

NPCA Board Dialogue  
On Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion  
October 17, 2019

Led by Peter Forbes

This is the only time you'll hear a lot from me. Forgive me for that, but this is the best way to share lots of information and ideas.

(veteran video)

Parks are medicine for our nation. Let's call it that this morning.

Nature is a medicine. Our national parks are concentrations of this medicine that reminds us to be humble, that something is much bigger than us.

Our cultural parks are also medicine: story medicine. Medicine that reminds us that the journey we've been is complex, never perfect, sometimes horrific, sometimes saintly and inspiring.

How do we ensure that these two medicines are always there for future generations? What obligations do we have to share these medicines?

This is not a new conversation for NPCA, but I hope today it will be a re-igniting and re-focusing of our best thinking around the sort of innovation that will help make NPCA stronger, more relevant, an even more courageous defender of national parks in this next century.

JEDI is how to both protect and share these medicines in a new century. It is about NPCA stretching and doing yoga, but still being NPCA. JEDI is not about NPCA becoming a YMCA or the Black panthers. JEDI is not code for anything unspoken.

Our own Deny Galvin said it so well here: national parks can be reminders of our values as a nation. "there remains a need to promote parks, not to bring people to them but to promulgate the values they have come to present."

I hope Deny will share at points today what he feels those values are. Here's my list:

I believe our national parks gives us these values:

- Our sense of our awe, humility, smallness, our spiritual or metaphysical place in the "big picture"
- Our ability to judge between what is real and what is artificial
- Our sense of belonging to a place and to an idea
- Our sense of tolerance/ acceptance of other life

So, when there's a medicine that important for people and for the planet, how do we help more people to trust that the medicine is there for them? And if more people believed that the medicine belonged to them, wouldn't they protect it as well?

JEDI is a lens through which we can learn about and then express a new public promise for our national parks: that these places are medicine for everyone.

I think it's a responsibility of each generation to understand and then confront the challenge of their times. The realities facing young Americans today are vastly different from the world Muir experienced.

We are now 4 generations removed from John Muir, and 3 generations removed from the founders of NPCA.

What does this era need and want from our national parks?

Each generation has responsibility is to try to see the world with new eyes, to try hard to see the way the world really is:

It's a still beautiful blue marble, there's still so much potential for good in our nation and within our democratic traditions.

To realize that potential and to truly protect that beautiful blue marble, we've got to figure out our part in the great work of reconciling the two original sins of slavery and genocide.

That's a huge statement, I know, and I'm not suggesting that NPCA's mission is to reconcile slavery and genocide. I'm saying our work must be sympathetic and in response to our nation's history. And that people who are growing into leaders today know this because of the world they will have grown up in, and we must support them. And this isn't about being politically correct or fashionable, but about moving forward together as a nation on something as important as our national parks.

That slavery and genocide have not been reconciled in any serious and intentional way is why today we have:

Twice the numbers of prisoners as we have farmers. America has 5% of the world's population but 25% of the world's population of incarcerated people.

The richest 1% of our country hold about 38% of all privately held wealth while the bottom 90% holds 73% of all debt.

798 men, 61% of whom were people of color, were fatally shot by police in 2018,

We are so fearful of one another today, says the sociologist Richard Barber that we are sorting ourselves by race and class more than ever before in our 250-year experiment in democracy.

What is the role of our national parks and our public lands to this American moment?

All of us in this room are needed to answer this.

Our conservation movement has always been good at evolving:

First, Conservation was about iconic beauty, that was Muir's contribution.

Then it was about science, that was Rachel Carson's contribution.

Now it is about belonging and respect, I'll say reconciliation, this is this generation's contribution.

Here's the situation in short:

All human beings, all people, need and want nature. Yes, there's a lot of technology and serious distraction that get in the way, but we are still hard-wired for a relationship to nature. And that's not true for some people who have cultivated it, but all people. Nature is appreciated by people in business suits and people in torn Carhart's. We've known for decades from polling data that people of color are often stronger supporters of parks and nature than white voters. I remember how surprised the conservation movement was 15 years ago when that polling data started to be understood. The fastest growing segment of our population, latinex people, are also the strongest supporters of nature.

But the public work of protecting nature has been done by one segment of our culture: White people. To it, we've brought our values, our biases, our ideologies, the things we see and the things we can't see.

We've made conservation in our image, and not enough others see themselves in the world we created. Not enough feel they belong in that world that we've created.

Here's some of the evidence:

According to a 2009 survey by the University of Wyoming and the National Park Service (NPS), whites accounted for 78 percent of the national parks' visitors; Hispanics, 9 percent; African-Americans, 7 percent; and Asian-Americans, 3 percent.

When compared with their share of the U.S. population, white park visitors are overrepresented by 14 percentage points, African-Americans were underrepresented by 6 percentage points.

Whites are overrepresented not only as visitors but also as park employees. 82 percent of NPS employees are white.

In this New York Times editorial, columnist Glenn Nelson explains that people of color are about half as likely to visit national parks as whites. He offers two reasons for this disparity: People of color are less familiar with parks and hesitant to go, and there's lack of racial diversity among the nation's park employees.

But It isn't *just* unfamiliarity that keeps people of color away.

When you already experience being treated differently in safe places, why would you go to a place that you don't know?

*Let me try to explain the context for this assertion.*

120 years after Jim Crow laws were stopped, America remains largely segregated.

I suspect most in this room understand the ongoing impacts of a century of Red-lining, the discriminatory practice of fencing off areas where banks would avoid investments based on the neighborhood's race and ethnicity.

Here's Michigan's' attorney general describing how the practices worked:

Well, Redlining occurred in the 2008 housing bubble when predatory loan practices were focused on families of color. 67% of the bankruptcies in 2008 were people of color.

Because of brown V Board of education, NPCA understands the history of segregation in schools, but how many of you understand how segregation is perpetuated today?

Here's chief justice Thurgood Marshall dissenting against a supreme court case that kept segregation alive in 1974.

Today, there are more black children going to school with white children in the south, but not much anywhere else.

In 1,000 school districts across America, the average student of color still resides in a school mostly of other children of color who receive on average \$4,000 less than the average white student.

And the 3 highest incidents of segregation in education dollars are in the supposedly progressive states of CA, Ny and NJ. Today, 1 in 4 students in America attend schools that are racially isolated and receive much less, or much more.

Our criminal justice system is segregated.

There are now more African Americans in Prison in 2019 than were enslaved in the 1800s.

So, a person of color in America has long experienced how housing, education, the flow of money, our criminal justice system are shields to keep them out or walls to keep them in. **Why wouldn't they be suspicious about their belonging to our national parks?**

What different invitation is needed to cross a boundary of broken trust?

I know some of our beloved parks are being loved too much –too many visitors-and they need to be protected in different ways not to lose the medicine they offer. Knowing that some parks are loved too much, I still believe that everyone in this room is in favor of sharing the medicine of our parks as a widely as possible. No one in this room wants the medicine hoarded for themselves or for just one group of Americans.

Some see this sharing the medicine as a moral responsibility, it's the right thing to do for others. Some see this as a strategic responsibility, we should share the medicine because it's ultimately good for the medicine itself. This is the relevancy argument. Who will be our members if we aren't relevant to new diverse audiences?

It doesn't matter whether you are drawn to the strategic argument or the moral argument. Both are valid.

National parks will survive only if they are appreciated and supported by an informed citizenry. If this is true, then we need to re-imagine our national parks to fit a profoundly changing world.

Here's what I mean:

2042

4 Quadrants

Here's a photo I took in 1987 when I started work in conservation. Here's a picture of the international leadership team for 350.Org taken last summer.

Clearly conservation can evolve, and has evolved. But has it evolved enough?

JEDI is a very important part of NPCA's evolution and the 3 core ideas of it are simple: Respect, Empathy, Belonging

**Respect:** means literally to look again.

I want us to look again at a few things.

There's this human desire to carve the world up into good and bad people, and here in the United States the primary way we have divided up people is by the color of their skin.

Everyone knows that biologically speaking race doesn't exist, that there's only one species of human. But long ago, we created a social contract that says that humans with a lighter shade of skin have privileges and benefits that don't extend to the same humans with a darker shade of skin.

I have some personal experience of this.

My father was a Hassidic Jew who immigrated here, and my mom a woman of unknown ethnicity born on the Osage Indian reservation in Oklahoma. They met in a bar in NYC in 1942, a time when my father would have needed to list himself on immigration forms as non-white. But they were light skinned so they could easily pass to re-invent themselves, which they did and changed their name to Forbes. I don't identify as Jewish or whatever race and ethnicity my mother was. I was raised a Forbes, a wasp, and that's what I became.

It's put me in a good position to know how whiteness is a fabrication. Whiteness has brought me all kinds of advantages throughout my life that that my own parents didn't have. I know this is true. My white, waspy looks and my name associated with wealth have given me unearned privileges than my parents never had. Some might think this is good news and it's certainly what my parents wanted.

But that privilege, different from theirs, divides me from my own family. It lays bare for me how crazy unfair that is. And what about for the good people in this room whose shade of skin is darker than mine? How has that made their experience of life much harder than mine?

Martin Luther King said "I have a dream that one day in our nation my four children will be judged by the content of their character not the color of their skin", because his kids were, in fact, judged for the color of their skin.

In America, we are defined by color of skin. We may want America to be color blind, but America is not.

We all want *All Lives to Matter*, but in America all lives have not mattered.

This is a photo from 1934

This from 1955

This from 1998

This from 2018

The overwhelming evidence is that lives of black men have not mattered in our country.

For those who want all lives to matter, we must first work to have Black Lives Matter. For me to say Black Lives Matter is to respect that a Black person's life in America is really different from mine, which affirms their humanity.

Talking about our differences can be used to point a finger at a common enemy, to shame and judge, but it can also be about offering respect and finding our common humanity. With JEDI, our goal is to get to that common humanity, to move forward together.

This brings me to why it's important to talk about history.

I become a more interesting, more whole person when you know my full story. Our conservation movement will also become more whole and more effective as it learns and grapples with its own history.

Terry Tempest Williams says it well: *We, the people, have made mistakes. We have made mistakes in our relationships with those who came before us and the land that holds their memories.*

This country invented and exported worldwide a great idea, the model of national parks—and with that story comes a corollary: the ugly, forced removal of indigenous peoples.

I think there's a powerful opportunity for reconciliation ahead that will make our conservation movement and our parks much stronger, but we can't get there without acknowledging the history.

Bryan Stevenson, one of our country's heroes, says: most all want reconciliation, but there is no reconciliation without the truth."

(Bryan Stevenson vid.)

Empathy:

We all want to think of ourselves as independent actors who make our own way, it's very American. But often a lot of what we got was provided by things we didn't earn.

(Privilege walk video)

I end up at the front of the line, my mother would have been at the far back.

Those at the back of the line are always looking at the back of my head. They see me, *I don't see them, unless I choose to turn around. They have to navigate me; I don't need to navigate them.* Me, at the front of the line, learning to turn around, to listen is about becoming empathetic.

For the more privileged like myself, empathy is the ability to be open to the claims of others without the expectation of being thanked or congratulated or even expecting empathy in return.

**Sometimes there's no way to close the gap between someone's world and my world, but I have an obligation to know the gap is there and why.**

Some of us are free to choose a different destiny for ourselves, some are much less free to choose that destiny.

Empathy, itself, is a privilege just as it's a privilege to be free of despair.

Belonging:

Belonging a very different idea from access, right?

Access can be provided in lots of ways which people won't take advantage of because they don't feel they belong.

Our goal is to help different people to feel they belong to our national parks. If they feel they belong, they will find the access that's always been there. *If they don't feel they belong, no access will make any difference.*

(Winona La Duke reconciliation video).

Belonging requires apologies and forgiveness. This is the big work facing our national parks, our beloved NPCA, and I would say our country.

How do we adopt a graceful stand where we do not feel judged or shamed or defensive, but can still freely and authentically apologize and receive forgiveness? And be the ones that helped us all to move forward together.

Aldo Leopold was a wise man. I credit his wife Estella “The penalty of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.” He was speaking about living with the horrific wounding of nature.

Today, our consciousness is broader and so we have it harder. We must live with both an ecological and a cultural wounding.

I amend Leopold’s to the positive: “The reward of doing the JEDI work is to work together for a better future in a world of wounds.”

We have to acknowledge, too, that doing this well requires nuance and balance. It’s easy to go too far. In the effort to celebrate what’s different, we can forget what holds us together. In being sensitive to others, we can assume this means we must reject our own past.

It’s about being graceful, respectful, empathetic *and courageous*.

I want to work alongside you in this world of wounds. Many others want to work alongside you in this world of wounds (photo of man holding up the earth ball)

(“We, the black and white, deeply need each other here if we are truly to become a nation.” James Baldwin)

Grounded in the very ideals of our national parks is the idea of these places being “Virgin Continents” that omitted all humanity and its signs. Which comes across as: I don’t see you. I don’t recognize you. You don’t belong here.

Muir said wilderness exists for urban people to escape, find beauty and peace. But native people weren’t ever included. Their sense of Muir: *He took my home*.

The conservation value of the “primacy of nature” did lead to the forced removal of people who had their own but different reverence for nature. Thus, those early conservation efforts did help to break another people’s spirit and soul.

Here’s a lineage of that history: Cultural parks and some iconic parks have earned appreciation and attendance from people of color who appreciate them and beginning to belong, while the concept of wilderness and the data on its usage remains overwhelmingly white.

There's so much evidence that NPCA is prepared to lead with JEDI and to offer an antidote grounded in respect, empathy and belonging.

Here's the start of a catalogue of A JEDI Catalogue of National Park sites and Heritage areas that speak to Justice, Equity, Diversity and Equity. Wendy Bennet, this is a start on the catalogue you asked for.

Tomorrow at the board meeting, Hayley and staff will be showcasing the many ways that NPCA is fostering a new relationship between Native people and our national parks around honoring their stories, urging their roles as park leaders and sharing in the management of the land itself.

All of this is real.

And so is fact that inside of NPCA there is the strongest cohort of people of color leaders I've ever met within a green group. And they are led by a strong cohort of women at the highest echelons of leadership.

And one last data point that is much less obvious. According to the Williams Institute, 4.5 % of Americans self-identify as gay or lesbian. An equivalent percentage of NPCA's team identifies as members in the LGBTQ community. The point being that NPCA has already proven it has a mission and values to which other groups of Americans can belong, and that's a very important accomplishment. That signals much about the possibilities to connect with others.

There are important questions for the board to wrestle with in the months ahead:

What's the right balance between being protectors of nature and purveyors of cultural history?

Stone wall is place for us to have a focused conversation. How do we tell this story when gender so quickly becomes identity politics?

We will not grow this work if anyone in this room is afraid to ask questions, afraid to try something new,

None of us are perfect; I'm going to make mistakes.

The skill here is not how fast we critique and point out missteps, but how well we help one another to get up and try again.

So, let's start: What's most resonant in what I've just heard? Where do I agree and disagree with what we've heard?

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