcome is as such. The prevalence of preserved land in white communities is likely a result of systemic racism and housing discrimination, such as red-lining, which allowed white people to own their own land at higher rates while preventing BIPOC individuals from doing the same. This outcomes shows the importance of adopting explicitly anti-racist policies. Land trusts and conservation organizations must carefully study where they have missed the mark in preserving land in BIPOC communities within their areas of interest, and if their areas exclude BIPOC communities, those areas should be expanded to be more inclusive. One such area that has historically been excluded, but could easily be included, because of the resources, and prevalence of land trusts in Fairfield County, is Bridgeport, Connecticut.

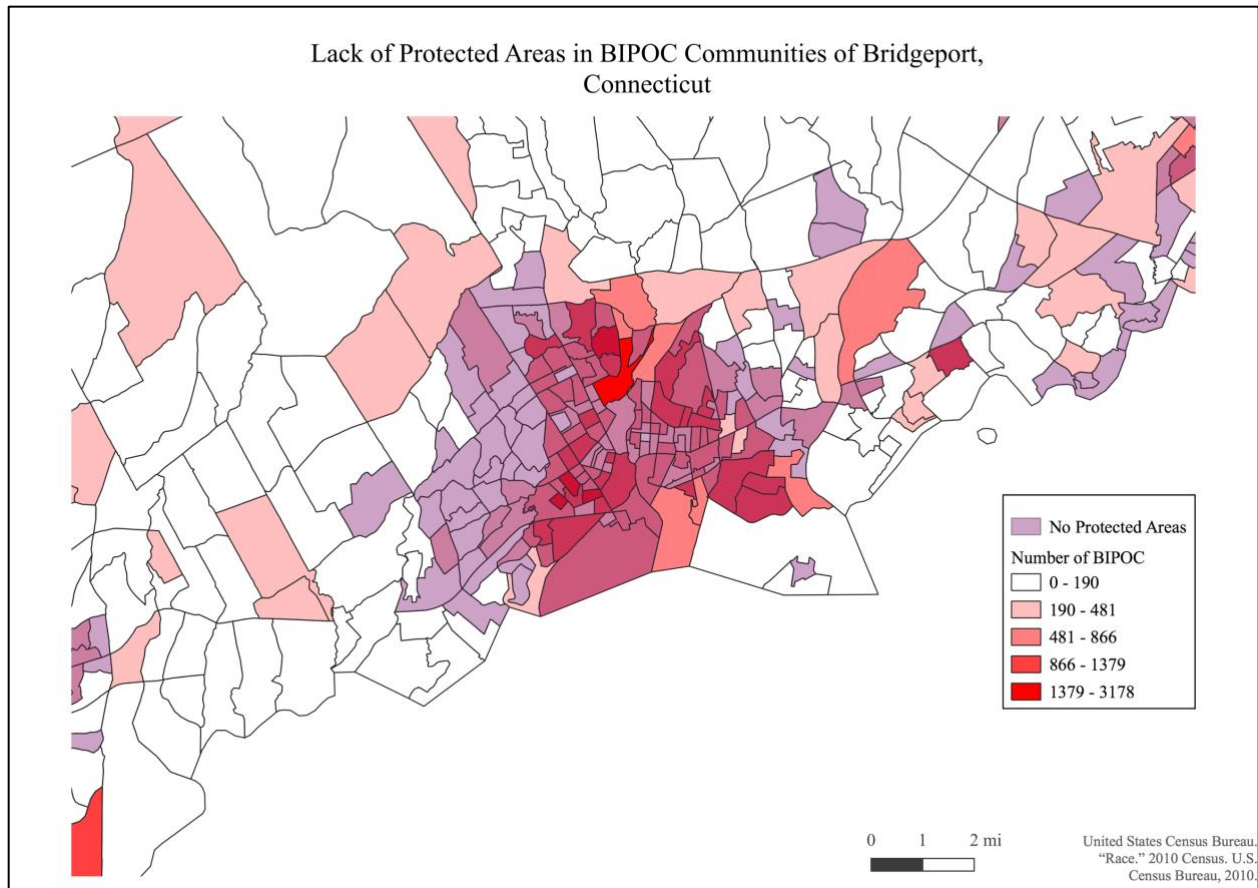


Figure 6. Bridgeport, Connecticut has a concentration of BIPOC communities, many of which lack access to protected areas. Bridgeport is also located in Fairfield County, known for its wealth and proximity to New York City, creating an opportunity for resources to be redistributed to resolve this environmental injustice.

There are over 20 different land trusts in Fairfield County, Connecticut,³ providing plenty of opportunity for engagement and cooperation with a project to preserve land, or to create a unique vision of open space, in the underserved areas of Bridgeport, Connecticut. Some land trusts, such as the Aspetuck Land Trust, and the Wildlife in Crisis Land Trust, have already worked across town lines and at the regional level, which position them for ready involvement in a project in Bridgeport. Fairfield County is also home to the Highstead Foundation, which has many accomplishments in leading Regional Conservation Partnerships and large landscape projects that advance regional conservation goals. There are thus many organizations with the resources, connections and experience to advocate for a project that partners with underrepresented communities in Bridgeport. Many land trusts, in light of this country's recognition that racism is nowhere near eradicated, and is currently prevalent in many spaces, have embarked on including Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice (DEIJ) into their goals and missions. Including underserved communities in projects to establish protected lands is thus a

³ "Fairfield County Land Trusts." Connecticut Land Conservation Council, 2018.
<http://www.ctconservation.org/landtrusts/region/Fairfield>.

natural extension of these goals, one which would ensure land trusts put their money where their mouth is, and go beyond “woke-washing” proposals that fail to induce real change in racial disparities.

There are also plenty of community organizations in Bridgeport that would be excellent partners and leaders in such a project. The Burroughs Center, for example, is a community organization focused on overcoming barriers to success with a focus on diverse and inclusive communities and community building.⁴ There are also two local chapters of the NAACP (National Association of the Advancement of Colored People) in Bridgeport, an organization with a history of environmental justice based projects.

Access initiatives by land trusts can go beyond sponsored group trips to already preserved land, and instead work with the communities themselves to create a unique vision for open space that is close to home (thereby also minimizing incidents of racism that can occur in more rural communities). One model is a cultural respect easement and agreement, which centers BIPOC voices on what access should look like.⁵ Many land trusts have new projects focusing on mitigating climate change, but if land trusts are to be truly anti-racist, and be part of the growing movement for climate justice, initiatives must focus beyond prioritizing the preservation of biodiverse species and large landscapes to include initiatives for environmental justice. A project to remedy the lack of access to preserved lands in Connecticut BIPOC communities is a necessary next step in DEI for land trusts and conservation organizations, as well as a next step for the human right to a clean environment and environmental justice.

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⁴ “Burroughs Center,” 2018. <https://burroughscenter.org/about-us/?v=f24485ae434a>.

⁵ Russell, Danielle. “The Power of Land: Race, Equity and Justice.” *Race, Equity and Justice: Lessons for Climate Resilience* (blog), June 18, 2020.

