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Untangling roots: Reflections on eugenics, conservation, and US national parks

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INTRODUCTION

Two years ago, it came to our attention that one of the founders of Acadia National Park, with which we are both associated, was involved with eugenics, an international movement of scientists, doctors, politicians, educators, and others who supported controlling the genetic composition of human populations under the guise of “improvement.”

As our respective organizations are partners in caring for Acadia, we immediately recognized the need to address the park’s interpretation related to this founder. Website articles were easy to amend, ranger talks could be modified. Memorial plaques, place names, and the park’s overall approach to its founding story presented a more complicated challenge that required discussion with the families of the founders and the local community, and more research.

Thus began our descent into the tangled histories of conservation and eugenics. We learned a few things relatively quickly. First, that some of the key people behind the creation of some of the most popular US national parks—not only Acadia, but also Denali, Glacier, Everglades, Redwood, and Yosemite—also discriminated against anyone they deemed “unfit” and inferior, and a few (but not all) of the same were leaders in anti-immigration and forced sterilization eugenics efforts.

Second, we learned that despite the availability of both popular and academic publications on the subject, this history is not commonly known among our fellow conservation practitioners, communicators, and National

Park Service (NPS) staff.¹ Eugenics is often portrayed as a shameful, but completed, chapter in American history that ended after World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust.

But, as we are still learning, the ideas underlying eugenics are part of a larger world view that can best be described as a belief in White (male) supremacy, and they persist to the present day. Which is why we came to believe that acknowledging and addressing this history is critical if NPS and its partners are to be successful in efforts to be more inclusive, get every kid in a park, co-steward parks with Indigenous Nations, and have positive relationships with neighboring communities—all of which are necessary as parks face the urgent and dire consequences of a changing climate and biodiversity loss.

This essay reflects some of our preliminary research to understand the relationships of conservation, national parks, and eugenics in the United States and how they affect parks today, as well as actions NPS staff and partners are taking to recognize and reconcile these entangled histories. The roots spread wide and deep, and we have barely scratched the surface. We intend this article as an invitation, to ourselves and our readers, to further exploration and reflection.

PART ONE: EXPLORING THE EUGENICS-CONSERVATION CONNECTIONS

We are not academics, but communications professionals working for and with NPS. We did not have any special funding to support our work on this article, nor did we have the capacity to conduct extensive reviews of primary sources. Instead, our reflections rely upon the

work of several academic scholars who have spent many years documenting the connections between eugenics and conservation—including and especially *Control: The Dark History and Troubling Present of Eugenics* by Adam Rutherford, Susan Schrepfer’s *The Fight to Save the Redwoods*, Jonathan Spiro’s *Defending the Master Race*, Alexandra Stern’s *Eugenic Nation*, and several key journal articles. Like many of the authors we have cited, we find the connections are best illustrated through stories of individual people, the leaders of both eugenics and conservation movements. These individual stories are also important because of the role they play in national park founding narratives.

One of the prime examples is Madison Grant (1865–1937). A wealthy lawyer, Grant started his political career in conservation, helping to move the vision for Mount McKinley (now Denali) National Park successfully through Congress. He was influential in the creation of Glacier and Olympic National Parks and Redwood National and State Parks. A descendant of French Protestant and English Puritan immigrants, Grant also believed in and promoted a racist hierarchy: mixing with other groups he saw as inferior could not be tolerated. He believed it would doom the United States. Grant advocated for eugenics policies and immigration restriction. He supported forced sterilization, the surgical process of removing a person’s capacity to reproduce, for people with disabilities and those who had committed crimes. He was a leading voice of national campaigns for immigration restriction.²

Through his membership in the Boone and Crockett Club and the friendship that ensued, Grant had the ear of Theodore Roosevelt. In our professional circles, Roosevelt is renowned for his conservation leadership as president of

Charles M. Goethe is considered one of the founders of the NPS interpretive program. Yet he also was affiliated with the American Eugenics Society, American Genetics Association, and Eugenics Society of Northern California, and his writings advocated for immigration control, forced sterilization, and eliminating the “unfit.”

the United States but less so for his belief that the North American continent had to be taken from “squalid savages” by (and for) the “White race,”³ that Blacks were inferior, or that Asians were incompatible with “White civilization.”⁴

Across the country in California, Charles M. Goethe (1875–1966) supported many conservation and wilderness preservation causes, including the Sierra Club (of which he was named regional head in 1921) and the Save the Redwoods League. He personally funded acquisition of redwood groves and supported the effort to establish Everglades National Park, and is considered one of the founders of the NPS interpretive program. Yet he also was affiliated with the American Eugenics Society, American Genetics Association, and Eugenics Society of Northern California. His writings advocating for immigration control, forced sterilization, and eliminating the “unfit” were filled with what today would be considered hate speech against people from Mexico and Asia.⁵

Other individuals prominent in the broader history of science and conservation—such as Gifford Pinchot, Henry Fairfield Osborn, and David Starr Jordan—also supported eugenics.⁶

In the United States, conservationists with backgrounds in hunting, mountain climbing, sailing, fishing, parks and playgrounds, science, and education joined the eugenics movement. Is there a cause-and-effect relationship? Roots can be tangled for all kinds of reasons.

In national park “founding father” biographies, we found intersections between the two movements. Both were responses to urbanization and industrialization, and associated movements for social change. In both cases, rather than target the governments and industries most responsible for the problems (led by their own majority and in many cases by their own families) activists chose to focus on symptoms: declining wildlife, disappearing landscapes, increasing numbers of immigrants.

The eugenics and conservation movements are both underlain by a conglomerate of shared characteristics:

- a sense of entitlement to America;
- faith in science;
- pessimism about the future;
- a capacity to influence and create policies and standards; and
- a need for public education and support.

What follows is some of what we learned about these shared characteristics, and their relevance to national parks past and present.

PRESERVING NATURAL INHERITANCE

As a young man, Grant used his wealth and New York connections to pursue big game hunting across North America. As noted earlier, he was a member of the elite Boone and Crockett hunting club, co-founded by Theodore Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell in 1887. But by the time Grant joined the club in 1893, wildlife populations across North America were noticeably declining. Even though rarity of game added challenge to the pursuit and value to the trophy, disappearance of game would mean extinction of the “manly sport.”

Market hunting, which most certainly affected wildlife populations, was among what these conservationists judged to be the wrong ways of relating to nature. But so, too, were subsistence and sustenance hunting. Local residents attempting to procure food for their families were considered wildlife-destroying poachers. Indigenous Peoples practicing their cultural traditions and lifeways were dismissed as primitive and savage for their hunting, fishing, and gathering, relations evolved over millennia of being in place.

One of the early campaigns focused on protecting the “big game paradise” around Denali in Alaska, where bears, caribou, and Dall sheep were becoming scarce. Grant and the Boone and Crockett Club advocated for game laws that dictated how many animals could be taken, when, and where. In promoting what they deemed as the right way to relate to nature, they established a system of game wardens, registered guides, and permits to control the activities of those who relied on game for sport—and survival.

Surely part of their motivation was the very real and innate connection to the natural world shared by all humans. Wildlife really was on the decline and action was needed to prevent extinction of many species. But wildlife and wild lands were also symbolic of a nation—their nation.

In their own romanticized version of United States history, White male Protestants, and Christians more broadly, had a special role in the founding and meaning of the nation.⁷ Their ancestors had sailed the oceans, fought Indians, cleared the forests, farmed the fields, and won the West, and as such they considered themselves to be the rightful heirs to a mythic America—and its mythic wilderness, purged of its Indigenous inhabitants.⁸ This “pride of possession”⁹ motivated conservation: protecting “blank” spaces on the American canvas preserved places for this portrait to endure. Thus, lands such as Denali offered “a last chance for the people of the United States to preserve, untouched by civilization, a great primeval park in its

Madison Grant helped to move the vision for Mount McKinley (now Denali) National Park successfully through Congress. He was influential in the creation of Glacier and Olympic National Parks and Redwood National and State Parks. Grant also believed in and promoted a racist hierarchy: mixing with other groups he saw as inferior could not be tolerated. He believed it would doom the United States.

natural beauty.”¹⁰ It was *their* nature, *their* inheritance, and they were saving it for *their* own “civilized” kind.

Eugenics-minded conservationists who held such beliefs were quick to accept and support the “science” of racism, as researchers manipulated data, numbers, maps, and tests, ranking humans into biological groups measured by physical characteristics they then linked to inner intelligence, morals, or behaviors passed on from parents to children, fixed and unchangeable. Within their hierarchy, northern Europeans were the fittest and the best; their culture was the highest order. They didn’t question the “science” because it confirmed their bias, and conformed to a “racial worldview resolutely fixed in American culture and consciousness.”¹¹

SCIENCE AS SAVIOR

From their travels across the Great Plains, Mountain West, and Alaska, Grant, Roosevelt, and their fellow Boone and Crockett Club members (as well as other groups with similar experiences and assumptions of environmental decline) had learned that they could successfully use their organizations, clubs, and networks of likeminded friends and family to enact policy. But they also realized that creating space for wildlife was not enough to protect them. Sustaining populations required intervention, such as “culling the herd” for the good of a population; some later applied these lessons of power and control to human reproduction and migration.¹²

If, as one interpretation of the then-new so-called science of genetics claimed, racial and other character traits

were inherited, then the human race could be improved through better breeding. And to do so, eugenicists needed data, and data needed collecting and analyzing by such organizations as the Eugenics Record Office, a department of the Carnegie Institution of Washington's Station for Experimental Evolution at Cold Spring Harbor, New York, led by Charles Davenport. They found support for these institutions from some of the very same benefactors who funded conservation efforts.

Threatened by environmental, social, and demographic changes, eugenics leaders used their positions of privilege to preserve what they imagined was their rightful place at the top of the biological and social order through three primary campaigns: confinement and sterilization of the "feebleminded" and "inferior," immigration restriction, and race betterment.

This is where we found the connection to the person whose history launched our study: Acadia National Park co-founder Charles William Eliot, longtime president of Harvard University.¹³ According to Eliot, society's success in responding to and eradicating yellow fever and cholera was evidence that, through "the control and slow extinction of moral and mental defectives," breeding out the bad could be achieved.¹⁴ Descended from early Protestant colonists from England, Eliot was a vice president of the First International Congress of Eugenics in London in 1912. He served on the central committee of the First and Second National Conferences on Race Betterment in Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1914 and in San Francisco in 1915.

According to Charles William Eliot, Acadia National Park co-founder and longtime president of Harvard University, society's success in responding to and eradicating yellow fever and cholera was evidence that, through "the control and slow extinction of moral and mental defectives," breeding out the bad could be achieved. Eliot was a vice president of the First International Congress of Eugenics in 1912.

Himself a scientist trained in chemistry, Eliot touted the importance of biological science for solving fundamental social problems, and eugenics was no exception. He believed in research, such as the studies conducted by the Eugenics Record Office, that seemed to show how criminality and other moral defects were "eminently transmissible" from parent to child. He therefore supported laws forcing sterilization of "degenerate" and "feebleminded" people to improve the human race. Eliot, however, was vehemently against another way eugenics-minded conservationists sought to prevent the propagation of so-called inferior germ plasm: restricting immigration.¹⁵

PROTECTING AMERICA FROM DEGENERATE HORDES

At home in New York City, Grant was incensed at the way Italian immigrants hunted songbirds and squirrels in local city parks for food. But Grant's fury wasn't really about squirrels.

At the same time as expanding industry and settlement were crowding out the big game and destroying the habitats Grant so admired, people of different colors, languages, and faiths were crowding into *his* city. Grant felt overwhelmed and repulsed, "elbowed out of his own home" and "literally driven off the streets of New York City by the swarms of Polish Jews" and other Eastern and Southern Europeans.¹⁶ Theodore Roosevelt similarly worried that Americans were becoming, like the bison he helped to save, "the last remnant of a doomed and nearly vanished race."¹⁷ A fear of deterioration was connected to their sense of entitlement to America's land, water, and wildlife.

This worldview had already justified Indigenous genocide, Black enslavement, and Asian exclusion, and would in the 20th century continue, through American eugenics ideas and policies, to inspire the murder of more than six million Jews during the Holocaust.¹⁸

Grant differentiated himself from the new immigrants by claiming membership in a superior "Nordic" race. Immigrants, in contrast, were associated with weakness, disease, dirt, pests, invasive species, and "inferior germ plasm."¹⁹ It was stereotyping cloaked in the perceived authority of science and inspired by the perception of a world in decline.²⁰

Grant worked to create national parks while also lobbying to prevent immigration. Within months of establishing Acadia and Denali National Parks, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1917, which required immigrants to pass a literacy test. Still unsatisfied, Grant continued to push for more restrictions. He eventually helped secure passage in 1924 of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act,

which limited immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, condemning tens of thousands of Jews and others to their deaths.²¹

It wasn't enough for Goethe, a California banker and real estate developer. A member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, he was a hiker, birder, friend of John Muir, and avid fan of Grant, and founded and supported multiple eugenics organizations and, later, Nazi causes.²²

Watching as Mexican, Japanese, and Filipino immigrants not addressed by the 1924 legislation continued to flow into California, Goethe—himself a descendent of German immigrants—continued to lobby for even more restrictions on immigration and to expand sterilization throughout the 1930s. Eugenics was just another means for his racist ends. But what does it mean that, at the same time, he was helping to preserve groves of coastal redwood trees?

Goethe and Grant were among the few who linked the two causes explicitly, claiming that the number of “wretched outcasts” and the “new hordes” of immigrants threatened the conservation of natural resources.²³ Conservation and eugenics, at least parts of it, are rooted in land: who has rights to it, who controls it, who decides its future. Conservation was a way to preserve land (for future generations of certain groups), while eugenics was a way to preserve and expand the future existence of people (in particular places). And eugenics-minded conservationists intended to preserve only the best.

CONTINUING THE QUEST FOR PURITY

When it came to both nature and people, eugenics and conservation leaders acted as gatekeepers, stewards who held the future in their hands. They would decide which people were worthy of being Americans, who was most fit to reproduce, and which places deserved to be parks.

One year after publishing *The Passing of the Great Race*, the best-selling book of the eugenics movement, and six months after helping to pass the Immigration Act of 1917, Grant joined Henry Fairfield Osborn of the American Museum of Natural History and John C. Merriam of the University of California at Berkeley on a trip to northern California. Osborn supported eugenics and helped Grant with his book. Merriam would soon become director of the Carnegie Institution, which supported the Eugenics Record Office and its collecting of data on “degenerate” family trees and “feeble-minded” cousins. The men camped along the South Fork of the Eel River among the redwood trees, at once awed in the presence of giants and

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— Charles M. Goethe

dismayed by the sounds of nearby logging. By then, what was once a fairly continuous swath of woodland along the northern California coastline had been fragmented into patches and isolated groves.

The following year, they formed the Save the Redwoods League. With funding from individuals including Goethe and NPS Director Stephen Mather, they would preserve more than 100,000 acres of redwood trees in state and national parks. In our research we did not find evidence that Mather was a eugenicist.

For Grant, Osborn, and Merriam, in echoes of their earlier rankings of human groups, redwood trees represented nature's most “noble race,” the remains of an ancient and primeval—and unpeopled—wilderness. A racial worldview continued to influence the language of conservation as the status of the groves inspired discussion about national park standards. In the eugenicists' world, they would deem which “great,” “extraordinary,” and “supreme” places represented national significance, just as no “inferior” immigrants would be allowed into “their” America.²⁴

Still, by this time, creating new national parks required a supportive public. Believing that a public who understood the “purity” of wilderness would also support conservation, eugenics-minded park leaders saw a need for outreach and education.

INCULCATING SCIENCE LITERACY AND MORAL VALUES

In his time, Goethe was one of the strongest advocates of education in America. He supported orphanages, playgrounds, and urban planning, and was influential in founding the Boy Scouts of America. Inspired by a naturalist-guided hike while traveling in Europe, Goethe initiated a series of naturalist-led talks and field trips in the Lake Tahoe area. These talks led directly to creation of the NPS interpretive program.²⁵

Goethe wrote nature guides about Yosemite and other areas, and pamphlets that combined eugenics with travel commentary, natural history, and ethnography. A sound understanding of biology was essential in Goethe's view, not only for the appreciation and preservation of nature, but also, as his friend Grant had argued, for instilling proper moral values. An educated public would naturally accept and support eugenics research, laws, policies, and philosophies.

Goethe thought naturalist programs made people more "biologic-minded." He felt that knowledge of the laws of evolution, and exposure to ancient ecosystems, would increase public awareness of biological selection processes, promote selective breeding, and garner support for the passage of immigration laws. In one of his many educational pamphlets, Goethe explained the connection between naturalist education and eugenics: appreciating and protecting nature, preserving and managing wilderness, and eliminating "bad genes" all showed "accelerated progress in human betterment." "Perhaps," Goethe continued, "the greatest national gains from a really completed National Park system ... can be expected in the accelerated building of a eugenically-better nation."²⁶ This is one of the few examples of statements explicitly connecting the two movements. Other, but less explicit statements, can be found in discussions of immigrants. Immigration policy was one tool eugenicists used to control the racial makeup of American society. In arguing for an "emergency" immigration quota after World War I, Grant linked the "servile class" of immigrants with rapid development of natural resources, including "the slaughter of all mammals for food, trophies or fur, of all birds for sport or feathers, the cutting of all forests for timber and grape stakes, the opening of all coal mines, the draining of all oil wells, the harnessing of all waterfalls for power."²⁷

A PERSISTENT LEGACY

As the creation of national parks entered its most prolific era during the Great Depression and beyond, many communities, their use of land deemed improper, faced

Within NPS, recognition is growing that the complicated history of parks also makes them ideal places to confront the racist legacies of the conservation movement.

"resettlement" for the benefit of the nation; parks such as Great Smoky Mountains, Shenandoah, and Isle Royale were created in their stead.²⁸ And long after eugenics as a movement was thought to be extinguished (i.e., in the years immediately following World War II), overt attempts to displace communities to make parks and to control who had access to conserved lands persisted. Many early conservation leaders were still prominent in the waning eugenics movement at this time. We believe that scholars have yet to fully illustrate how the thinking inspired by eugenics continued in the National Park System into the later 20th century and beyond.

But we reached a point in our research where we could go no further on our own. We would have had to broaden the conversation and greatly expand the scope of our study, and needed more resources than are readily available to us. Still, we can hear the echoes of eugenics in the language of conservation science; in public discussions of immigration, public health, and outdoor recreation; in the legacy of interpretive infrastructure and practices of NPS.

Almost by default, the way some parks view their origins and present them to the public continues to perpetuate eugenicist and other discriminatory principles. A common national park or land conservation origin story revolves around the role of individuals in ensuring the protection of certain places. But within these stories lurks a larger, overarching story of who these individuals were, what they believed, who they were protecting land for, and why. Their conservation actions cannot be separated from other causes they supported. Likewise, NPS itself and many individual park founding stories celebrate their democratic-sounding establishment clauses. For example, the 1872 legislation creating Yellowstone states that this place is hereby "set apart as a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people," without asking *which people* actually benefited. Furthermore, citations of this legislation rarely include the full text: "that all persons who shall locate or settle upon or occupy the same, or any part thereof, except as hereinafter provided, shall be considered trespassers and removed therefrom."²⁹

National park enabling legislation and origin stories often omit the violent dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their homelands, the enslaved labor behind the wealth that enabled conservation, and displacement of other non-Indigenous communities in favor of a dominant narrative that justifies such actions in the name of universal heritage.

Within NPS, recognition is growing that the complicated history of parks also makes them ideal places to confront

the racist legacies of the conservation movement.³⁰ The possibilities for how to do this are numerous. By completing histories, changing language, and expanding ideas about which stories are told and by whom, some national parks and offices have seized an opportunity to confront their own troubled origins.

PART TWO: CREATING A MORE HONEST AND INCLUSIVE FUTURE

NPS has been working to re-examine and correct public information about its histories, change the way new parks are founded, understand its own internal drivers of bias and discrimination, and rethink system-wide approaches and culture. This change has taken place sometimes through the work of a single employee in an individual park and sometimes by NPS offices and program staff, in a complex mosaic of learning and doing. What are some examples of how parks are addressing the legacy of eugenics? What more can NPS and others do to create a more honest and inclusive future?

BUSTING “FOUNDING FATHER” MYTHS

Just as stories of park founders offer a way to understand the eugenics–conservation connections, so do their stories provide a point of beginning for confronting the legacy of eugenics in the national parks.

In August 2021, park rangers at Muir Woods National Monument modified existing interpretive waysides with caution tape, “history under construction” signage, and sticky notes with information about park founders Gifford Pinchot and William Kent and their connections to eugenics. The display prompted dialogue with visitors and also helped park staff begin the process of amending narratives about Muir Woods.³¹ Around the same time, largely at the urging of seasonal interpretive staff, Acadia National Park started a multi-year effort with its partners to contextualize the role of Eliot and the park founding in general.³² These are just two examples of how NPS has joined a broader movement within the conservation community to more fully research and address the “complicated histories” of their founders, such as California’s Reexamining Our Past Initiative.³³ To help foster these individual park efforts, funding is now available to help parks get the resources they need to expand inclusive interpretation and education.

In April 2022, NPS added a section to its website on conservationists who “also embraced exclusionary ideas and policies that caused incalculable harm to people,” with profiles of Madison Grant and others.³⁴ “These stories are part of NPS history,” the website states. “Understanding them is necessary to build a more honest and inclusive future.”

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NPS staff also created topical sites where stories from across the National Park System could be aggregated, including Colonization & Settlement, Immigration, Japanese American Confinement, and Segregation & Desegregation. The challenge remains, however, to illustrate how these topics are related to each other, to tell the stories of individual park origins within the context of these larger, intersecting themes. And, how do we expand a common narrative of the National Park Service without losing staff enthusiasm and public trust?

We can diversify founding narratives—we just need to commit to making the effort, instead of reaching for the same tired quotes or repeating the same old stories about who is responsible for a given park. What about parks created by collective action? Acadia was in fact assembled from multiple parcels of donated land; every individual donor could be considered a “park founder.” What other parks resulted from similar community collaboration? Who were the women and people of color who supported the creation of parks and the protection of wildlife and landscapes? Where are the statements acknowledging that the land was never uninhabited, pristine wilderness?

Uncovering these ties isn’t easy. Archival records and historical sources of those who have been silenced, oppressed, and marginalized are limited. Often, a single committed staff member takes it upon themselves to correct a park’s story, to include and center other people and their voices.

EXAMINING THE NATURE OF SCIENCE

We recognize that, for Acadia co-founder Eliot and others, eugenicist thoughts and actions were well within the intellectual mainstream in and beyond the United States, embraced by those who valued collectivism, efficiency, expertise, organization, regulation, and planning—the

same Progressive ideals that lay at the core of early-20th-century conservation, ideals which, as we have learned, can be deeply problematic, even when well-intended.³⁵ Today, this history provides an opportunity to explore the definitions and ethical considerations of science with Acadia visitors.

Eugenicists misinterpreted emerging theories of evolution and heredity. Despite developing some statistical methods still in use today, they mistook correlation for causation. They published results without experimental design or peer review. Their data collection was biased. As researchers they cherry-picked and invented data to confirm what they already believed: that humans could be divided into distinct races, that some races were inferior, and, implicitly, that they and their kind were superior. After World War II and the Holocaust, eugenics lost both its scientific status and public popularity.³⁶ (It had not lost its practical application, as miscegenation laws persisted until ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1967, and state sterilization laws continue to the present day.)³⁷

Eugenicists thought they were practicing science, but eugenics is not science. It relies upon invented evidence of human differences and inheritance, raising the question, what *is* science? Park interpreters, communicators, and educators at national parks are well-positioned to pose this question, to share stories and engage with park visitors in ways that encourage the critical thinking at the heart of scientific inquiry. Yet NPS also needs to recognize its role in and be open to presenting science as a way—and not the only or necessarily the best way—of knowing.

All the conservation leaders discussed here had early positive experiences in nature that motivated their activism. Their experiences and their feelings for nature were real. Science has repudiated their racist views, but contemporary research continues to demonstrate the influence of nature on human mental and physical health and well-being.

REFRAMING CONSERVATION

The legacy of eugenics persists in pessimistic framing linked to a romanticized version of the past and perceived degeneration of social and natural worlds.³⁸ But whose worlds? Such framing is the perspective of some, not all, and excludes those who have already experienced destruction of their homelands and culture, for whom present crises are not “unprecedented.” It matters how we frame conservation problems and solutions. For example, when it comes to climate change, national parks are greatly impacted—the severity of which should not be minimized—but they also represent stories of inspired action. Efforts such as the NPS History & Hope climate change interpretation project are including diverse voices and perspectives to offer a more positive path in conservation.³⁹

NPS seeks to foster an organizational culture that is increasingly inclusive and participatory and feels a responsibility to ensure that park narratives “are informed by up-to-date scholarship that is inclusive and incorporates issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and power.”⁴⁰ But complexities, challenges, and barriers remain. Even the Muir Woods National Monument webpage about William Kent’s role in creating the park, while acknowledging Kent’s White supremacist views, at the same time describes Redwood Canyon as “pristine” and omits any mention of the trees being part of the homeland of the Miwok peoples, who instead are featured under the “History & Culture” webpage. The very navigational structure of many park websites separates people, culture, and nature. Acadia National Park has begun to address this by providing thematic points of entry to the park story outside of the confines of the binary culture/nature narrative. Framing Acadia as a “peopled place” throughout all of time is key to breaking the idea that Acadia is/was pristine nature.

BEGINNING WITH THE LAND

Where to begin today? Experiences in place, outdoors, on the land, have great potential to be common ground. All the conservation leaders discussed here had early positive experiences in nature that motivated their activism. Their experiences and their feelings for nature were real. Science has repudiated their racist views, but contemporary research continues to demonstrate the influence of nature on human mental and physical health and well-being.

Real, too, are the parks themselves. The fact remains that Acadia, Denali, Glacier, Redwood, Muir Woods, and other national parks have helped to conserve North American biodiversity and ecosystems. Today, public lands contain some of the best possibilities for Indigenous communities

to renew relationships with their homelands, and offer space for millions of people, including those historically excluded, to connect with nature.

When it comes to eugenics-minded conservationists, let their legacy not be their reasons for conservation, not their racist ideas or supremacist beliefs, but the land itself. The parks and preserves they helped create have successfully conserved plants, wildlife, ecosystems, and history from the continued onslaughts of colonization and industrial capitalism. Dall sheep roam the slopes of Denali, redwoods stand tall in the California fog, and waves crash against the rocky shores of Acadia. From tangled historical roots, with a contemporary commitment to reconcile and not repeat past mistakes, NPS can help grow a diversity of places that welcome every member of the one and only human race.

ENDNOTES

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