



SOCIAL ACTIONS, PARKS, AND PERSISTENT INEQUITIES:

Does systemic racism and structural power
activate increased access?

NINA S. ROBERTS

Introduction

Understanding who the communities are that organizations seek to engage is a vital starting point for mitigating inequities. Why do structural “-isms” matter in relation to managing conservation landscapes? Learning why systemic racism impedes progress and contributes to further inequities is essential. Breaking down barriers that reduce access to parks and public lands/open space is an ongoing effort. The scale of current and potential inequities *and* inequalities across our nation’s parks and open space requires a revolution of purpose, intention, and accountability. The challenges managers face (and we all experience the outcomes) in building and sustaining healthy and equitable communities mandate new ways of thinking, problem solving, governance, and decisionmaking.

Most important, all this compels us to learn the skills of interrogating power, challenging the status quo, and analyzing privilege (individual and institutional). Whether resources do, or do not, flow to communities as planned is a direct result of both individual and institutional power. Regarding the agencies we work with, and partners engaged in collaboration, leaders must seek common ground. In addition, comprehending the larger systemic context of one’s personal and/or professional involvement towards increasing park access is paramount for a systems change approach (e.g., developing collective solutions, building an organizational culture of

Wildwood Regional Park, Thousand Oaks, California. | NIKOLA KNEZEVIC / UNSPLASH

learning across difference, and not over-relying on leadership from the top down).

A persistent focus on race relations and inclusivity is essential for understanding and healing—and yet it's more complicated than that. What are we missing in our assessments and strategies? What agency practices reinforce inequity? Blaming every disparity or inequity on race or racism sometimes creates the illusion that the lives of people of color can be enriched by inexorable self-examination by whites. This myth must be dispelled.

**Reaching communities of interest:
Who is that for your agency?**

While the United States is experiencing a collective identity crisis, race may not be the only issue regarding the intersectional relationship of inclusion versus exclusion. Could age, gender, or disability also be factors? There has been lots of attention on Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (**BIPOC**) for several decades; what shifts within this ongoing

notice are demographics, trends, and use of language and terminology. There's a lot of ingenuity among BIPOC, with both innovative ideas and solutions being produced regularly. As BIPOC, we have to take control of our own narrative. To get more seats at the proverbial table, do we need to be more creative, more intelligent in our approach? Not necessarily. We simply may not be taken seriously. Ask yourself, *What narrative has been the driving force behind my agency's decisions?* As an educator, I always encourage my students to tell their stories; then, in a matter of time, those accounts will be spread far and wide.

Systemic racism has always existed yet may currently be a highly over-simplified term. The US is experiencing the next evolution of "racism," yet is its impact being vastly exaggerated? Perhaps what's been suppressed has merely been given permission lately to surface. Consequently, let's not forget about the leadership of women, specifically, to transform our environment or the conservation landscape. Women of color, for instance, have overcome gender

Earth Day clean-up, San Diego, California, 2021. | STEVE JEWETT / UNSPLASH





Skimming for small herpetiles, such as tadpoles, at Piscataway Park, Maryland. | SARAH SPARHAWK / NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

and cultural constraints, and are entering the parks and public lands arena in growing numbers. At a management level, decisions need to be made based on science and logic, not emotion. Women knowing how to tug on the heart strings of communities who have not “drunk the Kool-Aid,” however, is of utmost importance (e.g., increasing awareness is a key entry point to natural resource preservation and protection). Regardless of whichever marginalized or under-resourced group is being referred to, dispelling myths and fixing broken promises is paramount. Keep in mind, your word to the communities you’re serving is your bond. In many instances, this relates to the fact public policy may need to change.

We live in a world of cognitive labor, a part of which is that we all have developed, at considerable cost, our own areas of expertise. That is, many humans strive to access additional information about a topic of interest, may defer to relevant experts, and/or ground their own incomplete understandings in whatever facts are available; there’s no shame in your game in learning something new! Yet, when our social order is disrupted it seems we then stop trusting each

other. Subsequently, drawing on assets of community expertise is paramount if agencies are genuine about “outreach and engagement.” Hence, we must find solutions to problems that are closely related. What are your touch points for collaboration with other organizations? Who are your partners and do they continue to be “like-minded” or representative of institutions different enough to provide you with new ideas for a new level of success? Environmental studies and conservation are indisputably worthy causes for attention. This fact notwithstanding, without considering human injustices, those two are intensely unbalanced. More exceptional models and evidence of success are needed.

Power, privilege, and policy: Where the three shall meet?

Power has many definitions. As used here, it means the ability to direct laws, policies, and investment that shape people’s lives. Privilege, on the other hand, means the accumulation of special rights and their benefits. Both of these concepts (power and privilege) are complex and sometimes overwhelming. These are typically used, consciously or not, by certain groups at the expense of others based on

social categorizations, including variables such as income/wealth, race/ethnicity, religion, physical ability, and gender. For leaders in parks, public land, and even marine protected areas, who exude sincere interest in systems change, use of such power and privilege can lead to policy shifts if assessment, intentional management approaches, implementation, and evaluation are employed.

Our nation is amidst an unprecedented opportunity to transform inequities by increasing access to our parks and public lands. To achieve this, managers and other decisionmakers must advance more progressive park policies and inspire philanthropists to increase their support. One way to achieve this, as mentioned, is shift to a systems approach to reverse the inequities that have occurred year after year. Managers of conservation landscapes, small and large, ought to embrace action-oriented opportunities for land acquisition, land development, and recreational and

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education programs that increase access to BIPOC. There are many **equity frameworks** available and managers should consider reviewing and determining which ones makes sense for their agency.

Yañez, Aboelata, Rigolon, and Bennett (2021), for instance, propose a systems approach to addressing parks and open space inequities that prioritizes "building power among people closest to the problem so that they can drive policy and systems change solutions." Their report includes lessons learned from various public health initiatives that

can benefit the park equity movement; examples of promising green and open space equity policies are provided as well. This report, and contemporary discussion, can involve a multitude of options and strategies. Landscape conservation efforts ought to include an action plan and policy review to address structural barriers to access and determine the need for organizational updates and revisions. Agency managers and leaders should use power-building strategies by engaging communities of interest most impacted by the issues needing attention, as defined by the community members themselves (e.g., residents, business owners).

For white managers and field staff at all levels, it's essential to work through your own white privilege and "**white fragility**" (DiAngelo 2018). Why? For life-long learning. And, to send a positive message to the communities you're serving that you are, indeed, doing your own work around these topics and will use your power for the greater good. In a KQED Forum radio interview, Michael Eric Dyson, professor of African American and Diaspora Studies and of Ethics and Society at Vanderbilt University and renowned Black scholar, states, "All of us are fragile so we need to be self-critical." Speaking of Confederate supporters, he says that "they think it's about heritage, I think it's about hate.... We must talk about history and memory when you have the ability to tell the truth; and, you must do so or you leave a vacuum" (Dyson 2020).

Millions of people are left behind in many domains of life (e.g., environmental, health/medical, education, social, economic, political). Translating the disadvantages they experience in each of these domains into a limited set of indicators, and finding data to measure them, present substantial barriers. The effects of social exclusion on a person's dignity and their agency, for example, are difficult to measure, but can undermine one's sense of well-being (United Nations 2020). Inequality is a social stressor that also undermines self-worth and decreases community trust. Bottom line: Inequality can cause chronic stress and that contributes to serious health issues. Consequently, community quality of life can atrophy. Likewise, low social status is a stressor and can cause anxiety. There have been extraordinary efforts to promote the "great outdoors" as spaces and places to reduce such stress, and the scientific evidence is mounting that they do just that (e.g.,

Cornell University 2020). How can effective use of agency power, acknowledgement of privilege, and revising policies help to reduce these stressors?

On a related point, the current backlash among certain groups in the US against **Critical Race Theory** (CRT) is incredibly dangerous. This observation is not about being anti-white. More people may need to become “woke” to the reality of the value of CRT to understanding and using their energy to combat systemic racism within institutions. CRT is caricatured as attributing all problems to systemic racism, when it is in fact much more nuanced. It acknowledges that what we believe or perceive to be racist, is not always racist. Managers and leaders must be careful of creating hyper-radical arguments.

Over ten years ago I wrote a response paper (Roberts 2009) to an essay by Mary G. McDonald titled “Dialogues on Whiteness, leisure, and (anti)racism,” which was a response to calls for leisure studies scholars to more effectively integrate race into their work. Drawing from interdisciplinary scholarship,

McDonald sought to open a broader dialogue about the possibilities and dangers of analyzing whiteness within leisure contexts. I agreed with some of her context, such as “Whites do not see themselves as ‘raced’ or enjoying advantages; this is part of the worldview that helps maintain White hegemony” (p. 499). Yet I disagreed with some of her other principles. For example, she poses a variety of questions that, to me, were on the tip of the iceberg and not below, which is where the richest information lies. In one instance, I suggested that her question about whether policies and programming reflect race cognizance discourse could be strengthened by asking how agency actions and behaviors genuinely reflect what may be a written policy. As I noted in my response, “entering a new upsurge of critical race theory, specifically, should move us towards building additional critiques of the inadequate theorization of race and other constructions of cultural difference” (Roberts 2009: 506). This insight can translate to any discipline, including management of conservation landscapes.

Planting trees. | CHRIS POULIN / US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE



Closing thoughts

We must acknowledge, atone for, and deconstruct systems of oppression to make progress in resolving and reconciling historical practices that have led to inequity in access to parks and public lands/open space across the US. Historically, land use policies coast-to-coast can be considered expressions of exclusion, racism, and disenfranchisement. Unfortunately, despite decades of efforts and strategizing, colonialism and racism continue to generate a distinct equity gap by shaping which Americans, and many international visitors, have access to and feel welcomed in natural spaces. Those of us who are part of BIPOC communities need to write our own story; that is when the narrative is most authentic. Parks and conservation-related landscapes must be considered “necessities,” not just niceties.

According to the United Nations, “despite extraordinary economic growth and widespread improvements in well-being over recent decades, inequality remains high within and across countries. Today, powerful economic, social and environmental forces are affecting inequality” (United Nations 2020: 198). The current UN *World Social Report* is based on international studies on the impact of four key global trends: technological innovation, climate change, urbanization, and international migration. Including conservation, environmental studies, and outdoor recreation/education, the notion of rising inequality is not inevitable, according to the report. National policies and institutions across disciplines must help ensure that benefits of these global trends are shared widely and that their negative effects do not fall disproportionately on those who “lack the resources to cope and recover.” How professionals (and volunteers) helping to steward our parks, environmental programs, and conservation efforts address these trends will largely govern our common future based on who decides and how it is shaped.

Even with the best intentions, data-driven decisions, and evidence-based enhancements, managers will still unconsciously or intentionally perpetuate inequities. Disparities could be widened further if we are not conscious of our own power and the power structures within which we work.

Lastly, policy change provides transformation at the community level, with highly impacted populations at the forefront. The North Star should be: Equity at scale! We must continue building momentum towards reversing the structural inequities deeply impacting BIPOC and low-income groups. Rather than remaining content to offer traditional outdoor recreational opportunities, parks and public lands can be hubs for community resilience, and even go beyond that to include historical uses and lifelong sustenance for many Indigenous communities as well.

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The Interdisciplinary Journal of Place-based Conservation

Co-published by the [Institute for Parks, People, and Biodiversity](#), University of California, Berkeley and the [George Wright Society](#). ISSN 2688-187X

Berkeley [Institute for Parks, People, and Biodiversity](#)



Citation for this article

Roberts, Nina S. 2021. Social actions, parks, and persistent inequities: Does systemic racism and structural power activate increased access?. *Parks Stewardship Forum* 37(3): 442–447.

Parks Stewardship Forum explores innovative thinking and offers enduring perspectives on critical issues of place-based heritage management and stewardship. Interdisciplinary in nature, the journal gathers insights from all fields related to parks, protected/conserved areas, cultural sites, and other place-based forms of conservation. The scope of the journal is international. It is dedicated to the legacy of [George Meléndez Wright](#), a graduate of UC Berkeley and pioneer in conservation of national parks.

Parks Stewardship Forum is published online at <https://escholarship.org/uc/psf> through [eScholarship](#), an open-access publishing platform subsidized by the University of California and managed by the California Digital Library. Open-access publishing serves the missions of the IPPB and GWS to share, freely and broadly, research and knowledge produced by and for those who manage parks, protected areas, and cultural sites throughout the world. A version of *Parks Stewardship Forum* designed for online reading is also available at <https://parks.berkeley.edu/psf>. For information about publishing in PSF, write to psf@georgewright.org.

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The journal continues *The George Wright Forum*, published 1981–2018 by the George Wright Society.

PSF is designed by Laurie Frasier • lauriefrasier.com



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