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Mustafa Santiago Ali on Healing America Through Social Justice

by Sandra Yeyati

Mustafa Santiago Ali has dedicated his career to fighting for environmental justice, public health, resource equity and political empowerment to uplift the most vulnerable communities in America. For 24 years, he served at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and is currently vice president of environmental justice, climate and community revitalization for the National Wildlife Federation. He is a renowned public speaker and has appeared on MSNBC, CNN, VICE TV, Black Entertainment Television, Democracy Now! and other networks.



of what people are asking for. Then we focus on getting engaged in the civic process—voting.

Dr. King said, “I cannot pass legislation to make you love me, but I can pass legislation to stop you from lynching me.” When we fast forward that to today, we can pass legislation that addresses social ills, disparities and other egregious

types of behaviors. We can also make sure that our organizations are representative of what America looks like—in our hiring practices and on our boards—and make sure that our philanthropic organizations are moving in the right direction where they are helping to fund and support folks who are doing this transformative work. It really is a holistic set of actions.

Does the Black Lives Matter movement feel different than other moments in our history?

Yes. This is a transformational moment. So many different types of folks are coming together in large numbers, not just in our country, but across the planet, saying that change has to happen and we have to eliminate systemic racism and discrimination. They want the 21st century to look like the 21st century, and not something from the 1950s or the 1940s or even the 1960s.

How can we keep the momentum going?

By bringing all kinds of different folks together, building authentic coalitions that are rooted in change, harvesting the energy of this moment and making sure that the right types of legislation—whether at the federal, state, county or local level—are reflective

How do you remain hopeful in light of America’s turbulent history?

I see many artists and entertainers who are getting engaged in an effective way, and they have the ability to reach so many folks. Even more critical are the thousands upon thousands of incredible young leaders who are pushing, willing to put their bodies on the line, creating their own organizations and investing their time to make real change happen.

I see people at the local and state level changing laws that have been entrenched for decades. I see organizations that would not normally see themselves in these types of conversations or actions saying, “You are right. I apologize for not being here sooner,

but we're going to do everything we can now to stand in solidarity with this change that's happening." My hope is anchored in the fact that people are already doing the work and we're seeing fruits from the seeds that people planted sometimes hundreds of years ago, but definitely decades ago.

What kind of justice are you fighting for?

We're fighting for housing, transportation, economic and public health justice, and of course, the environment.

Which vulnerable communities are you fighting for?

I fight for communities of color. I fight for lower-wealth white communities. I fight for indigenous brothers and sisters. And I fight for the planet. I know that disproportionately, these are the communities that are often unseen and unheard, and I know if we can give voice to those communities, then it will benefit everyone. Social justice gives us the opportunity to make America whole—to be stronger and better, as we become anchored in real justice. We have to be focused on moving our most vulnerable communities from surviving to thriving.

What is your contribution to the National Wildlife Federation?

I sat down with President Collin O'Mara to have real conversations about what a 21st-century organization and their 6 million members would look like. I thought that if I could get 10 or 20 percent of those members to embrace environmental justice and to stand in solidarity with folks, then that could help the movement and make real change happen. The National Wildlife Federation board has just approved a full environmental justice analysis of all of its programs, policies, activities and budgeting decisions. No other organization in our country does that, and it sends a clear message to all the other organizations that are out there that these are the types of things, you have to do to be a 21st-century organization.

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