

WRITING ABOUT DISABLED PEOPLE & THE CLIMATE CRISIS

CONTEXT

Disability justice intersects with the climate crisis because [sustainability, justice, equity, and resilience are interconnected](#). The climate crisis will continue to have a major impact on the rights and the quality of life of disabled people, exacerbating longstanding inequity and mortality risks. Disabled people are at much [higher risk](#) from the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation but are left out of narratives and content about the climate crisis. Environmental solutions and policy can't afford to continue to exclude disabled people--storytelling can't either. Narratives should explore and consider why certain populations are made vulnerable by our ableist systems and policies and portray the realities that disabled people disproportionately experience from the climate crisis.

- [1 in 4 adults](#) (61 million) have a disability in the U.S., and about 1 billion people worldwide, or [15%](#) of the global population, experience some kind of disability.
- Around [14%](#) of disabled people in the U.S. have a mobility disability, experiencing difficulty

walking or climbing stairs. Mobility challenges can make it hard for people to prepare for extreme weather or to evacuate. For example, people who depend on electrically-powered mobility devices will have trouble getting around during power outages. The [digital divide](#) and [communication disabilities](#) also impact the ability to respond to climate crisis-fueled weather emergencies (e.g., if emergency communications are unavailable in accessible formats).

- Disabled people and older adults are [2 to 4 times more likely](#) to die or be seriously injured in a disaster--often due to the government's failed and inaccessible infrastructure, lack of preparation, and inadequate disaster response. For example, disabled people and older adults made up [77%](#) of Camp Fire victims in Paradise, California; nearly [50%](#) of Superstorm Sandy victims; and approximately [71%](#) of Hurricane Katrina victims.¹ When populations have to evacuate due to flooding, forest fire, or other extreme weather events,

1. Valerie Novack, Ph.D., "[Centering the Disability and Aging Communities in Federal Emergency Response Efforts](#)," Center for American Progress, June 16, 2020.

temporary housing or shelters are often inaccessible and do not meet the diverse needs of disabled people.

- Only 35 of the 192 nations that signed on to the [Paris agreement](#) mentioned disabled people in their climate pledges and plans; only 45 countries refer to people with disabilities in their national climate policies and adaptation measures.² Even when disabled people are mentioned, this is [not accompanied by concrete measures](#) to enhance their climate resilience or to include them in climate adaptation planning.
- According to [2020 U.S. Census data](#), there are 24 million Asian, 45.9 million Black, 62.1 million Latino, and [1.5 million](#) Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander people across the country. Predominantly AAPI, Black and Latino communities in the U.S. are consistently [exposed to higher levels of air pollution](#), and are [disproportionately impacted by climate change](#).
- Disabled [Black](#) and [Indigenous](#) people are at the frontlines of the climate crisis. Environmental racism, poverty, and disability are linked. Existing environmental racism and inequity creates disability outcomes. Where you live determines how you experience the climate crisis and its intensity. For example, areas already segregated by race and class are more likely to be exposed to high emissions, poor air quality, a lack of clean water

access, hotter temperatures, more flooding, and lack of governmental disaster support. Disabled people are disproportionately poor, Black, Indigenous, Latino/e/x, and migrant people who live in these areas. American Indians and Alaska Natives have the [highest rates of disabilities](#).

- Workers with a [disability earn 66 cents for every dollar](#) that non-disabled people earn. Disabled people experience poverty at more than [twice the rate](#) of non-disabled people. Disabled people are at heightened risk, especially Black, Indigenous, or of another racialized group. The world's poorest people [continue to experience](#) the most severe impacts of climate change through lost income, displacement, hunger, and [negative impacts on health](#).³
- Housing shortages and housing inequity disproportionately affect disabled people, especially racialized and poor disabled people. As housing costs skyrocket, homelessness is on the rise. Disabled individuals who are homeless are highly impacted by disasters related to the climate crisis due to lack of shelter and access to life-sustaining utilities like electricity and running water. Disabled people experience higher ["energy burdens,"](#) spending a large portion of household income on energy utilities. As a result, life-saving necessities like air conditioning during a [heatwave](#) aren't affordable to them. When shelters or

2. Fiona Harvey, "[Disabled People Being 'Systematically Ignored' on Climate Crisis, Says Study](#)," The Guardian, June 10, 2022.

3. Cara Schulte, "[People with Disabilities Needed in Fight Against Climate Change](#)," Human Rights Watch, May 28, 2020.

cooling centers are available during disasters or severe weather events, they are often inaccessible, lacking necessities that keep disabled people safe and alive. Some disabled people may not even have power or running water, like American Indian and Alaska Natives in some rural lands.

- Due to a lack of adequate government investments in life-sustaining home and community-based services ([HCBS](#)), disabled people are regularly [involuntarily institutionalized](#) during disasters, often putting them in greater danger and unable to return to their families and communities. For those who rely on the services of home care workers or family caregivers, travel restrictions and evacuation orders can make it difficult for disabled individuals to receive essential care. The gender identities and partnerships of disabled Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+ people aren't always respected in emergency housing and by institutions.
- The climate crisis and subsequent related disasters present particular risk factors for mortality among disabled people that are unaddressed by non-disabled people and governments. For example, increasingly prolonged and extreme heat waves can cause power outages making it difficult for people who take medication to properly store their life-sustaining medicines that need temperature control.
- Climate displacement and migration rates are rising as parts of the planet become increasingly unlivable, but disabled people are [often excluded](#) from emergency

preparedness, response, recovery efforts, safe climate migration, and other climate adaptation measures. For example, during climate-crisis-related disasters-- such as wildfires, floods, and subsequent power outages-- disabled people often evacuate without support and access to necessary medical equipment. In many instances, emergency information and services are not made accessible to disabled people.

- Climate change is a "[threat multiplier](#)," heightening social, political, and economic tensions and driving conflict globally, including all forms of gender-based violence such as domestic or intimate partner violence, human trafficking, and more. [Disabled women are more likely](#) to experience [domestic violence](#), [emotional abuse](#), and [sexual assault](#) than women without disabilities. Women with disabilities may also feel more isolated and unable to report the abuse, or they may depend on the abuser for their care. When [environmental degradation increases](#), [gender-based violence increases](#). [Climate change risks are higher](#) for [women and girls](#) who are Indigenous and Afro-descendent, older women, LGBTQIA+ people, migrant women, and those living in rural, remote, conflict and disaster-prone areas. Disabled women and girls existing at these intersections of oppression are especially vulnerable. Disabled people within Indigenous communities are especially vulnerable in cases of extreme weather events and natural disasters.

CURRENT FRAMING: ERASURE, HARMS & INACCURACY IN STORYTELLING

- In stories, disabled people's needs are not spotlighted in climate solutions. Consider who is left out of narrative worlds where the climate solutions presented may have unintended eco-ableist ripple effects. For example: "carbon footprint" reduction initiatives that limit heating or air conditioning use don't account for disabled people who need to control the temperature of their living spaces due to medical conditions; incentive programs that favor cycling or public transportation to cut emissions can be exclusionary if these modes of transportation remain inaccessible and inhospitable to many disabled people; "zero-waste" or "low impact lifestyles" aren't always accessible to poor, disabled people who have dietary restrictions or medical needs.
- Current storytelling emphasizes themes of individualism and consumerism as solutions to the climate crisis. Instead, focus on stories that feature collectivist and systemic change led by disabled people. Consider shifting focus in your storylines from climate crisis solutions like greenwashing, reducing personal carbon footprints, or straw bans toward disability-inclusive climate action. Disabled main characters can be shown leading their neighbors, local government officials and disaster workers through updating community emergency evacuation plans, like ensuring that all disaster communications are available in various formats for their neighbors who are D/deaf or that evacuation methods are suitable for wheelchair users. Storylines can show non-disabled and [disabled neighbors coming together](#) through mutual aid where infrastructure and governments have failed.
- Climate storytelling over represents the experiences of non-disabled white people. Climate change most impacts disabled people and heightens the effects of [existing systemic social inequities and barriers](#) including racism, ableism, sexism, socioeconomic disparities, etc. Black, Indigenous, and other racialized disabled people are most affected by the climate crisis and are frontline leaders of climate justice movements. Even narratives about youth climate activists often [exclude](#) communities and [leaders](#) who are [disabled](#), [Black](#), [Indigenous](#), and who are racialized people. Disabled people are the [best positioned](#) to create [innovative, disability-inclusive environmental solutions](#). Protagonists and other characters should reflect this reality.
- If disabled characters are present at all in climate narratives, the depictions aren't always well-balanced. Disabled characters are often in the background or treated as [collateral damage](#) in climate crisis or climate disaster storylines for shock value or sympathy.

WHAT'S NEEDED & NEW STORYLINES

- Write stories that show the realities of ableism, racism, class inequality and their impact on disabled people, especially in the context of the climate crisis, disasters, environmental remediation efforts and community organizing. Craft stories that accurately reflect a kind of climate movement work that is much more than a march or a protest—years of commitment, community-building, learning, and collective growth.
- “Solutions storytelling” helps raise awareness about exciting advances in sustainable living and offers agency to the viewer. Disabled climate activists and their communities lead and create more [inclusive, creative solutions to the climate crisis](#). “Indigenous leadership, knowledge, and innovation have been critical to protecting at-risk wildlife, fighting fossil fuels, transitioning to just and sustainable economies, countering destructive environmental rollbacks, and protecting some of the most carbon-rich places on earth.”⁴ A disabled character, especially disabled Black and Indigenous characters, and their peers discovering environmental solutions as citizens, workers, and community members in storylines can draw viewers to action.
- While showcasing climate apocalypse in projects is enticing, instead imagine

worlds where climate solutions and interventions are possible or even achieved. Storylines should explore the ways [climate adaptation](#) and resilience are happening right now, in our world. Show disabled characters, in the present and the future, living and thriving in communities with successful and accessible [drought-response strategies](#) and [green infrastructure](#).

- Though it's important to explore how environmental issues can create disability and put disabled people at greater risk, avoid showing disabled people only as “tragic,” victims of the climate crisis. Portray disabled characters as protagonists and leaders. Show their harrowing experiences with dignity, agency, and depth in your climate storylines.
- Avoid “inspiration porn” and depictions of disabled people as superheroes or angels. Create storylines that reflect disabled people’s agency and collectivist action in climate justice movements to [save lives and support their communities amid the climate crisis and related disasters](#).
- Don't overly rely on the one-dimensional “disabled villain” wherein a disabled character is morally bereft or vengeful, often due to anger over their disability. Avoid making disabled characters who are climate-crisis solvers, or eco-concerned people into terrorists, eco-

4. Jon Devine, Alison Kelly, Taryn Kiekow Heimer, Jade Nguyen, Helen O'Shea, Caroline Reiser, Garrett Rose, Jennifer Sherry, Jennifer Skene, and Zak Smith, “[Indigenous Leaders at the Frontlines of Environmental Injustice and Solutions](#),” NRDC, October 11, 2021.

fascists, and villains. The real “bad guys” in the climate story are those who try to profit from a destructive status quo that immensely harms life.

- Create more stories that connect humans with the rest of the living beings around them, showing the environment as something separate from us is part of the mindset that lead to climate crisis. Incorporate culturally appropriate Indigenous knowledge about living in harmony with all living beings into storylines. Indigenous people have always lived with traditional surroundings and as such have answers to the climate crisis others may not.
- Storytelling about the climate crisis and related infrastructure solutions must center on disability, racial and economic justice, and the needs of the most impacted communities. Avoid one-dimensional, “climate crusader”, “white savior,” or “non-disabled savior,” narratives of the non-disabled. Disabled organizers, especially those who are Indigenous, Black and poor, are most impacted and are long standing leaders in environmental justice movements and in creating solutions to the climate crisis. Spotlight their stories.
- Attribute climate disruption events to the burning of fossil fuels and show the increased burden it places on disabled people and their communities. It's not just a random super typhoon, deadly wildfire, 1,000-year flood, refugee crisis, killer heat wave, crop disease or drought – the disaster or terrible alteration is a product of global warming, caused by burning

fossil fuels, industrial farming, and deforestation. Connect the dots in your story, and it will help viewers see that we must decarbonize now to avoid things worsening.

- Create dynamic, hopeful climate storylines for disabled protagonists. Climate storylines don't have to be dystopian or a disaster story. Which future we choose is up to us now. The fight to make the choices that ensure a better future is heroic--an epic story of saving the world that happens in individual people, communities, companies, and nations. Disabled people are at the [forefront of climate justice action](#) and create creative solutions to the climate crisis.
- Avoid staging arguments between climate “believers” and “deniers.” Climate change is a scientifically observed fact based in thermodynamics, while climate denial is a fantasy. They are not two equal sides of a debate. The factual basis of global warming and its causes is as certain as gravity. Also, refrain from mocking climate denial. It only increases polarization and does nothing to persuade people. Stories about the climate crisis and solutions should center disabled people's experiences--especially those of Indigenous and Black disabled people and other racialized disabled people-- and should [rewrite the future](#), go [beyond the apocalypse](#). They should be accurate, empowering, reparative and imaginative.

TERMS

Ableism - Practices and beliefs that assign inferior value to those with developmental, emotional, physical/sensory, or psychiatric disabilities. Ableism is rooted in the assumption that disabled people need to be “fixed.” Examples of ableism include institutional discrimination (employment, housing); ableist language; inaccessible streets, buildings, and transportation; lack of or harmful media portrayals; bullying, isolation, and pity.

Climate adaptation - Adjustments in ecological, social, or economic systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli and their effects or impacts. It refers to changes in processes, practices, and structures to moderate potential damages or to benefit from opportunities associated with climate change. People and communities should develop climate adaptation solutions to [prepare for an already changing climate](#).

Climate change - Generally defined as a significant variation of average weather conditions—say, conditions becoming warmer, wetter, or drier—over several decades or more. It's the longer-term trend that differentiates climate change from natural weather variability.

Climate displacement and migration - Climate displacement is movement, in part due to climate-related disasters, both sudden and slow-onset disasters, that are either temporary or permanent, within countries or across borders. The climate crisis and displacement disproportionately impacts disabled, Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, [especially women](#).

Climate justice - Climate justice approaches the climate crisis through a human and civil rights lens and centers the belief that by working together we can create a better future for present and future generations, with the people and communities most impacted.

Disability - As defined by the CDC, disability is “any mental or physical condition that makes it “more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities” or “interact with the world around them...The diverse population includes people with mental illnesses, chronic health conditions, physical or visual impairments and others.”

Disability justice - A term coined by disabled, LGBTQ+ women of color of the Sins Invalid performance project that describes a framework and/or movement that traces ableism's connections to heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, racism, anti-Islamic beliefs, and capitalism, etc. and that centers the leadership of disabled people of color and of queer and gender non-conforming disabled people.

Eco-ableism - The failure and discrimination perpetuated by systems, decision-makers, and activists in solutions and environmental actions that make life more difficult and/or unlivable for disabled people.

Eco-anxiety - The American Psychology Association (APA) describes eco-anxiety as “the chronic fear of environmental cataclysm that comes from observing the seemingly irrevocable impact of climate change and the associated concern for one's future and that

of next generations". The APA considers that the internalization of the climate crisis can have psychological consequences of varying seriousness in some people.

[Eco-fascism](#) - Eco-fascism blames climate destruction and the "planet's demise," on overpopulation, immigration, and industrialization, yet leaves out things like colonialism and war. Solutions eco-fascism relies on are xenophobic, ableist, and racist. Eco-Fascists believe that the climate crisis is the direct product of already marginalized and displaced populations, especially minority groups, and ascribe to harmful "survival of the fittest" ideologies.

[Environmental justice](#) - Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people

regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

[Environmental racism](#) - Intentional or unintentional racial discrimination in environmental policy-making, enforcement of regulations and laws, and targeting of communities for the disposal of toxic waste and siting of polluting industries.

[Green washing](#) - Expressions of environmentalist concerns, especially as a cover for products, policies, or activities. It manifests as marketing a company, an organization, or an institution, policy to produce an environmentally friendly public image when, in practice, activities pollute the environment, are harmful, ineffective, or misleading.

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SP Thanks the Following for Their Consultation

