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## Community resilience and conservation connections

NINA S. ROBERTS



ADAM BAUTZ / FLICKR CREATIVE COMMONS

**Understanding why conservation is important should not be an assumption of universality.** Many people, for instance, know and fully understand the values and principles for practice of promoting biodiversity and protecting wildlife, ranging from urban areas to remote wilderness. We can all maintain a healthy

and functional ecosystem if managers and decision-makers truly involve, educate, and engage *all stakeholders* across cultures; this entails being explicit about naming communities of interest (e.g., involve local Black leaders, educate groups that need environmental literacy, engage women-owned businesses).



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San Francisco State University students in a Parks and Protected Area Management class, taught by Dr. Roberts, partake in education and service at the SF Bay National Wildlife Refuge. | NINA ROBERTS

Collaborative programs must address common social, ecological, and economic goals and not emphasize merely one of these areas. Subsequently, to truly engage *all* stakeholders, public involvement must be inclusive, connecting individuals not only with an interest in the collaborative efforts, but also those who may have less knowledge of an environmental condition being discussed or who may be indirectly affected by any potential outcomes. At times, using environmental justice challenges as an example, communities most impacted by privileged decisions are low income, typically people of color, and generally under-resourced. Professionals involved with large landscape conservation may need a paradigm shift in management and realize that people across diverse groups are part of very resilient communities. That is, putting aside pride or ego and fears (e.g., of offending others or losing power), and establishing relationships with non-traditional users impacted by collaborative programs is vital for success.

### Collaborative conservation and cultural dynamics

Honoring diversity is a value all organizations should embrace. Embracing both biodiversity and human diversity requires a humble attitude and solid listening skills. Are under-represented and marginalized groups supported? Are Indigenous and local perspectives valued? Do your actions reflect that people of color or low-income communities matter? Is there complete understanding of how and why certain communities immerse themselves in the natural world while others might not?

Encouraging a network of practitioners to establish a solid foundation for mapping and implementing large landscape initiatives is part of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy **Strategic Framework for Policy and Action** (McKinney, Scarlett, and Kemmis 2010). One of the objectives is “build awareness and understanding of the diversity of approaches to catalyze, enable, and sustain large landscape conservation initiatives”

(p. 39). Part of this “diversity of approaches” must include a desire and knowledge of being intentional to involve as many community leaders as possible to ensure equity and inclusion prevails in such initiatives.

Why is that still so difficult for some managers and policymakers? Biodiversity protection is complex and, oftentimes, controversial (think of ranch owners and wolves) so the typical prevailing sentiments are “we have enough to worry about and deal with” or “we don’t have the staffing [or budget] to do outreach.” The list goes on regarding a litany of excuses or fears for authentic engagement across cultures. The dynamics are multifaceted and can be compounded when attempting to address various conservation issues in the face of climate change as well. The science is indisputable and the human impact is devastating. Our core systems (e.g., transportation, agriculture, businesses, energy) and institutional challenges

exacerbate the barriers of connecting with communities across cultures. What’s often misunderstood is these individuals’ perception and desires. A study by Leiserowitz and Akerlof (2010), titled **“Race, ethnicity and public responses to climate change,”** including over 2,100 individuals, shows people of color support development of effective climate change policies (e.g., adopt renewable energy, regulate greenhouse gases) more than whites. For example, “Hispanics, African Americans and people of other races and ethnicities were often the strongest supporters of climate and energy policies and were also more likely to support these policies even if they incurred greater costs.” How will dynamics at the conference room table or board meeting be different if those spaces were truly representative of all communities impacted by large landscape conservation efforts? What new decisions could surface if the public discourse entailed a more balanced perspective and local or Indigenous knowledge?



## Listen, learn, lead

Blacks, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) are reflected in communities across variables such as race, economics, education, home ownership, and more. Many managers and decisionmakers often need to do a better job simply listening, learning from community experiences, leading with empathy and conviction, and then acting on behalf of those who have fewer resources to participate in the process. BIPOC leaders are the change-makers striving towards equity and justice in their communities; landscape conservation managers, and the ecosystem as a whole, would benefit immensely from being more intentional with strategic planning efforts and implementation (e.g., workforce enhancement, youth development) that includes individuals impacted beyond the traditional high-education, high-income, privileged white stakeholders.

Since the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit was held in 1991, 17 principles of environmental justice have been drafted and adopted. While these principles have served as a defining document for an increasingly vigorous grassroots movement for environmental justice, actions seem to make progress at a proverbial snail's pace. For instance, as noted in a 2020 National Geographic story about the predominance of white leadership in conservation organizations, "people of color have long been excluded from environmental policy and conservation—creating blind spots that perpetuate inequality." The fact this conversation is still occurring 30 years after the Summit exudes continued elitism and the inability to engage (e.g., lack of knowledge on how to engage and what to do). Organizations and agencies need to be reminded that their tactical plans have not led to the outcomes they intended because institutional constraints (e.g., internal blind spots) perpetuate inequity.

Furthermore, all of this has been clear for decades in the literature on outdoor recreation, overall nature-based education, and attendance at state and national parks, as well as forests and other public open space areas. It is well known that visitor use still tends to be disproportionate between people of color and their white counterparts—although this has been changing dramatically given many years of community engagement and agency strategic planning (Roberts and

Spears 2020). Are you listening to new ideas? Are you reviewing these strategies and wide-ranging methods for community engagement to develop future initiatives?

*It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.*

—Audre Lorde

## From understanding and awareness to action and resilience

According to the International Land Conservation Network (ILCN), conservation issues globally "transcend the legal and geographic reach of existing jurisdictions, institutions, and organizations." Furthermore, conservation challenges must indisputably be dealt with at all scales; large landscape conservation, as indicated by ILCN, works way more effectively across varying legal and geographic boundaries. Those factors are important to both understand and increase awareness about communities of interest across cultures. Moreover, climate change and its devastating impacts have become more urgent; it is increasingly more significant for not just the US but the global land conservation community act at the large landscape scale "to ensure the integrity and resilience of ecosystems and the protection of land and water resources" (ILCN 2021).

That goal is crucial, yet the statement omits the human dimension. The resilience of our communities is absent and needs to be part of the equation, not separate from it. Elsewhere in the same report, for example, ILCN recommends that stakeholders and interested parties bring together leaders "advancing landscape-scale conservation initiatives that are multijurisdictional, multipurpose, and multi-stakeholder to advance collaborative approaches to solving key challenges in their landscapes." That is the human connection for achieving the goal of



Environmental education activity at Ninigret National Wildlife Refuge, Rhode Island. | US FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE NORTHEAST REGION

ecosystem protection; it's further noted this occurs through peer learning. Establishing the language, planning, and implementation in a way that is more holistic with integrated culturally appropriate principles, best practices, and policies is a better, stronger mode of engaging communities across diverse backgrounds and socioeconomic groups.

#### Where to from here?

A great way to summarize the messages set forth in this edition of *Coloring Outside the Lines* can be found in the words of the renowned Audre Lorde (writer, feminist, civil rights activist): “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.” Hence, collaborating with others around large landscape conservation needs to also embrace this fundamental philosophy if efforts are to truly be

successful. A level of cultural consciousness, and the reality of large landscapes as spaces also identified for personal healing, are slowly being brought to the forefront in these endeavors as a means of fostering long-term sustainability. The conservation movement has, indeed, involved more BIPOC over the years; this remains pivotal for both advancing racial justice as well as building effective collaborations that, generally, are not afraid to challenge the status quo or traditional mindsets.

New approaches must confront the dominant narrative about under-served populations and moderate assumptions regarding their overall caring about natural resources and desire to be involved (e.g., programmatic, management decisions). The cultural fabric of large landscape conservation dates back for centuries through today, as Native

Americans, for example, have paved the way for maintaining Indigenous uses and protecting “Mother Earth” for livelihood and sustenance (see Cornell 1985). Indisputably, other racio-ethnic groups have inseparable connections to the land throughout history (e.g., Blacks, Asians, Latinx and others). Traditional as well as alternative modes of managing large conservation landscapes are, therefore, essential for achieving the greatest long-term outcomes.

From program offerings and visitor use to protecting wildlife and restoring natural habitat, managers must be held accountable for the content of collaborative agreements; providing additional training to staff as part of the balance needed for success should also not be overlooked. Evading the inevitable (e.g., improving workforce development) could merely erode the infrastructure experts and professionals have worked so hard to create. For people of color, Clarke and Rein (2015) suggest that “a conscious analysis of where power is concentrated can help us begin building momentum to democratize the spaces where decisions that deeply affect our lives are made” (p. 8). Given intricate goals of natural resource management and the reasons why large landscapes exist in the first place, decisions made *do* impact our lives and make our communities even more resilient. So, despite perceived and real barriers to public involvement, or myths about park use and whether people of color are concerned about nature or not, tapping into the cultural heritage of multiple audiences and inviting their energy of direct action is a must for victory.

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