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PSF

PARKS STEWARDSHIP FORUM

# AMERICA'S LARGEST CLASSROOM

EXPANDING THE ROLE OF  
EDUCATION IN OUR PARKS

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# CONNECTING THE DOTS

Why does what and who came before us matter?



*Nina S. Roberts and Alan Spears*

## PREFACE—NOTES FROM NINA

Why is “Coloring Outside the Lines” the title of my column in this journal? In the end, it is all about changing the narrative. Coloring Outside the Lines leads me to further action about engaging communities of color outdoors and into the natural world—for those who have not had such experiences, that is. I didn’t say “start engaging” because people of color have been immersed in the outdoors/nature for centuries. From living outdoors, working in nature and fearing the woods, to playing, exploring, and loving nature (and more), peo-

ple from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds have been doing it. We are out there; always have been. For me, this also leads back to a discussion of social permission as well as addressing structural barriers. This column title speaks to innovation coupled with communities of color and arbitrary “lines.” We must expand the conversation. Yet when our political climate challenges this work and national priorities become twisted, progress made decade-after-decade reverses its course, leading to natural resource destruction and sociocultural deterioration. This issue’s essay is written with my friend and colleague, [Alan Spears](#), senior director of cultural resources, National Parks Conservation Association; we hope readers think differently and become inspired.

↑ Boarding a bus for a 14-day backpacking trip in the High Sierras, 1970s.  
| COURTESY OUTWARD BOUND ADVENTURES ARCHIVES

*In many ways, there is a lack of knowledge and honoring of our past, especially as it relates to people of color, including our own involvement in preservation and conservation.*

## INTRODUCTION

John Muir and Rachel Carson are pioneers in their own right, yet how many people know, for example, who [Lancelot Jones](#) or [Martha B. Aikens](#) are? Few involved in the world of parks and protected areas have a sense about the forefathers and foremothers who are pioneers in engaging communities of interest across cultures. In many ways, there is a lack of knowledge and honoring of our past, especially as it relates to people of color, including our own involvement in preservation and conservation. We pay a great price as a result. In this column we offer a brief historical perspective with hopes to inspire the future. We offer a reminder that there were other organizational leaders who paved the way to create the progress we see today in parks, conservation education, environmental studies, outdoor recreation, and related areas.

Well into the 21st century federal land management agencies (FMLAs) such as the National Park Service (NPS) and non-profit organizations like the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) continue to struggle to make and sustain gains on the relevancy, diversity, and inclusion front. Younger practitioners often operate in a vacuum where their organizational culture and history make the critical blunder of engaging in justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion work without the benefit of understanding that generations still living, and possibly sitting one or two cubicles over, have trodden these same paths before.

As a result, we begin to feel as if we are living in an enhanced cultural diversity version of the movie *Groundhog Day*, predestined to relive, redo, and reenact the past with little hope of learning from our history and adapting our approaches to ensure success. How does education come into play as we seek to train the Next Gen of leaders and decision-makers? Professionals have all been talking about “changing demographics” for a while, yet few have a profound sense of what that really means. In this article, there’s no way to include everything that we’d like or that we know is important; hence, what we share is not exhaustive so any omissions of organizations or specific individuals are not intended to diminish values or contributions. We merely hope to help connect the dots. For example, people of color outdoors has been a topic of conversation since the 1962 Outdoor Recreation

Resources Review Commission (ORRRC) report, or even earlier, and in 2002 Rodriguez and Roberts critiqued our nation’s progress, or lack thereof, 40 years later. That was nearly 20 years ago. Since then, diversity has become a “hot topic” and we’ve seen a surge of additional research, a plethora of new programs and organizations, a burst of mainstream media coverage, and noteworthy language shifts, to name a few.

What does the scarcity of people of color outdoors mean for public lands, national parks, subsequent policy about those landscapes, and our collective ability as a nation to protect and preserve them? What happens if we don’t invest in this work and figure out how to truly “get it right”? Diversity will always be an essential construct, and this work has evolved to become part of acronyms such as RDI (Relevance Diversity Inclusion), EDI (Equity Diversity Inclusion; some use DEI—same acronym, different order), and now Justice Equity Diversity Inclusion (JEDI). This is great—yet it risks being potentially meaningless if organizations who establish statements reflecting any of the above, and post them online, but don’t follow through or commit the resources necessary for success.

Implicit racism is deeply embedded in US society and the culture of parks and conservation is no exception. A lack of awareness intensifies the problem. Many individuals in these or related fields who are privileged by belonging to one or more dominant groups do not feel responsible for the systemic racism that also exists in the parks culture. People who do not experience a certain type of inequity tend to dismiss it more easily than those who do. Thank you to all those who helped move the needle forward. This includes traditional parks and conservation professionals as well as people of color, our unsung heroes who were not always treated kindly or with respect, yet helped shape the public lands conversation that we know today.

The social media sensation has been exploding and has brought this work to an innovative level, both dispelling myths and encouraging new users and visitors across cultures. The advent of social media

*People of color [will become] the US's majority by the 2040s.... To ignore these shifts is to do so at our peril; there's a greater opportunity to reach more, be bigger, do better.*

in the late 1990s created an ability to exponentially spread messages, tell our stories, and promote our programs to communities of interest (e.g., people of color, LGBTQIA, people with disabilities). And with these technological advances, this platform brings with it an opportunity for race-specific affinity groups, among others, to band together because they can, and because they want to. For example, the new kids on the block, such as Outdoor Afro, Latino Outdoors, Outdoor Asian, and Natives Outdoors, seek to serve a very specific typology and are a welcome commodity! We applaud their leadership, growth, and increased visibility. They play a vital role in national progress and change (see [diversifyoutdoors.com](https://diversifyoutdoors.com) for other examples). Additionally, each of these organizations has a different history in the outdoors, so some of their nature-based activities that connect them to their past, their families' cultures, or ancestors, for instance, will reflect their outdoor practices differently. While many organizations of the past also served specific communities of interest, others sought to engage a broad cultural constituency, partially because there was a smaller proportion of people of color to reach.

Demographics continue to depict a seismic transformation, including people of color becoming the US's majority by the 2040s, according to the Census Bureau. To ignore these shifts is to do so at our peril; there's a greater opportunity to reach more, be bigger, do better. Knowing this is fact and not fiction, organizations have begun to get on the DEI bandwagon in a way that, for some, reaps great rewards of progress. For others, "lip service and rhetoric" is still the rule of the land causing them to get left behind and, consequently, unable to recruit a diverse workforce. And, in many cases these parks and other outdoor organizations are, therefore, unable to retain extraordinary talent because people of color can read between the lines and no longer have to stay where they are not valued or their perspectives and knowledge embraced. Combined with structural and social factors, the relative homogeneity in the parks and related fields reinforces the dominant culture. This fact notwithstanding, many organizations, from non-profits to FLMAs, have diversified their staff and boards in some respects. Yet, the reality is this remains a smaller proportion than what has been predicted for the 21st century (see [Green 2.0](#), formerly the Green Diversity Initiative). There are models and "best practices" by others who have advanced this work—not without challenges, flaws, and shortcomings. These organizations were an impetus and have shared many lessons learned along the journey.

#### A RICH AND REWARDING HISTORY: ORGANIZATIONS AND AGENCIES WHO PAVED THE WAY

There have been racially diverse leaders in the field of parks and protected areas hard at work for decades. Additionally, researchers and academic scholars have explored this work for a long time, acknowledging the history, trends, and gaps in the literature. Perhaps only in the last 10–15 years, the tide is turning, and more voices are being heard. A conversation that has occurred for 50+ years, including the pursuit of "equitable access" that has been at the forefront of the work of pioneering individuals and organizations, is finally receiving the recognition it deserves (Erin Gates, California



Young Brothers from East Oakland enjoy tide pooling at Point Reyes National Seashore, circa 1990. | COURTESY RUNNING GRASS

*“There has been a long history of people of color who have been directly involved and engaged in outdoor recreation, quite literally going back to the founding of our country....”*

State Parks, personal communication). Depending on the type of organization, there may be greater flexibility or, in other cases, merely some action-oriented professionals working amidst a sea of bureaucracy who may not feel heard. As Gates notes, “Just because the government is listening doesn’t validate the message. The message was valid a long time ago, and pioneers have been sharing that message.... [Organizations] must continue to create space for these conversations, ask the tough questions, and be willing to listen.”

Having some knowledge of this evolution is conducive to making progress. Although some people, especially those who began this work more recently, may not know precisely the names of these leaders or organizations, the vital ingredient is recognizing there has, in fact, been extraordinary effort—painful at times yet always rewarding—laying the groundwork for the innovative programs and policy changes we see today.

Researchers across cultures notwithstanding, one of the few journalists who have made this eminent-ly clear is James Mills. In his book *The Adventure Gap* he makes a strong statement that there have been role models all along. As he acknowledges, “There has been a long history of people of color who have been directly involved and engaged in outdoor recreation, quite literally going back to the founding of our country through the age of exploration, through the 19th and 20th centuries.” Furthermore, an important distinction is that other people of color spent time outdoors, yet for them doing so was not always a recreational experience. For example, the black regular Army troops, more commonly referred to as **Buffalo Soldiers**, spent much of their time outdoors mostly in the American West, yet what they were doing would not be considered recreational. A great example from Nix (2018) takes us back to 1904 when the Buffalo Soldiers constructed an arboretum in Yosemite, recognized today as the first museum in our national parks. Six years later, in 1910, Glacier National Park was

established, and that summer Buffalo Soldiers went off to the Pacific Northwest and northern Rockies to help fight wildfires (Nix 2018). A recent NPS resource study (National Park Service 2019) evaluated ways to increase awareness and understanding of the Buffalo Soldiers as well as develop new methods to enhance historical research, education, and interpretation.

Over the last 60 years, many organizations played a role and were instrumental in the outdoor recreation and conservation “movements” that laid foundational stones and have “paved the way” for our work today. The examples that follow are just one way to increase awareness that we’ve done this work for a long time. This list is not exhaustive. They provide the reader with extraordinary models as an attempt to reach those audiences less familiar with the history of these efforts (e.g., journalists, program directors, new grassroots organizations, social media influencers, new outdoor enthusiasts across race, class, and gender).

On the federal government level, we acknowledge the history of segregation on public lands and conflicts that sometimes arose among, and between, users and land managers as a result of



Buffalo Soldiers in the 24th Infantry carried out mounted patrol duties in Yosemite National Park, 1899.  
| YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK ARCHIVES

*History teaches us that despite a decree outlawing racial discrimination in the CCC, young African American enrollees still lived and worked in separate camps.*

racism. While new laws surfaced mitigating the impacts of segregation, discrimination indisputably remained. This column is not intended to focus on this atrocious history, and we do not dispute that progress moves at a snail's pace. Rather, we want to recognize past threats to equity and inclusion and offer a perspective of the affirmative efforts that sometimes go unnoticed. This work should neither be invisible nor rendered as non-existent.

One example, the [Civilian Conservation Corps](#) (CCC) of the Roosevelt era in the 1930s, included African Americans on national park crews. History teaches us that despite a decree outlawing racial discrimination in the CCC, young African American enrollees still lived and worked in separate camps as they experienced our nation's parks and public lands (both in their CCC work and during leisure time). While this is objectionable by today's standards, the CCC and the parks it created, such as [Prince William Forest Park](#), are a testament to the success of the program in exposing young African Americans to natural resources and environmental stewardship early on. So many of these incredible programs and efforts from the distant past go unnoticed and unrecognized today. This is due, in part, because there is still a dearth of visitor use "evidence" of the changes they spearheaded—and because their efforts may seem inconsequential compared with today's expectations. The gap between what they accomplished and what we expect today has only been heightened over the past 15–20 years by an increase in media hype focused on how agencies, still, are fouling up and doing an inferior job in promoting diversity.

So, by the 1970s land management agencies had been making sporadic progress in promoting diversity in natural resources and conservation for decades, yet challenges were clearly still plentiful. That decade proved to be a watershed for DEI. One exceptional effort that began during the 1970s was the establishment of relationships and cooperative education programs with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), including with public land-grant HBCUs. In fact, many pioneers in the natural resource, conservation, and environmental studies arena are alumni of HBCUs. And the Youth Conservation Corps, Young Adult Conservation Corps, and Job Corps models of the 1970s led the way for embracing an inclusive envi-

ronment connecting thousands of people of color to parks, environmental and conservation projects, and green job training opportunities across the nation.

While there are many presidential executive orders (EOs) in existence, pertinent to parts of this article is the seminal [Executive Order 12898](#) ("Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations") issued by President William J. Clinton in 1994. This EO outlines the crucial task for federal agencies to ensure "no racial, ethnic, cultural or socioeconomic group disproportionately bears the negative environmental consequences resulting from governmental programs, policies, or activities." EO 12898 also directs these programs, policies, and activities to be conducted in a manner that does not have the effects of exclusion or discrimination towards minority, low-income, or tribal populations. Furthermore, EO 12898 directs each federal agency to prepare a plan to integrate environmental justice into its activities. Accountability and follow-through, or lack thereof, would be another chapter in our history.

In 1998 the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) wrote a large compendium of programs and activities offered by national wildlife refuges across the country to engage people of color. "Minority Outreach in State Fish and Wildlife Agencies" (see Roberts et al. 2009) is a report to the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies by its Education Committee, Subcommittee on Minority Outreach. Assistance was provided by USFWS's Management Assistance Team and the Division of Federal Aid. This report was the result of the first initiative of USFWS to assess the nationwide status of state fish and wildlife agency efforts to reach minorities in both education and outreach programs as well as in workforce recruitment and retention.

Non-profits have equally served our communities well in a multitude of ways for generations. From the [Fresh Air Fund](#) established in 1877, to youth camps and Boy/Girls Scout programs in the early 1900s, these long-standing organizations, built on

*OBA was the brainchild of one of the first women in radio, who was assisted by a former Tuskegee Airman as well as the first African American in the Angeles Chapter of the Sierra Club.*

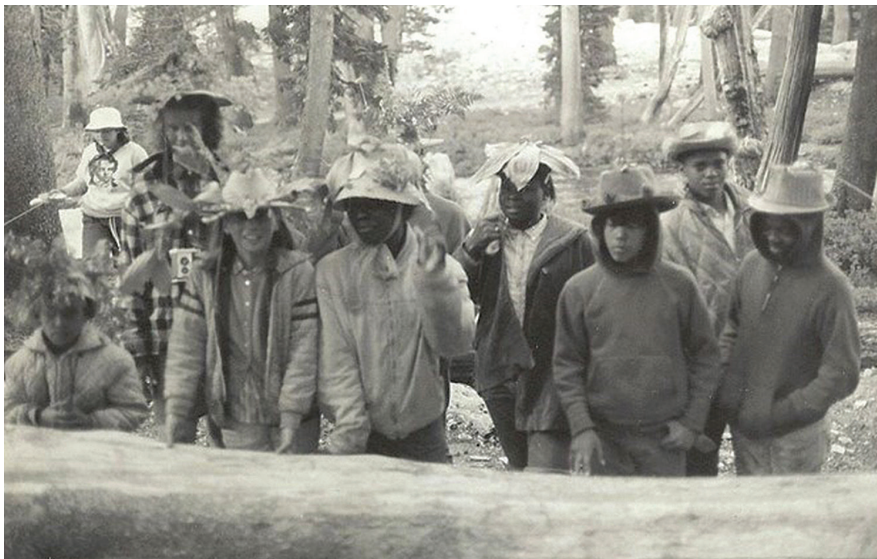
the charitable backs of white people, have been “getting city kids into the outdoors to experience nature” for a long time, conveying that this is not a new phenomenon. Fast forward to 1962: [Outward Bound Adventures](#) (OBA) was the brainchild of one of the first women in radio, who was assisted by a former Tuskegee Airman as well as the first African American in the Angeles Chapter of the Sierra Club. Today OBA is known as “the oldest non-profit in the nation created and dedicated to providing outdoor education, conservation and environmental learning expeditions for primarily low income, urban and rural youth and their families.” Their unique history actually began with their first trip in 1960 as a Junior Audubon Science Club for inner-city kids before they changed the name to OBA and eventually obtained non-profit status in 1967. Several years later, in 1972, the [Environmental Careers Organization](#), a national non-profit, was created. For some 40 years before it closed around 2012, it operated with a mission to “enhance the environment through the development of diverse leaders, the promotion of careers, and the inspiration of individual action.” The [Roundtable Association](#) (RTA), also now defunct, was a national non-profit organization established in 1984 that provided African American recreation, park, and conservationist professionals with an independent and non-partisan forum for deliberation and decision-making. RTA closed down when the founder, [Ira J. Hutchison](#), passed away. RTA’s forum encour-

aged aggressive participation in the examination of recreation, park, and conservation issues and public policy, and subsequently published *The Blueprint: Improving the Quality of Parks, Recreation and Conservation Services for Minority Populations*. Although the *Blueprint* was always a work in progress, it became well known and was presented at a national press conference in 2000, “Guiding principles for community engagement among minority populations in park, recreation, and conservation services.”

[Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences](#) (MANRRS) started as a small group of minority students from the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Michigan State University. Out of its networking activities stemmed the first leadership conference of MANRRS in 1986 and a national conference has been held annually since then. Today, more than 60 colleges and universities have MANRRS chapters and natural resource agencies nationwide have been able to recruit students who have participated and competed for permanent employment. In the late 1980s, a group of educators and cultural and community activists created the [Three Circles Center for Multicultural Environmental Education](#)

to help shift environmental education towards a broader, more authentic and inclusive, community-based approach. The center seeks to “introduce, encourage and cultivate multicultural perspectives and values in environmental and outdoor education, recreation and interpretation.”

Although only a small part of this brief history, in 1991 the [First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit](#) propelled the environmental justice movement onto the national stage. This event brought together over 300 African, Latino, Native, and



[Outward Bound Adventures](#) participants on 10-day backpacking trip to the High Sierras, circa 1964–1965.  
| COURTESY OUTWARD BOUND ADVENTURES ARCHIVES



Asian Americans from all 50 states. A noteworthy addition here is that the [Second National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit](#) was held in 2002 to review the accomplishments of the movement over the previous 11 years. Although other opportunities for information exchange have been organized since then, no additional summits from this prominent start have been held to date. Next, it is important to mention the [Student Conservation Association](#) (SCA), founded by Elizabeth “Liz” Titus-Putnam in 1957. It is the nation’s largest and oldest provider of national and community service opportunities in conservation involving student and adult volunteers in the stewardship of public lands, including natural and cultural resources. In 1993, SCA established the [Conservation Career Development Program](#) (since renamed) to embrace the challenge of diversity by working primarily, but not exclusively, with people of color and women.

WOW ([Wonderful Outdoor World](#)), established in 1995, is one of the first programs to introduce

city kids to the outdoors, where they “traded their Walkmans and Gameboys for sleeping bags and backpacks” (BLM, 1995, p. 3). [WOW](#) offers the excitement of outdoor recreation and environmental education through an overnight camping experience at local Los Angeles recreation centers or parks. One of the earliest and most unique collaborations, [WOW](#) program partners and founders include the US Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Walt Disney Company, Chevrolet, Coleman, and the Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks. All contributed to the mission of introducing urban youth to the wonders of the outdoors, educating them about outdoor recreation and community building skills, and teaching them environmental stewardship (e.g., service projects were part of each overnight camp-out) (BLM 1995).

The [National Hispanic Environmental Council](#) was founded in 1997 as a policy, program, and advocacy organization that works to ensure Latinos have a voice and a seat at the national environmental



Students in SCA’s Conservation Career Development Program learning to build steps on a trail . | COURTESY STUDENT CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION ARCHIVES

## WOW! CITY KIDS DISCOVER THE WONDERFUL OUTDOOR WORLD



Photo by: John Dalton

BLM Deputy Director Denise Meridith and U.S. Department of Agriculture Under Secretary James Lyons encourage young people to enjoy nature.

WOW, Wonderful Outdoor World, was one of the first programs to introduce city kids to the outdoors. | BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT NEWSBEAT ARCHIVES

decision-making table. A year later, in 1998, the [James P. Beckwourth Outdoor Education Center](#) was founded as a mentoring and development program for Denver youth ages 8 to 18. While the [Beckwourth Mountain Club](#) for adults (founded in 1993) still exists, the youth program is no longer in operation. A core goal was to groom urban youth “to be responsible and productive members of society through leadership programs, peer and parent accountability, and interaction with nature.”

Regarding a few milestone events, [NPCA](#) led the charge of three national-level [Mosaic in Motion](#) conferences. Held in 1999, 2000, and 2002 in different cities across the country, they were a series of multi-day workshops designed to forge connections between people of diverse ethnic backgrounds and America’s national parks and public lands. Coupled with the first event was the advent of NPCA’s groundbreaking Community Partners program that ran from 1999 to 2003. This initiative was established to connect national parks in six major cities more closely to racially and ethnically diverse constituents. Several years later, stemming from the NPS’s continued recognition that African Americans are one of several underrepresented visitor groups to national parks (see, for example, NPCA’s 2009 Diversity Task Force Report), the [Breaking the Color Barrier in the Great Outdoors](#) conference and expo was organized by [Earthwise Productions](#) in 2009. This one-time event showcased the broad diversity among Americans who are committed activists, protecting our environment, conserving our natural treasures, and performing extraordinary feats of personal accomplishment in the “great outdoors.” For those unaware of this history, it was believed this conference was one of the first of its kind. It brought together the same kind of diverse leaders and added a broader grassroots perspective from conservation, outdoor recreation, historic preservation, and higher education as did its predecessor, [Mosaic in Motion](#).

The most current endeavor, launched in 2017, known as [PGM ONE](#), “People of the Global Majority in the Outdoors Nature & Environment,” is a national summit by people of color, for people of color. Following that successful first annual event, the effort has upheld its vision and grown to serve more than 350 professionals of color. Conveners

*Mosaic in Motion conferences were a series of workshops designed to forge connections between people of diverse ethnic backgrounds and America’s national parks and public lands.*

seek to create “an intentional space for black, indigenous, and people of color/the global majority who participate in US-based movements for environmental education, access, and justice; land sovereignty; conservation; climate justice; food justice; and others.”

On the cultural and historic front, the [Association for the Study of African American Life and History](#) (ASALH) has worked with both NPS and NPCA to raise awareness about the critical role the federal agency plays in protecting and interpreting the African American experience. Founded by Dr. Carter G. Woodson in 1915, ASALH played an instrumental role in working to get his home in Washington, DC, designated as a unit of the national park system. ASALH has lobbied on behalf of Obama-era national monument designations that also helped diversify our national parks, such as Pullman National Monument in Chicago and the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument in Alabama. ASALH’s work deserves mention because the strong, yet not well understood, connection between the National Park Service and the preservation of African American history and culture serves as another tool for connecting black and brown people to sites ranging from Yosemite to the Frederick Douglass Home.

There are many more angles that could be included to help connect more dots. For instance, while exposure, experience, and experiential learning in



Participants at the PGM ONE Summit, Berkeley, CA, 2019.  
| NINA S. ROBERTS

the outdoors is essential, stewardship and education must continue too, as well as all the efforts, including by people of color, that occur to diversify the national park system and designate new units. It is our conviction that sharing with people the fact that our parks are more relevant based on the stories and resources they protect is an equally effective way of educating and diversifying the constituency for national parks and other protected areas.

These non-profit organizations and federal programs have done for 50+ years what folks today have only just begun to do in last 10–15. These seeds were unquestionably foundational. Everything going on today is rooted, directly or indirectly, in what came before. A major difference between then and now is that we currently have more people of color creating and/or managing policy. Additionally, they have been working diligently to ensure that “Green Groups” (e.g., environmental non-governmental organizations) and FLMA’s are both operating in ways that are more equitable, just, and inclusive. There is a comfort and pleasure in knowing about all the new programs that also get young people from diverse backgrounds into the “great outdoors.” A crucial insight is that if it weren’t for people of color and our allies working on policy, there would be less “great outdoors” for all people in which to play, explore, learn, serve, heal, and more. As Reginald “Flip” Hagood (former vice president with SCA) once said, “We do things outdoors that are foundational and are being passed on to others, often unbeknownst to us. And, we may or may not be alive later on to see the growth and changes that occur, even after us, as a result of our work.” From professionals in the field and journalists to new organizations sprouting up across contemporary society, embracing this prior knowledge and culture of exchange that has paved the way is paramount.

### THE CONFLUENCE OF THEN AND NOW: IS HISTORY REPEATING ITSELF?

This current generation of work, these trends in the last 10–20 years, could merely be an extension of the past with fundamentally new iterations today. Yet, what have we learned from those who came before us? We know there’s a myriad of examples during the Civil Rights era and even during the Women’s Rights movement. Over 50 years ago, people asked who’s at the table, who’s not? From

*“We do things outdoors that are foundational and are being passed on to others, often unbeknownst to us. And, we may or may not be alive later on to see the growth and changes that occur....”*

then until now, however, this question is still being asked: Are you connecting the dots as you educate and train the Next Gen? Decade after decade, there have been people of color in the outdoors and a multitude of efforts and initiatives to increase use and access. Are young people learning this in school or in their field-based environmental education programs? Is history repeating itself or is this a false narrative?

Professionals in outdoor/parks organizations, from small and large non-profits to wealthy corporations as part of the outdoor retail industry, began to experience “diversity trainings” in the 1980s and 1990s (and still do today). “Cultural competency” discussions about people of color outdoors have continued to occur year-after-year since the 1990s. Consequently, organizations began setting new goals to “get people of color into parks” (or other outdoor spaces) and new entities were being established and growing. With that, additional studies about constraints and barriers for people of color surfaced and are still occurring today (e.g., Chavez, Winter, and Absher 2008; Zanon et al. 2013; Roberts 2015; Flores et al. 2018). Beyond merely observing that “they can’t get there and don’t have the money,” issues of sociocultural permission in communities of color remain. We must ask ourselves how people of color can feel like they can and should get outside without having to spend cultural capital in order to do so. This is not a new conversation. As the late, great [Charles Jordan](#) (former chairperson of the Conservation Fund) once said, “Oh Lord, we’ve been here before” (C. Jordan, personal communication). There have also been many exceptional books about diversity in conservation and the environment that help keep this work moving forward (e.g., Cook 1992; Enderele 2007; Finney 2014; Bonta, DeFalco, and Taylor-Smith, 2015).

Progress is key; and to some professionals it feels like spinning our wheels reduces the energy needed for even more forward momentum. We would argue that while it’s easier to focus on wheel-spinning, the harder and potentially more meaningful work is to acknowledge that, even with

past failures, there is a large number of individuals, groups, and businesses who make good-faith efforts to drive this change and progress. Can we expect after decades of incredible efforts to have completely eradicated racism or sexism? The answer is unequivocally “no.”

Where we do believe there is room for improvement is in rewriting the narrative that mainstream environmental organizations continue to pedal, advancing their own set of wheels. The traditional models serve to rescue people from an abyss of stress and lack of connection to nature. People of color and other “underrepresented” groups are often targeted as people who have never been inspired by the grandeur of “iconic” places in the West, from Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon to Crater Lake and Mount Rainier. Hence, the insinuation is such individuals must be lacking meaning and joy in their lives. A more contemporary version of this thinking recognizes people of color may have been prevented from entering national parks or spending time in “the great outdoors” due to deliberate acts of exclusion, and so have been robbed of feeling as if these places were our own. The current undertone that people of color may only be equal to our white counterparts if we benefit from such park experiences is ill-informed at best.

Again, with the surge of new entities sprouting up, and with social media to support a multifaceted effort to reach young people of color, a new generation may experience these “issues” differently. That is absolutely essential; and part of the issue is that when new entities surface, we embrace them yet wonder how best to educate about what and who came before, including what worked and what did not. While some people use language indicating “we need to start getting more people of color outdoors,” the real need is to remind people that we must continue what has taken other professionals, and pioneers, decades to cultivate and endure.

### SHOULD THE FUTURE FACE OF ADVOCACY FOR PARKS AND PUBLIC LANDS BE A BLACK OR BROWN ONE?

The popular media has been spinning its wheels with journalistic bewilderment perpetuating the claim that there is a “lack of diversity outdoors, in parks,” when in fact we are out there, we’ve been out there (for centuries), but, as noted by Graham (2018), you have just chosen not to see us. A need

*The popular media claims that there is a “lack of diversity outdoors, in parks,” when in fact we are out there, we’ve been out there (for centuries), but you have just chosen not to see us.*

to advocate, advocate, advocate today is a play on the famous Frederick Douglass quote “agitate, agitate, agitate.” It’s impossible, in our opinion, to divorce advocacy for relevance, diversity, and inclusion in FMLAs from advocacy for better budgets that will facilitate the ability of these agencies to hire, train, and retain a professional workforce that has the skills needed to develop relevant education programs, as well as inclusive and equitable interpretation. Additionally, advocating for building community relations, especially beyond park boundaries, is becoming even more essential today. For critics to continue beating up FMLAs (e.g., NPS, BLM, US Forest Service) for poor performance is amateurish, ineffective, and unproductive.

Groups such as NPCA have decades-long track records of successful struggles to maintain strong protections for clean air and water in our national parks, better protections for wildlife, and continued efforts to ensure greater access for people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds to our parks. All these examples and more, along with the concomitant need to make those sites more relevant to black and brown people, are why increased advocacy across cultures is so vital.

The latest development in this long and both vibrant and tumultuous history was the passing of America’s Public Land Act of 2019 (see [Congress.gov, H.R.1276](https://www.congress.gov/house/116/legislation/1276)). It was the result of great fortitude across party lines, and includes favorable provisions for both Native Americans and African Americans. In summary, while some of the issues facing our public lands have changed over the years, the need for an actively engaged group of citizen advocates prepared to fight for the best interests of these places remains critical to their survival; this persistence must endure as unimpaired for the benefit, enjoyment, and inspiration of current and future generations. That is where concern about the negative impacts of the claim that national parks are “America’s best idea” come into play.

*They then stumble to the erroneous conclusion that black and brown people who lack a dedicated connection to national parks are not living life to the fullest, and must be brought into the fold.*

## THE TROUBLE WITH THE NATIONAL PARKS “BEST IDEA” NARRATIVE: A CASE IN POINT

In 1983 Wallace Stegner (the American novelist, environmentalist, and historian) stated, “National parks are the best idea we ever had. Absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best rather than our worst” (as quoted on [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov)). Stegner was certainly on to something when he lauded the idea of holding lands in a permanent public trust to inspire all people. Unfortunately, over the last three decades the “best idea” concept has undergone a strange metamorphosis from a values statement about the significance of this country’s commitment to preserving public spaces, to a code of conduct and thinking that has separated dyed-in-the-wool park users and advocates from those less steeped in the tradition of actively loving and using the outdoors. And, this at exactly the moment when our parks and public lands are facing a variety of novel threats from bad budgets to harmful policies that require as broad, engaged and enraged a constituency as we can muster to defend them.

How can describing our national parks as “America’s best idea” be divisive? Because it takes as its guide star the views of a handful of people and assumes that the rest of us either agree with their outlook or are possessed of a moral failing that keeps us from placing national parks at the center of our universe. This is not evil, but it is myopic. And it’s also fundamentally about race and a lack of understanding on the part of some white park enthusiasts regarding how some black and brown people view their parks and public lands. One argument frequently used to rebut the need for enhancing cultural diversity is that if black and brown people aren’t visiting and advocating for national parks, then so be it. That is their decision, probably based on some innate lack of appreciation for those spaces, and given this is a free country in which people are entitled to go (or not go) where they please, why force the issue?

It rarely, if ever, occurs to proponents of the “they don’t get it” mindset to examine the circumstances that led to a disconnection between some people of color and their public lands. Access, safety and relevancy were, and still remain, significant issues of concern for black and brown people when it comes to visiting (or even thinking about visiting) national parks (see Chavez et. al. 2008; Floyd 1999; Taylor

2000). Put directly, as people of color, we want to know: “Will we be welcome, will we be safe, and will a park experience have any benefit or relevancy to our lives?” It is clear, from the low numbers of people of color who do visit our national parks (although this continues to increase), that many of us have decided the answer to those questions is “no.” This answer continues to profoundly baffle those who support the best idea concept.

Still, some best idea proponents have developed a genuine desire to resolve issues of race, racism, justice, equity, and inclusion when it comes to national parks and other public lands. Unfortunately, they then stumble to the erroneous conclusion that black and brown people who lack a dedicated connection to national parks are not living life to the fullest and that they must, by any means necessary, be brought into the parks fold. Again, note the assumption that parks *maketh* man and woman. They do not.

According to a survey by [Mandala Research](https://www.mandalaresearch.com) (2018), African Americans, for example, spent roughly \$63 billion on travel and tourism. More than half of those surveyed took a vacation to places that were more than 100 miles from their homes, with the Caribbean, the Bahamas, and Mexico leading the list of international destinations. African Americans are quite amenable to spending money to visit places and engage in activities that have meaning and relevance to their lives. It turns out that Jamaica, Ghana, and the backwoods in North Carolina are more desirable to the souls of black folks than a visit to North Cascades National Park. Consequently, in the absence of visiting national parks, we have developed meaningful traditions that feed us emotionally and spiritually. As people of color, we can be, and in fact are, whole and well-traveled people, good or even great Americans, even if our itineraries have not traditionally included national parks. So, please do not attempt to inform us that we are losing out.

As national parks advocates, we understand the need to better connect communities of color to our parks and public lands. That mission, however,

*It is also essential to recognize the Congressional Black and Hispanic caucuses, who have two of the best environmental and pro-national parks voting records in congressional history.*

must not be born from the misunderstanding that black and brown people are lost and in need of rescuing. Rather, we ought to reclaim Stegner’s original concept about our national parks: that our now more than a century-long commitment to holding some of the most significant natural, cultural, historic, scenic, and recreational places on the American landscape permanently in trust for the benefit, enjoyment, and inspiration of all Americans—and everyone else on Earth as well—is a righteous idea. Here are some examples of how this particular idea is best supported.

First, let’s ensure that we continue to create and sustain a just, equitable, diverse, and inclusive movement that protects our national parks and public lands. Second, let’s encourage this by acknowledging that people of color have played pivotal roles in park use and defense from the Buffalo Soldiers who patrolled Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks in the early 1900s to the organizing and activism of the Roundtable Associates and the National Hispanic Environmental Council. Additionally, it is also essential to recognize the Congressional Black and Hispanic caucuses, who, in the 21st century, have two of the best environmental and pro-national parks voting records in congressional history. Third, it is vital to disdain the idea that parks are, or need to be, at the center of everyone’s universe by engaging those perceived to be the “uninitiated” in a respectful manner that does not invalidate their personal choices and preferences. We, park advocates, need the passion, commitment, and stewardship of people of color

much more than they need our validation; the truth is, people of color love and enjoy outdoor spaces and public lands in ways that are real yet merely not always understood. And, we must continue acting and engaging communities of color like we understand the fate of our parks and public lands depends upon them.

#### A CHALLENGE TO PROFESSIONALS, ADVOCATES, AND AGITATORS

Progress has been made. The Next 100 Coalition, for instance, is yet another—also newer—entity comprising people of color representing black and brown interests in JEDI work related to “public lands for all.” Formed in 2016, this coalition seeks to represent and show up in new ways based upon old ideas of justice, equity, and inclusion. The Next 100 Coalition, the pro-parks and public lands work of the Hispanic Access Foundation, and a slight but significant increase in the number of black and brown professionals working on public lands and environmental protection, are all in some way descendants of Ira Hutchison (Roundtable Associates) and [Iantha Gantt-Wright](#) (formerly of NPCA). We need to honor and embrace that mighty legacy.

Furthermore, well-intentioned professionals should exercise caution when making the statement “it’s the right thing to do.” We will all embrace that line when this work is connected to the bottom line. Any agency, Green Group (non-profit or federal agency), or individual who engages in JEDI work because they believe it is the “right thing to do” is doomed to fail. Any professional commitment to JEDI must be grounded in an organization’s mission and vision and unquestionably tied to their bottom line. Without putting up the necessary resources to succeed and prove one’s dedication to the change and progress being made, agencies are destined for a tailspin. Otherwise, whenever the “real work” has to be done, resources (time, people, money) get pulled away and diversity digresses. The human dimension across cultures gets the short end of the environmental stick when it comes down to the proverbial “budget crisis” or “we can’t afford it.” The coincidence of how the “it” routinely per-



Outward Bound group at New Army Pass, Sequoia National Park / Inyo National Forest, circa 1970s | COURTESY OUTWARD BOUND ADVENTURES ARCHIVES

tains to people of color and/or individuals with less access, is no fluke; just connect the dots.

JEDI work cannot be separated from advocacy for better budgets and more humane and reasonable policies set forth to govern our public lands. Due to funding constraints, over the last 10 years NPS staffing levels have decreased by 11% while park visitation has increased by 19% (see NPCA, “[Support Increased National Park Advocacy](#)”). In addition, NPS historians are so focused on compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, and with the National Environmental Policy Act, that they cannot maintain their agency’s commitment to developing and maintaining cutting-edge interpretation that’s both bold in outlook and accurate and inclusive in scope. Better budgets could help resolve both these challenges.

For people involved in outdoor recreation, environmental education, natural resources, and conservation who care about this work, and have contributed to forward momentum, understanding this history and evolution is essential. Consequently, this is not just about the “great outdoors.” Two-thirds of our national parks, and a wide spectrum of other public lands, are sites whose primary purposes are historic and cultural. Despite the rising numbers of people of color who want to climb the highest peaks and ride class-five rapids, a significant proportion of us get the same thrill from a rewarding battlefield walk or a ranger-led tour of a historic site. The Maggie Walker home in Richmond, Virginia, managed by NPS as a national historic site, may be just as likely to connect people of color to the national park system as a three-day hike through Yellowstone or Arapahoe National Forest.

What we frequently see in contemporary mainstream media sources is a lack of recognition of what’s been going on and why and/or why not (e.g., see [The State of Diversity in the Outdoor Industry](#)). For people less aware and, perhaps, considered “non-users,” a vital message that must continue to be widely shared is that the US has an amazing system of parks and public lands. Many agencies, non-governmental organizations, and individuals have worked hard for decades to make these spaces increasingly more relevant and accessible. We think the sites and resources protected and interpreted therein are also worthy

*Despite the rising numbers of people of color who want to climb the highest peaks and ride class-five rapids, a significant proportion of us get the same thrill from a rewarding battlefield walk.*

of non-users taking the time and effort to visit and get to know. Moreover, everyone’s help is needed to ensure that our public lands survive and thrive into the next century. What does it take to seek this level of crucial support in perpetuity?

A continued lack of RDI, EDI, DEI, or JEDI is ultimately the single largest cultural problem facing parks and other public lands in the US today. An acronym is just a label—call it what you want. We need a systemic cultural change that can only happen when people are willing to acknowledge the challenges, take individual responsibility for them, and hold others accountable. The only way we can change the outdoor culture is by a massive alteration in individual mindsets, including institutions across varying disciplines (e.g., outdoor recreation, conservation, natural resources), from passively non-racist to actively anti-racist. At the end of the day, the sun always sets—and the start of a new dawn sets the sails for either a new beginning or increasing the momentum.

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