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PARKS STEWARDSHIP FORUM

## Humanizing the Seas

A Case for Integrating the Arts and Humanities  
into *Ocean Literacy and Stewardship*

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**Plastic Catch** • Susan Schultz  
porcelain and wood sculpture



COLORING OUTSIDE THE LINES

# **Cultural consciousness about marine conservation:** The multiracial experience as an emerging ecosystem

NINA S. ROBERTS



Children at an “Explore the Coast” community shuttle trip to Baker Beach, California, August 2014.

| COURTESY ALISON TAGGART-BARONE, GOLDEN GATE NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVANCY

## A multiracial context for marine conservation

Is it possible that exploring the ancestry and genetic variation of multiracial people can dismantle the typically negative construction of race? Can the concepts of a multiracial experience challenge current theoretical and political formulations of race using the mixed-race experience of individuals as a tool for examining these and other questions? Like our marine ecosystems (e.g., heterogeneous, diversified, variegated, patchwork, eclectic), multiracial people are assorted, hybridized, unconventional, multifaceted and more. Subsequently, in the context of marine conservation, the metaphors and analogies to the multiracial experience is woven into the fabric of the very nature of our marine ecosystems.

This installment of *Coloring Outside the Lines* includes a personal sketch of my own multiracial experience and explores topics such as gender in a multiracial context, ethnicity and its role in identity formation, and their relationships to our ocean environment. I seek to encourage readers to go deeper into self-examination regarding who you identify with and who you choose to honor; whoever that is for each of us, there's a relationship to what we value based on some level of personal connection. Throughout 2020, we've experienced a major pandemic, global social and racial unrest, unprecedented protesting around the world, and continued threats from climate change. Furthermore, there's a multitude of reasons our oceans need to be cared for yet are still being destroyed based on ignorance, lack of education, and a dearth of personal connection to over 70% of the Earth's surface. Ocean and coastal habitats support some of the most valuable and diverse biological resources on the planet, consisting of thousands of species. Coastal habitats also provide crucial services including flood control, water filtration and storage, storm protection, food production, and recreation and tourism (see [Ocean Conservancy](#)). Consequently, cultural connections to all of that are indisputable.

“Cultural consciousness can be defined as the process of developing awareness of culture in the self, which can result in expanding understandings of culture and developing deeper cultural knowledge about other individuals and contexts” (Páez and Albert, n.d.). And, individuals from mixed-race

backgrounds, inherently, experience multicultural norms and ideologies giving rise to that *deeper cultural knowledge*. Our oceans, and marine life within, like multiracial people, carry varying approaches to, and perspectives on, survival all over the world. The ocean comprises the chemistry, physics, and geology of our spectacular marine systems; understanding how organisms shape these systems is an experience as unique as studying the characteristics, physiology, and life history of mixed-race people.

## What are you, anyway?

From sea to shining sea, the national slogan *E pluribus unum* has not delivered the promise we all have strived to attain. This Latin phrase, interpreted as “one from many,” offered a strong statement of the American determination to create single nation from a broad collection of states and peoples. Conversely, in the 21st century, we are far from a “single” nation, as the intention of that founding motto to reflect strength in our diversity has failed us—given that this catchphrase is actually best understood through the lens of righteousness and superiority. For multiracial people like me, *E pluribus unum* takes on a very literal meaning. The “one from many” explicates my ethnic and cultural heritage; yet the evolution of that slogan exudes the embarrassing arrogance of our country's current leadership, in part, and ignores the historical oppression that persists. Instead, the multiracial experience is best understood by promoting greater solidarity and concern for the collective well-being across the nation and around the world.

Ten years ago, I wrote a chapter in the book *Speaking Up and Speaking Out: Working for Social and Environmental Justice through Parks, Recreation, and Leisure* about my personal mixed-race background and a teaser about some of my experiences. As noted in that paper, I am multiracial yet often convey my ethnicity in simple terms as biracial. For instance, my primary identity is East Indian and White (i.e., English and Swedish) based on family traditions across generations. Based on phenotype, people do not know one of my parents was White. Merely because of my brown skin and curly dark hair, I was relegated to an oppressed group at an early age and, unfortunately a “target” (e.g., considered inferior, with limited access to social



The author, age 3.



Jim and Colette Roberts, parents of the author. This photo was taken in 1967, just three months before *Loving v. Virginia*, the landmark case decriminalizing interracial marriage across the entire US, was decided by Supreme Court

| COURTESY CLIF NANTON

power) in the world of *target, agent, ally* as sample terms used in social justice work. When expanding the palette of my (and my three siblings’) ethnic heritage, of value to note is my maternal grandmother is part East Indian and part Native American; my maternal grandfather was raised on the island of St. Lucia (West Indies) and sent to the US when he was 12 years old. Later in life he met my grandmother in New York City, my mother was born, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Fast forward to my parents becoming interracially married in the 1950s when that option was illegal in many states across the US. Growing up in the 1960s at the tail end of the Baby Boom, “I had to learn new ways to navigate the social, cultural, educational, and political systems” (Roberts 2010: 32). Developing and nurturing my relationship to nature and parks transcended to the majesty of our oceans given my proximity to the Eastern coastline and now to the West, as I currently live in the San Francisco Bay Area. My fascination with marine conservation started soon after I was born and evolved as I entered my career, always experiencing a love for what lies beneath the sea. I always felt and saw parallels to my multiracial identity. Like our collective need to make decisions to protect our marine ecosystem based on sound science, the need to be my authentic self involves moral, ethical, and spiritual decisions as well.

### Privilege: Aware or unaware of personal power and influence?

Privilege comes in a speckled form such as race, class (e.g., wealth), gender, physical fitness level, feelings of safety, educational attainment, even how tall one is, and more. I have a degree of privilege based on my father’s European background as I’ve learned the cultural norms and gradations of whiteness. A middle-class upbringing was unearned privilege, yet my advanced education is a level of privilege I genuinely earned.

Our biracial or multiracial attitudes and experiences can differ dramatically depending on the races that comprise our background, how the world sees us, and how we choose to identify. As noted in a briefing from the Pew Research Center (see Parker et al. 2015) “an added layer of complexity is that racial identity can be fluid and may change over the course of one’s life, or even from one

situation to another. About 3-in-10 adults with a multiracial background say they have changed the way they describe their race over the years—with some saying they once thought of themselves as only one race and now think of themselves as more than one race, and others saying just the opposite.” This in itself affords us, as mixed-race people, with a level of privilege unknown to others and which is often misunderstood because we also face racial discrimination, from callous slurs to physical threats, because of our racial background.

We are rarely taught to see it, but having privilege and recognizing it means that I am in a position to use my advantage as an ally. Similarly, because I currently remain in an oppressed group (women of color), I also need my white allies to step up and speak out, and together we must all learn to use power and privilege to create a more just and compassionate world. The relationship of all this to both our environmental and cultural ecosystems is indisputable. While a cliché, in part, *compassion* for individuals cannot be achieved without special attention being paid to the lifecycle of the ocean; for example, by infusing the heartbeat of marine life into human nature we can strive to meet environmental as well as community needs—or suffer the consequences of adverse impacts, whether intended or not.

So how do biracial or mixed-race people experience conservation, ocean life, and the overarching

intersection between the humanities and marine ecosystems? Inarguably, there are multiple perspectives; for me, this can be viewed through one vantage point while keeping in mind we cannot fully omit gender (or other demographic variables) from the equation. Marine heritage, to me, also includes not only the natural phenomena associated with our oceans (marine mammals, plant life, geology of the seafloor) but also my obligation to help protect it as a parallel to my ethnic and cultural composition.

### Education, conservation, investigation

The ubiquitous connection of humans to the extraordinary ocean environment is indisputable. So why do humans continue to destroy the ocean—and thus each other? Why is there still a dearth of professionals and scientists across ethnic groups working to help reach the “30 by 30” goal of protecting 30% of the Earth’s lands and ocean by 2030 (Rowland-Shea et al. 2020)? One reason is that too many of us know too little about the ocean.

Education about marine life should become a core competency in the K–12 curriculum to invite, include, and instill a spirit of stewardship and collective need to protect the ocean in perpetuity. “Educate students, starting in kindergarten, about the crucial need to preserve biodiversity and expand peoples’ empathy not just to all human beings but also to the living elements in the natural world” (Sodhi and Ehrlich 2010: 19). One of the best descriptions I’ve ever seen explaining how the ocean and humans are connected is targeted to middle schoolers by *Ocean Wise*, an ocean education and research organization, which is “[c]ommitted to promoting the highest standards of education and creating a real awareness across all ages of the conservation issues our world is facing.”

As demographics continue to change, the number of mixed-race youth in K–12 public schools is also on the rise. According to Livingston and Brown (2017 via Pew Research Center), 17% of all newly married individuals in the US had a spouse

Watershed Action Program at Muir Beach, California, 2015—a program of Kids for the Bay | COURTESY SCC ARCHIVES





of a different race or ethnicity, marking more than a fivefold increase since 1967, when only 3% of newlyweds were intermarried. In a landmark US Supreme Court case that year, *Loving v. Virginia*, it was ruled that marriage across racial lines, previously forbidden in many states, was now legal throughout the country. Another context for new horizons in marine education is that one in ten married people in 2015 had a spouse of a different race or ethnicity, equating to 11 million people interracially married across America.

Marine conservation is equally about understanding people as it is about comprehending oceanic ecological processes. For instance, many marine ecosystem projects can falter because they may not sufficiently understand, address, and integrate variables such as economic, social and cultural needs and concerns of constituents. We marine conservationists should unequivocally support the creation of educational materials that also appeal

to mixed-race people; this is feasible by explicitly calling attention to how the dynamic and diverse interactions at the heart of ocean ecosystems have the same characteristics as our multiracial identity. One source of such support might be the [Mavin Foundation](#), an interdisciplinary nonprofit organization founded in 1999 that is the first and only organization of its kind. When I was first exploring what's out there like this when the World Wide Web first appeared, scouring the Internet kept bringing up Mavin. It can be an outstanding education resource with cross-cutting materials that cover everything from sociology of mixed-race people to marine conservation and the multi-hued experience.

Furthermore, as noted in a recent [Boston Globe](#) story (Venkataraman 2020), "The ocean can be a major part of our climate solution. I think of the ocean, actually, as a hero instead of a victim. The ocean has been buffering the impacts of climate

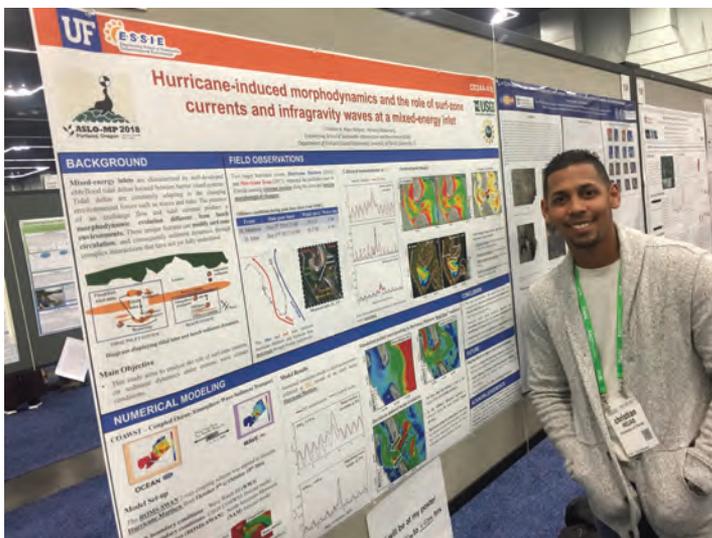
change; it has already absorbed about a third of the carbon dioxide we've emitted by burning fossil fuels and over 90 percent of the heat that's been trapped by greenhouse gases. Coastal ecosystems have been protecting us from storms." And, clearly there's more. The author cites research showing people of color are more concerned about the climate crisis, and states that "the climate crisis is so big that we need to build the biggest possible team." I wholeheartedly agree. I also concur with her missives that we cannot succeed in tackling the climate crisis unless we involve people of color who are part of essential communities changing the way they live their lives. We must continue to search for ways everyone can partake in this transformation, to continue to build on the solutions that are already readily available.

### Sprinkle relevant programs and stir in the funding

A plethora of other programs relevant to multicultural and multiracial appreciation of the ocean exist from East to West. Three progressive examples follow.

First, the **Multicultural Program of the Association for the Sciences of Limnology and Oceanography (ASLO)**. Based out of Hampton University in Virginia, this National Science Foundation-funded program offers unique opportunities with a strong (though not exclusive) focus on students from underrepresented minority groups. Once accepted into the program, students present their own research in a symposium or a regular session at the annual ASLO meeting where they gain first-rate experiences and exposure to trends in aquatic sciences; strategies for diversifying the field is exemplified in this program. As part of this experience, students are paired with a mentor at the conferences. Evaluations indicate this helps make students feel part of limnology and oceanography community and the networking and contacts obtained also support career-building opportunities (Cuker, Haxton, and Martinez 2016).

Established over 30 years ago, the Hampton ASLO Multicultural Program has served more than 1,100 students from over 150 colleges and universities across the US, with great success in achieving racial diversity (45% African American, 35% Latinx, 6% Native American, 6% Pacific Islander, 3% white



Students at the 2018 ASLO meeting. (above) A field trip to the Columbia River Gorge. (below) Presenting research at the poster session. | COURTESY BENJAMIN CUKER

or other). Apparently, there are many multiracial students; however, if they indicate some Black heritage they were automatically entered into the "African American" category. Why does the "one drop rule" still live on? Institutions seeking to diversify participants, students, and/or professionals must seek new ways to monitor and track the growing number of mixed-race participants and staff joining the ranks of the workforce.

Second, and newer to the scene, **Brown Girl Surf** was established in 2011 with a mission "to build a more diverse, environmentally reverent, and joyful women's surf culture by increasing access to surfing, cultivating community, amplifying the voices of women of color surfers, and taking care of the earth." Additionally, the organization has solid values it lives by and teaches its youth participants.



The 2019 Surf Sister Camp in California. (above) Volunteers, youth, and staff gather for a group photo at Half Moon Bay. (below) An East Bay Regional Parks naturalist leads a seine netting activity at Alameda Crow Beach. | COURTESY BROWN GIRL SURF ARCHIVES



For example, an emphasis on girls' empowerment helps these young people to be strong in their bodies and minds, and to invent themselves in their own preferred images. Another facet creating balance in Brown Girl Surf's programs is participants' use of art for self-expression and to celebrate themselves and their community. The juxtaposition of the values of stewardship and enjoyment of the environment is expressed in Brown Girl Surf's care and respect for both the ocean and the land as they exude "gratitude for the gifts of nature."

A third excellent model is [Minorities in Marine and Environmental Sciences](#) (MIMES) South Carolina Marine Resources Division Summer Minority Internship Program, which occurred for one year only, in 2015. This program provided undergraduate minority students the opportunity to conduct independent research projects under the direction of mentors experienced in various fields of marine science including, but not limited to, environmental chemistry, marine biology, and toxicology. The Marine Resources Division of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, with funding from the National Science Foundation and the cooperation of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, offered college students of color internship positions at the Marine Resources Center on James Island (near Charleston), South Carolina. During this interagency, 12-week program, students were offered "a supportive yet challenging scientific experience" whereby they engaged with marine science experts as mentors to design and complete their own rigorous scientific project, took classes, participated in field work, presented their work to peers, and had the chance to meet successful minority scientists. This is the type of program we need more of coast-to-coast.

How else are such present-day opportunities funded and sustained? Philanthropy is one vital source of financial support, state and federal agencies are another. One example in California is the state Coastal Commission's [Explore the Coast grants](#), a national prototype initiated in 2013, which fund a wide range of programs bringing people to the coast who have a right to access it. That does not just mean providing a parking lot and a trailhead near the beach. It means encouraging a sense of

comfort and belonging in these spaces. Awarding over \$6 million through more than 200 grants, many of these projects provide hands-on environmental education about the ocean and the San Francisco Bay to K-12 students, focused on schools in low-income communities.

This grant program looks for projects that meet one or more of the following priorities: "Provides a coastal experience for people that may face challenges getting to or enjoying the coast (e.g., lower-income people, people with disabilities, English as a Second Language communities, students from Title I schools); creates opportunities for people to visit the coast for the first time; provides a valuable recreational, environmental, cultural, or historic learning experience; and/or increases stewardship of coastal resources." Additionally, merely having fun at the beach while there has immediate emotional and physical benefits, and is often the start of a life-long relationship with the natural world.

Some 3,000 miles away, the [New York Sea Grant](#) (NYSG) is part of a national Sea Grant network that comprises NOAA's National Sea Grant College Program. A cooperative program of the State University of New York (SUNY) and Cornell University, NYSG's mission is "to serve New York's diverse coastal communities by assisting them to respond to rapid economic and environmental change." These entities express commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion by their efforts to recruit, retain, and prepare a diverse workforce, and by being proactive in how and where they engage and serve the diverse populations of coastal communities. As NYSG notes, "Sea Grant is committed to building inclusive research, extension, communication and education programs that serve people with unique and varied backgrounds, circumstances, needs, perspectives and ways of thinking."

As have hundreds of organizations globally, NYSG has issued a [statement of solidarity and action items](#) in support of "resilient communities and economies, healthy ecosystems, environmental literacy and workforce development, and food and job security through sustainable fisheries, aquaculture, and seafood." Organizations and col-

laborative networks continue to make progress by emphasizing the benefits of human interactions with oceans and coastal ecosystems, but need to keep in mind that mixed-race people may see these opportunities through a very different lens.

There are numerous other Sea Grant programs to help fund similar vital initiatives and research efforts. For example, [Maryland Sea Grant](#) offers undergraduate students internships to conduct marine research in biology, chemistry and physical oceanography on the Chesapeake Bay. By engaging diverse students in “place-based research, extension, education, and/or communication that respects and integrates local ways of knowing,” these internships are also intentional in diversifying the marine sciences and conservation education workforce.

### Conclusion: Now what?

Because personal is powerful, I invite readers—and especially marine conservationists—to ask themselves: “Who am I? What is the story of my family and community; and what can I do to make positive change and bring social and environmental justice to my community and the world?”

An equity-centered approach to teaching and learning—whether in K–12 schools, a university, an outdoor/environmental education organization, or a social sector non-profit—concomitantly provides a community-responsive pedagogy. This practice transforms climate, culture, and curriculum, focuses priorities of wellness as major contributors to learning, and expands the critical consciousness of both students and instructors. From marine conservation to social and environmental justice, the meaning is in the mess! We find out who we are as a teacher, leader, manager, director, and more, when it gets messy. Our purpose is not our subject matter expertise, it’s the people we are trying to reach. Marine science, for instance, provides important data for decision makers just like social and behavioral data can drive the human dimension, from stewardship to social justice. We must struggle along with one another, acknowledging that our mistakes lead to an opportunity to share our successes. Unity is not possible any other way.

This work is real as well as transformative and empowering. What we need is for multiracial people with partial white heritage to also do collaboration/co-liberation work that enables a balance for both multiracial and non-mixed people of color. And what we all need to understand is that we are headed at blazing speed toward a society where many more people will identify as mixed race. This reality necessitates everyone to be exponentially more thoughtful about these truths as well increase your cultural consciousness about the many loaded layers and potential harm of words like “passing” and “presenting” as white when it comes to mixed-race individuals. We must be vigilant when interacting with people from mixed backgrounds who do appear white by not making assumptions about how they identify. For instance, I have dark skin and curly dark hair, people who don’t know me or are unaware that my father was white often assume that I’m Black so therefore I must “identify” as such. Conversely, to treat light-skinned, mixed-race people who can “pass” as white is superficial, flawed, and dangerously separatist, creates increased divisions, and causes fragmenting of relationships. That occurs, unfortunately, regardless of what people of color say, as it is actually whites who typically decide about whiteness (e.g., who is white or not) since they hold the most power.

To those involved in marine conservation and education, go deeper into self-examination and think about who you identify as people of color in your programs. If they are mixed race, showing a level of respect for their need to occasionally code switch is paramount. Create space for people in your programs who want to be untethered from the misunderstandings mixed-race people often face about their cultural heritage and subsequent chosen identity. Marine conservation and education efforts needs all hands on deck. As dreams and lives have been shattered by Covid-19 and persistent social and racial unrest, we cannot neglect our collective responsibility to protect the oceans and increase literacy across races “from sea to shining sea.”

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