

Amara Ifeji

Presentation at SVT's 2024 Emerald Forest Gala

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Good evening Everyone! My name is Amara Ifeji, and I am incredibly grateful to be here with you all today to share my story and some of the things I have learned through the environmental initiatives I lead. I cannot fully tell my story without sharing the most salient pieces of my identity that a 100-word bio cannot capture. So, I proudly share that I am Igbo, indigenous to the southeastern part of what is now Nigeria, where my ancestors have lived for thousands of years. I also hold community in what is now Maine and have a deep connection to the Penobscot River watershed on the unceded homelands of the Penobscot Nation. Lastly, I love fungi...more on that to come.

Before diving into my story, I invite you all to imagine with me. For those who feel called, go ahead and close your eyes. Take your mind to your favorite place in nature and imagine yourself completing an activity there. This may be skiing atop a mountain, soaking up some sun at the beach, or perhaps hiking your favorite Sudbury Valley Trustees-managed trail. Bring your attention to who is there with you? Maybe your partner or best friend? Who else is there with you that you may not know? A group of students, families, maybe even a solo adventurer. Lastly, take a moment to lean into how you are feeling as you engage with the outdoors. I invite you all to open your eyes and back into this space.

Without a show of hands, I am curious to know how many of you envisioned me, or someone who looks like me, completing the activity with you or even sharing space with you in the outdoors. I am going to go ahead and guess that not a lot of you did. Until a few years ago, I also did not see myself nor other black and people of color in my vision of the outdoors.

My story begins in Prince Georges County, MD, where my family moved after immigrating to the United States when I was 2. I grew up in the most loving multi-generational home, where not just my parents raised me, but my aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins cared and looked after me too. One of my favorite places growing up was this gigantic tree in the backyard of my house. I personally don't believe in a single, isolated experience as my critical juncture into the environmental movement. Instead, I believe that the cumulative power of my lived experiences brought me to this work. However, if I had to choose a few salient moments, I would say that an environmentalist was born under this tree because it was there that I sat, wondered, and watched.

I sat under the beautiful tree, wondered about the sounds, smells, and sights of the world around me, and watched in awe as it unfolded before my eyes. I often watched my grandfather, Papo, as he cultivated his relationship to the land. We didn't have much of a yard, but we had enough space for Papo to grow the most delicious assortment of corn, peppers, beans, squash, and so

much more that kept my family of 12 full and connected to our culture through food. Today, at nearly 83 years young, my grandfather still farms and embodies a land ethic of reciprocity and care.

However, when my curiosity led to me begin fostering my relationship with the outdoors, my family often cautioned me, “Amarachukwu, apuna n’ilo. Do not go outside.” Looking back, I recognize their fear as that of many black and POC folks, who view the outdoors as a place of historic and continued violence. Especially when I moved to Maine at nine, I never saw those who looked like me portrayed in the outdoors. Therefore, my view of the natural world was of privilege and exclusion, where I did not belong.

In high school, I found environmental science research, which presented an outlet where I felt safe and comfortable exploring my environmentalism. I was the basement-dwelling science experiment kid who, ironically, killed a whole lot of plants. Despite a not-so-green thumb, tending to these plants and their mycorrhizal fungal mutualisms compelled a deep appreciation for this plant-fungi duo. Fungi sought critical nutrients for the plants and even shared these nutrients with neighboring plants in need. This system embodied a community.

As an extrovert, I recognized a need to leave my basement to fully explore my environmental interconnectedness. Yet, studying these systems outdoors significantly differed from my previous experiences. While engaging outside, I was met with stares, confederate flags, and feeling ostracized in my rural Maine home. While I had many reasons to embrace fear, I welcomed the environment's duality as a beautiful space. I started small at my neighborhood park taking walks after school. There, I grew at ease listening to the sounds of nature surrounding me.

From there, I leaned into the lessons fungi taught me about the power of community. I coordinated community science outdoor learning experiences for fellow female-identifying students of color at my high school, who are historically underrepresented in the environmental spaces. Through this community, I fell in love with my local Penobscot Watershed as we sampled the river and streams nearly every week. Although I did not call myself one at the time, that was the start of my work in environmental educator.

During my senior year in high school, I began at fellowship with the Maine Environmental Education Association, the non-profit I currently work with. I leveraged my experience as an environmental educator to coordinate the Maine Environmental Changemakers network, where I led over 400 youth similarly committed to exploring their environmentalism. Many of us, people of color, faced barriers to access, but we braved spaces together: camping in Lincolnville woods, hiking Mount Megunticook, and paddling at Popham Beach. I experienced many firsts in community, which enhanced my bond with nature as I learned from and taught others.

As I led these efforts, I sought to bridge theory and praxis to draw from my undergraduate coursework to bring environmental education to scale for all students in Maine. Alongside a 25-person planning team, I served as the lead coordinator for Maine's first Climate Education Summit, a cross-sector convening that sought to understand climate literacy in Maine. In 2022, this research informed a grassroots campaign that I led alongside youth, educators, and environmental advocates across Maine. Our efforts culminated in a \$2 million climate education investment from the State Legislature, which provided funding to educators to equip them with the skills to ensure Maine students learn about our home's environmental beauty and challenges.

I underscore the lesson that fungi taught me in my basement all those years ago: the power of community. Building community is foundational to building a better world, a future of environmental stewardship, equity, and reciprocity. As one individual hoping to address environmental and social inequities in Maine, Nigeria, and beyond, I have learned that centering relationships is paramount. This work is hard and demanding, and I have faced imposter syndrome, fear, and tokenism in the often white-dominated environmental movement. However, my communities have been a place to celebrate, to grieve, and to grow.

Community does not mean a select few; it means everyone. To have everyone compelled toward building a more robust environmental future, everyone needs to be able to see themselves as part of the natural world because humans are inseparable from nature. Reflecting back on my story, I moved from environmental research, community science, environmental education, and now grassroots policy. However, it all began with a connection to the outdoors. Feeling connected to the natural world is the first step toward environmental stewardship and care. Therefore, we must ensure that everyone has access to and feels safe engaging in the outdoors.

As a land trust, ensuring equity in the outdoors might be through ensuring trail signs and maps are in languages represented in the community. Or perhaps partnering with local affinity groups like Maine's Department of Inland, Fisheries, and Wildlife did last month to host a PRIDE Outside event attended by hundreds. Or even ensuring that land acknowledgments are posted before trails begin to let folks know that the organization contends with the ongoing and deep histories of oppression and land theft. For individuals striving to do this work, it may be as simple as starting to criticize a lack of representation in the outdoor places you hold dear to you.

I am committed to shifting the narrative around the outdoors as a space for all and rewriting the single story about who belongs outside. I challenge you all to do the same in the ways I have mentioned and more in your communities and beyond. To close, I leave you all with the reminder that environmentalism does not have a face, nor does it look one way; we all have a right to the joy and liberatory power it brings. Thank you!