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PARKS STEWARDSHIP FORUM

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CITATION

Henry, Cait, Evan Salcido, Lydia Kiewra, and Brendan Kane. 2020. Rediscovering our roots: Steps to increase accessibility to and acceptance of people of color in America's national parks. *Parks Stewardship Forum* 36(3): 489-493.

A DOI for this citation is available at: <https://escholarship.org/uc/psf>

Plastic Catch • Susan Schultz
porcelain and wood sculpture



Rediscovering our roots: Steps to increase accessibility to and acceptance of people of color in America’s national parks

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Papers from the 2020
George Wright Society Student Summit:
“Systemic threats to parks and protected areas”

Abstract

The United States’ history is marred by systemic oppression, even within parks and protected areas, including national parks. Major barriers for people of color to public lands include accessibility, welcomeness, and safety concerns. Although national parks are one of the nation’s greatest ideas, and while the National Park Service states that diversity and inclusion are priorities, it has not been wholly successful in creating meaningful change to reach these goals. This article examines some of the National Park Service’s efforts to diversify visitation demographics and offers recommendations on how to further increase and diversify visitors to the national park system. This is not intended to discredit the National Park Service, but rather to offer suggestions and context for ways it can remain relevant as our nation deals with times of uncertainty. Alleviating transportation constraints, providing adequate opportunities for non-white recreation and personal experiences, and transitioning from Eurocentric narratives within historical interpretation to local, minority-driven narratives are the main recommendations. The purpose of this article is to illuminate the vitality of accessibility and unbiased historical interpretation as means to increase diversity of visitation to national parks. As such, while this article focuses on the National Park Service, it is intended to benefit any public land-managing agency aiming to remain relevant to its constituents. Movement away from Eurocentric historical narratives and recreational activities is beneficial to all as a means to catalyze empathy and understanding for every American’s lived experience.

Keywords: national parks, protected areas, access, engagement, representation

Authors’ note

We are aware that we, as researchers, come from a position of power and privilege to offer these suggestions to the National Park Service, and acknowledge that we have not experienced and will not experience what African Americans and other people of color within the United States experience daily. We also want to acknowledge the limited resources available concerning the experiences of Asian Americans and other minorities on public lands, which has led to a lack of their perspectives in this piece. This is not to diminish the value of their experiences; rather, this is a call to action to bring these narratives forward.

Introduction

The system of national parks in the United States was established with the stated aim of conserving the country’s lands and histories to benefit America’s citizens in perpetuity. At least in theory, national parks remain one of the best ideas the United States has ever had. As stated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, “There is

nothing so American as our national parks.... The fundamental idea behind the parks ... is that the country belongs to the people, that it is in process of making for the enrichment of the lives of all of us” (National Park Service n.d.).

In practice, national parks were established by and managed for the exaltation and enjoyment of white Americans until the middle of the 20th century, with people of color (PoC) an afterthought at best. To acknowledge a history in which PoC have been unable to share in the national park experience is not to say that the system is irreparably broken—far from it. Rather, it is to say that within the shifting cultural and population trends of past and future decades lie both need and opportunity for the National Park Service (NPS) to implement minority-driven interpretive programs within the parks. The people of the United States are changing, and NPS must be willing to change along with them.

Access for all

The mission of NPS—preserving the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for both the current generation and future generations to enjoy, learn from, and be inspired by—requires that national parks be both accessible by and relevant to all American citizens. Unfortunately, the United States has a deep history of systemic oppression, and the resulting cultural inertia plays a hefty role in modern park visitation disparities between whites and PoC. Dominant, heavily Eurocentric racial narratives helped create NPS; early national parks were created by and managed for an upper-middle-class, white, and predominantly male audience (Theriault and Mowatt 2018). Even today, national parks remain utilized largely by white citizens, with PoC tending to have lower levels of knowledge about them and to be under-represented in visitation (Xiao et al. 2018).

Historically speaking, when PoC were able to travel to and enter the parks at all, they were met with the same segregation and institutionalized disdain by NPS as they were elsewhere in the United States. Although PoC persistently made efforts to engage with and attempt to enjoy leisure time and recreation within America's national parks, in some cases unequal access to resources—such as being restricted to smaller, segregated campgrounds with less pleasing views than “Whites only” campgrounds in national parks in Southern states with Jim Crow laws—combined with a general lack of concern throughout the national park system for the visitor experience of PoC created an overall atmosphere where PoC were deeply unwelcomed, unsafe, and made to feel that they did not belong (Rugh 2008; Theriault and Mowatt 2020). Even though explicit physical segregation within national parks has since been phased out, the unwelcoming and unbelonging atmosphere for PoC who wish to utilize them has been more difficult to overcome: participa-

tion in certain recreation and leisure activities by PoC continues to be met with microaggressions and a general sense of unwelcomeness (National Park Service Chesapeake Bay Office 2020).

This situation is the result of systemic oppression, including societal and cultural norms that inaccurately reflect PoC's relationships and desires to participate in recreation and leisure activities. Historically, such activities (e.g., hiking, biking, skiing, camping) were almost exclusively white and have thus perpetuated societal and cultural norms. When PoC engage in these historically white activities, they are often faced with unwelcomeness from other users, mistrust, racial profiling, the unwanted task of being a spokesperson for their entire ethnic or racial group, and countless other barriers (National Park Service Chesapeake Bay Office 2020). Such obstacles ostracize PoC and prevent them from appreciating national parks, and continue to perpetuate the white ideologies that NPS was founded on.

In order for all people to have equal opportunity to enjoy national parks, all people must have equal ability to reach and utilize them. Although several NPS units have attempted to install or capitalize on low-cost and easily accessible transportation options, PoC have continually cited transportation cost and travel time as constraints to their ability to access and enjoy national parks (Perry, Xiao, and Manning 2015). This divide between the attempts and offerings of NPS and the stated desires of PoC may be an indication that the agency still needs to improve its efforts to communicate the availability of these options to minority communities, or that the avenues through which access to national parks is being improved are insufficiently enticing or accessible to PoC. Furthermore, the ways in which NPS's traditionally white user base has utilized and engaged with the parks may not match perfectly with how PoC view and wish to use them. Even if PoC can physically travel to and enter national parks, it will mean little if the park does not adequately present opportunities and personally meaningful experiences.

The past several decades have seen NPS attempt a more equitable and inclusive approach within its parks, with events commemorated at sites such as Washita Battlefield National Historic Site in Oklahoma being presented through the viewpoint of the Native peoples that still call the area home in order to balance the historical narrative (Hurt 2010). This is a promising trend that must continue if NPS and its visitor base are to reflect an increasingly diverse America. NPS units located in urban areas offer another path to bridging the disparity in visitation trends, as they tend to be more

readily available to and thus visited more frequently by PoC. These urban parks can potentially serve both as a destination in which NPS can connect with minority communities to understand how they prefer to use the national park system, and a stepping stone to encourage greater minority visitation beyond their local parks (Perry, Xiao, and Manning 2015).

Representation and location-based interpretive education

History can be viewed as a collection of individual narratives that allows for infinite interpretations. Instead of celebrating its diverse history, the United States is experiencing an uncomfortable cultural breaking point, partly due to the dangerous stifling of myriad narratives in favor of worshipping statues. Historical monuments should provide clarity from confusion, rather than romanticizing narratives of oppression. They should teach without bias or flowery language, so that the gravity of the situation and how it affected all Americans is understood. National park units have the ability to change how history is told through the nation's public lands, which can help catalyze empathy and understanding within a currently agitated and angry nation.

NPS suffers from a homogeneous visitor demographic as the nation continues to diversify. In order to connect to PoC, NPS must make a concerted effort to publicize the narratives and histories of communities of color, and shift focus away from promoting historically dominant Eurocentric narratives. Some park units have already begun to do this, particularly those within landscapes sacred to Native Americans. This change is vital because these sites can trigger collective memories that bolster personal identity (O'Keefe 2007). But Native American narratives around sacred sites are not always welcomed or even respected—especially if commercialized recreation occurs or is slated to occur at the site, as is the case at Devils Tower National Monument in Wyoming. The name “Devils Tower” derives from an incorrect European translation; the English version of the name as it is commonly known in Cheyenne is “Bear’s Lodge” (and there are similar non-offensive names in other Native languages). Not only is “Devils Tower” offensive to Native Americans because it equates this sacred site to devils, there are over 200 rock climbing routes on the landform (Dussias 2000), an activity which is offensive to many Native Americans. Impartiality in the face of continued suppression and disrespect of Native American narratives and sacred sites is not a neutral position; instead, it is one that places the NPS firmly on the side of oppressive, whitewashed, and biased history. As

Douglas Hurt states, “instead of promoting reconciliation between Euro-Americans and Native Americans, historic sites and tourist landscapes often perpetuate relationships that reflect cultural imperialism and conflict and need substantial modification to promote inclusive viewpoints” (2010: 377). Celebrating inclusive narratives via interpretation is one step NPS can take to make parks and protected areas more accessible to non-white visitors. Education is the first step toward accessibility. Being able to visit a national park unit and learn about people similar to oneself can help foster a sense of belonging and attachment to the place, which in turn helps create a sense of safety and accessibility that may not have been present before.

Educating visitors about non-white history also combats the Black collective memory that the outdoors are places of fear and danger by celebrating diverse narratives and unearthing roots. During a recent panel about the intersectionality of race and the outdoors, feelings of personal safety and accessibility were cited as the strongest deterrents for Black Americans to visit parks and protected areas (National Park Service Chesapeake Bay Office 2020). Welcomeness catalyzes connectivity to these places. All park units should bring their non-white narratives to the forefront. By providing these narratives, not only will NPS offer more balanced historical interpretation, but it will show solidarity with PoC who may feel uncomfortable in national parks. As Eola Dance, supervisor of resources stewardship and science at Colonial National Historical Park, stated: “Our lived experience is the history” (National Park Service Chesapeake Bay Office 2020). If NPS cannot unearth these narratives itself, it could partner with community-based programs, which can help bolster ties between the park and the constituents it serves. The past truly is prologue, and historical interpretation is vital to providing meaning to our national parks. All national park units deserve respect—not simply the grand wildlands of places designated as “National Parks.”

Progress in parks

NPS has made progress in properly telling the historical narratives of minorities. A focus group formed at Castillo de San Marcos National Monument in 2018 looked at the opinion of the Latinx and Hispanic community regarding the park (Ryan et al. 2019). The study showed that community members visit Castillo de San Marcos to learn about their history and heritage, even if there was a lack of community inclusion on the part of the park. Upon learning this, NPS corrected linguistic issues such as poor translations and unnecessary subtitles on interpretive videos (Ryan et al. 2019).

Another example of corrected interpretation occurred at Washita Battlefield National Historic Site. The site's interpretation was shrouded in a misconstrued pro-military narrative that overlooked the slaughter of over 100 Cheyenne women, children, and the elderly at the Black Kettle camp. As such, avoidance of the site was the only way the Cheyenne could actively resist the pro-military narrative that falsely portrayed the past (Hurt 2010). The park has begun adding the views of the Cheyenne people to a previously Euro-American-dominated interpretive program. The Cheyenne community were invited to comment on the appearance of the site. This has brought about some change, such as the inclusion of oral histories passed down through Cheyenne families (Hurt 2010). Castillo de San Marcos and Washita Battlefield took the initiative to correctly tell history by working with the communities whose story they tell. They recognize the importance of telling all aspects of history at these sites. Other NPS units should follow their example. Working with local communities, either through focus groups or by means of general community approval, are key to proper interpretation and creating a welcoming feel to the people whose stories are being told.

Conclusion and recommendations

The bottom line is that NPS needs to actively create a safe, inclusive, diverse, and welcoming place for all users. While NPS has successfully opened doors and created welcoming spaces for white people, it has not done nearly enough on a consistent basis to do the same for PoC. By simply employing diverse staff and leaders, NPS can foster a more welcoming environment where PoC feel safer in national parks, and where the next generation of leaders and stewards has role models who actually look like they do. Having a diverse employee base will make PoC feel represented, bring countless innovative ideas to the park management and conservation world, and truly assist in increasing the relevance of national parks (National Park Service Chesapeake Bay Office 2020). Employing diverse staff and leaders is a valuable step forward; however, it is not the only solution to this issue.

It is critical to acknowledge the problematic history of NPS, as these issues have not been completely resolved. Instead of erasing narratives of oppression and avoiding critical-but-uncomfortable moments in history, NPS should highlight these stories. Countless tales of oppression, and responses to it, are woven into American history, from the enslavement of African Americans and their relationship with nature and wilderness, to the Jim Crow era and Black Americans' role in protecting and shaping national parks (Theri-

ault and Mowatt 2020; Roberts and Spears 2020). This is the American history that needs to be highlighted as a focal point of all national parks. Involve and allow diverse and marginalized groups to tell their stories in a way that is accurate, genuine, and meaningful to them. By doing this, NPS will not only increase its user base, but can build relevancy and trust (National Park Service Chesapeake Bay Office 2020). Let people tell their stories, and make others aware of these issues, as they show growth and hope. NPS needs to tell the actual history of the United States, how the country was founded and who it is meant for, how it evolved to achieve its current status, and how the full story of its history can be one of its greatest treasures.

To those who cry out that tearing down monuments erases history, the Park Service can confidently reply that history remains. It is still here—has been here all along—untold and overshadowed by glorified monuments, and will remain even after those statues are (rightfully) torn down. Even more, we will be able to hear the other voices that were once silenced by the whitewashing of history. Black history is American history. Native American history is American history. Hispanic/Latinx American history is American history. Asian American history is American history. LGBTQIA+ history is American history. To be fully heard, these narratives deserve the same space within America's national parks.

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