

## *Foreword (excerpt)*

### *From the Hood to the Woods*

For over 40 years I've had the pleasure of introducing urban youth of color and their families to wild places, open-spaces and outdoor educational experiences. Doing this work requires relationships and interacting with the outdoor industry; including outfitters, retailers, land management agencies, land conservancies, conservation groups and small and large environmental organizations. To say that people of color were underrepresented 40 years ago in the outdoor industry would be a gross understatement. Today unfortunately it still is a gross understatement. By and large the outdoor industry and land management sector (public and private) is dominated by white males. The fact that they are white is not a problem, the fact that they are male is not a problem. The fact that the overwhelmingly majority of them have little to no sustained experience interacting with people of color is a problem. These white males (and others who have accepted the status quo) are the gatekeepers, they set the organizational agendas, develop the hiring standards, establish the programs and interpret our natural resources all from their perspective, seen through their lens and filtered through their own biases that they don't even know they maintain. Often, they are in positions of power that can make the greatest changes within an organization, but they know the least about what needs to be changed. Meanwhile the rest of the outdoor world is subject to the culture and policies these gatekeepers have established. It is important to note that while we all have equal capacity to appreciate the outdoors, we do not have equal capacity to access nor influence how we can interact with the outdoors. Because of these unbalanced capacities people of color in the wilderness are often seen as anomalies and outliers and even interlopers by the mainstream outdoor folks. For the most part I have found encounters with mainstream outdoor folks to be exceptionally congenial but often laden with an abject ignorance about how urban minorities are using and not using and enjoying the wilderness and open spaces. While most of my outdoor encounters have been congenial, we have come across a few in the mainstream who believe that people of color do not belong in "their" wilderness. Some have been outright hostile and behaved as though our groups were trespassing or they presumed we were lost and needed directions back to Los Angeles. Some folks have been verbally abusive or simply packed up their stuff and moved away from us. On one of our wilderness trips a "welcoming party" urinated on our tents while we were out hiking and then called the rangers and asked them to remove us because they felt unsafe! Nevertheless, my overall outdoor experiences have been exceptionally pleasurable when meeting others on the trail. We have found most folks

to be more curious than unwelcoming of our groups. In addition, it seems that the entire outdoor industry including natural resource management and conservation organizations are all chomping at the bit of diversity and inclusion and stand ready to eject any ignorant individuals who would intentionally exclude minorities.

Today, to address the lack of access that minorities sometimes encounter connecting to nature and using the outdoors there is a large movement by the environmental and conservation sectors to connect underserved populations to the outdoors. However, this large movement should be accompanied by a commensurately large change in the leadership of the outdoor conservation/land management and environmental sectors, which brings me to one of key points of this book; in order to create a more diverse outdoor user demographic, we must develop a more inclusive and diverse leadership culture within the outdoor, conservation, environmental and land management sectors. These new leaders must be culturally competent enough to understand the real needs and issues of those who are intentionally not using the outdoors. Being culturally competent means understanding the inheritance of privilege passed on to the white mainstream outdoor culture and the resultant outdoor pedigree acquired by the mainstream outdoor folks who make up the culture. Even with today's multitude of initiatives to diversify outdoor users, to see a large group of urban people of color backpacking through the wilderness, river rafting or on a birding expedition is extraordinarily rare, demonstrating that we still have a ways to go.

If we are to diversify our leadership we must begin by examining the social-cultural infrastructure that has allowed the top leadership in land management, conservation and environmental agencies to remain 90% white. Any infrastructure that manages to keep an employee sector so racially homogenous is doing so either by design or abject ineffectiveness. The outdoor retail industry follows the same racially exclusive path. It is not so much the individuals as it is the established culture that promotes a self-sustaining, social pattern that despite a desire for diversity is resistant to change, especially from those outside the culture.

Change must come from within, from the leaders themselves. It must come in the form of a complete cultural renovation of an organization, beginning with a comprehensive, clear strategy and explicit articulation of what diversity will look like. Everyone in the organization must be engaged through an organization-wide re-education plan. Because cultures are inseparably tied to

the social and emotional dynamics of the people within the organization, a cultural renovation framework must be created that is perceived as safe, doable, and purposeful, and perhaps most importantly result in an environment that can sustain a diverse employee base. Finally, the organization must expand its definitions of talent, and include a willingness to foster undeveloped leadership skills in those with non-traditional experience. Leaders will need to move away from a candidate just being a “good fit” because a good fit is basically saying, “We like you because you are like *us*.” Leaders should honestly be saying, “If we are to become more diverse we don’t need more of *us*.” Moreover, if a change is to occur it must include abolishing the elite pedigree, social history and appropriate connections often required to move into the typical upper echelons of environmental leadership.

Concurrently, we can greatly expand and diversify the pool of future candidates by addressing the large population of intentional non-users of the outdoors, those who see no value in connecting to nature. We must meet these people where they are, not where we want them to be. The intentional non-users are the silent majority that vastly outnumber any other segment of underserved outdoor users. We must shift our attention away from those who are with us to those who don’t know who we are. Our most sincere purpose should be to engage this population, if not just for their future voting power, then surely for our commitment to inclusion and equity. We must develop a vast network of urban partnerships that come to see the purpose of conservation work as a value of their own.

No culture escapes the signature stamp of its country’s history, the environmental/conservation and outdoor recreation culture of America certainly is no exception. Unfortunately, in America our signature contains a long history of racism, disparity, exclusion, entitled beliefs and manifest destiny. These historical elements have played a significant role in influencing the culture and demographic makeup of outdoor enthusiasts, environmentalists, and conservationists of today. I am certain, the vast majority of today’s environmental and conservation leadership reflect an artifact culture, a vestigial mono-culture that is slowly being eclipsed by an ever increasing multicultural demographic anxious for its place in the sun and an opportunity to connect with nature. Today we are offered a rare opportunity to shape our common future and franchise this multicultural demographic through preservation, conservation and restoration

This will be an arduous task if the leadership in the outdoor, conservation, natural resource and land management organizations lack the cultural competency to accommodate a large and growing

diverse constituency. Leadership that lacks cultural competency often promulgate land use and access policies that can create barriers for those who seldom visit or traditionally have not recreated in the outdoors. Costly entrance fees, remote entry points, camp fire regulations that require special stoves and fuel, the privatization of campsite reservation systems that have complex online registration processes and require a credit card, parking and day use permits, use permit lotteries, group size restrictions, authorization requirements from multiple agencies, not to mention the lack of public transportation to an entry area. These and other issues are enough to keep even a seasoned outdoor enthusiast at bay. Imagine a first-time user trying to make sense of these requirements or trying to determine even who to go to get a permit. In 2017 I polled 30 students at an urban high school to see how many knew how to get to their nearest national park. Not a single student knew where their nearest national park was located. Now imagine a first-time user finally getting a camp site and attending a ranger's interpretive talk that highlights the brave White pioneers that settled the area putting their lives in great danger because renegade Mexican bandits were raiding ranches and killing innocent White settlers in the area at that time. Anglo-centric interpretation of outdoor areas often precludes the real story of the first inhabitants and the contributions of other cultures. Couple that with rangers and agency staff who don't reflect the diversity of America and a very clear message of non-representation begins to emerge for urban minorities. Finally, those organizations that are committing to creating an employee pool more reflective of the American demographic tend to recruit primarily into the lowest hanging fruit of "diversity" - which typically is a Latino community in proximity to the organization. If our outreach efforts simply shift from employing all white to employing all white and Latino, we have missed the point of reflecting America's diversity. Most conservation, land management and environmental organizations/agencies don't understand how to expand their sphere of hiring influence and lack the skill, knowledge and resources to perform sustainable outreach into diverse communities. I have the deepest respect and regard for the work of these organizations, I also have an unmitigated concern for their social ignorance and incapacity to diversify their leadership and constituents. They know as well as I that if urban people of color are not empowered or "deputized" as servants to the land or franchised into the larger vision of future conservation, they will see very little reason to invest in it.

Many of these organizations' interpretive and volunteer programs operate under a culture of unconscious bias, often relegating those volunteer service groups they have had little exposure to,

(urban youth of color) to prosaic tasks, like trash pick-up or filling in road ruts and potholes while other traditional groups (white college students) are assigned to more stimulating science-based projects, like mammal counts and vegetation surveys. Both groups have equal capacities to perform the same tasks. These biases create access pathways that allow one group to feel ownership through mission-centric, value added conservation work while the other group sees their contribution as menial labor and routine maintenance disconnected from the mission. This bias is similar to the bias the county held against the original inhabitants of these natural landscapes 150 years ago. John Muir promoted the value of wilderness preservation with the concept of an “unpeopled” wilderness; nature was a place to visit and behold, especially for the Anglo-American tourist. Muir held the belief that the first nations, Native Americans, were a “degraded species” and he worked to create policies that ultimately would dispossess them of their lands. Today’s gatekeepers unknowingly continue to promulgate policies that only present barriers to those who historically have not had a seat at the table. A wholesale restructuring of education practices, access policies, inclusion procedures and a redistribution of power must be implemented to recruit and engage a future of ethnically and culturally diverse outdoor users and land stewards. It fills my heart with great joy to see that change happening, even though the change is slow.

Still, it seems for the last 40 years, much of the mainstream continue to struggle with the concept of equal capacity for appreciation yet unequal access to nature. That struggle plays out in the form of questions like “why aren’t urban people of color more active in outdoor and nature-based recreation?” The answer has always been crystal clear to me, and hopefully becomes indisputably evident in the pages of this book.