

Case Studies in Connection with Land and Water

Main Takeaways

Although some stories have often been buried and ignored, all people have connections to the land, and all play an important role in conservation.

By sharing stories, we give a voice to those who have been silenced and can begin to understand how history plays a role in the many ways that people connect to public lands.

Connections to Land and Water

As we work to make the history of public lands more comprehensive and inclusive, it is important to acknowledge the multitude of ways people connect with nature and examine how historical and current events and attitudes shape these connections. Although the stories of Indigenous Peoples, African Americans, Mexican Americans and other communities have largely been ignored throughout the U.S. history, these groups played and continue to play a role in the preservation of public lands, wilderness and other shared public spaces. The familiar and often-told stories about John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, Henry David Thoreau, Edward Abbey, and Aldo Leopold are important. However, to more completely understand the story of our public lands, we must give thoughtful attention to all environmental perspectives.

This module explores the various ways in which people connect with the shared legacy of land and water. Some stories may be familiar, and some may be new. We encourage you to consider all of these stories in the context of the social and historical movements in which they occurred or are occurring. This compilation is far from exhaustive. We encourage you to seek out additional buried stories and share them with fellow participants. Doing so is one way to give voice to those who have been discriminated against throughout U.S. history and the conservation movement.

People of Color and Conservation History

Sacagawea, a Lemhi Shoshone woman, served as interpreter and guide for Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery, starting in 1804. As a teenager, she traveled with her infant, helping negotiate passage over lands inhabited by various tribes and securing additional guides and horses for the party. She received no compensation for her services, but her French husband received \$500.

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The Buffalo Soldiers, an all African American army regiment, were among the first park and backcountry rangers, patrolling Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks on horse and bicycle.

Charles Young (1864 – 1922) was a military veteran who became acting superintendent of Sequoia and General Grant National Parks in 1903, the first African American to hold the superintendent role. Young oversaw the creation of infrastructure and worked to suppress wildfires, poaching, and illegal grazing within the parks.

George Washington Carver (1864-1943), was an African American agricultural scientist, botanist, and environmentalist who developed methods for improving soil in order to maintain sustainable harvests.

In the 1770's, **Brister Freeman** and **Zilpah White** were freed slaves who lived around Walden Pond, which would later become the famed retreat of writer, environmentalist and activist Henry David Thoreau. Prior to Thoreau's residency, Walden was a settlement for those who escaped slavery. The stories of Freeman and White, among other freed slaves, served as an inspiration to Thoreau.

African American men were allowed entry to serve in the **Civilian Conservation Corps** (1930-1942) but often faced discrimination, despite New Deal legislation banning the practice. African American enrollment was capped at 10% and thousands of men were turned away. While a few camps were racially integrated, most African Americans lived and

worked in segregated camps. Their involvement in the CCC is largely undocumented. Projects included restoring Union and Confederate monuments at Gettysburg Battlefield and building infrastructure in Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the Blue Ridge Parkway. Indigenous people also participated in the CCC-Indian Division developing infrastructure on reservations. The CCC-ID was administered by tribal leaders with the assistance of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Contemporary Stories of Connection

On the outskirts of Tucson, Arizona, **Saguaro National Park** has endeavored to become more culturally relevant to the city's majority Latinx population. Tucson is about 44 percent Hispanic or Latinx. Of the park's roughly 650,000 annual visitors, currently less than 2 percent self-identify as Hispanic. As part of the process, the park showed a potential ad to a Latinx focus group. The ad featured a strapping Latino man walking through the woods. The focus group responded with confusion: "Where's his family?" or "What's he running from?" In the words of a Latino school administrator in Saguaro, "rugged individualism" just doesn't apply. "It's like no, I'm going to bring my whole family, we're going to be loud, we're going to explore."

The lessons learned by the City of Houston as they embark upon a \$220 million parks project called **Bayou Greenways 2020** are illuminating for federal public land management agencies. The Bayou Greenways will ultimately be a 150-mile network of continuous hiking trails, biking paths, and green space that will run throughout Houston. When the city's parks and recreation department conducted its Master Plan Parks Survey in 2014, the majority of respondents replied that they wanted their neighborhoods and parks linked to biking and walking paths. Upon closer look, about two-thirds of the people who responded to the survey were White with household incomes over \$75,000. To correct this misrepresentation, a group of researchers from Rice University conducted another survey, with the Houston Parks and Recreation Department's blessing and funding. This one aimed to capture the voices of African American and Latinx Houstonians to find out what they wanted from the new park upgrades. The results showed that priorities differed from those of the initial survey. Connectivity was ranked last among priorities for African American and Latinx Houstonians. These respondents indicated that they wanted clean, functioning public bathrooms and water fountains, better lighting to make parks safer at night, better playground equipment, and an array of recreational infrastructure.

In 2016, a group of hikers from **Outdoor Afro** explored portions of the Appalachian Trail that overlap the Underground Railroad, following a path that Harriet Tubman may have taken in order to explore the historical relationship of communities of color and the outdoors.

In August of 2018, Jolie Varela and Indigenous women from **Indigenous Women Hike** travelled to Nüümü Poyo, a historical Paiute trading route which overlaps with portions of the John Muir Trail and Pacific Crest Trail. The group traveled under the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978, connecting with Paiute history and educating other hikers and

the conservation community about reclaiming Native American Lands and heritage.

In 2018, **Tyler Lau**, a dual citizen of the U.S. and Hong Kong known on the trail as "The Prodigy," became the first person of color and the 10th person in history to complete the Triple Crown: hiking the Pacific Crest Trail, the Continental Divide Trail, and the Appalachian Trail in a calendar year. Tyler hiked 8,000 miles to raise awareness and support for public lands, people of color on public lands, and organizations that serve youth of color in Montana, California, and the Northeast.

The Sierra Club and the National Council of La Raza's 2012 **National Latinos and the Environment** survey investigated the stereotype that Latinx people do not care about public lands and conservation. The survey reports that:

- 9-in-10 (92%) Latinx voters agree that they "have a moral responsibility to take care of God's creations on this earth—the wilderness and forests, the oceans, lakes and rivers."
- More than 9-in-10 Latinx voters (94%) say outdoor activities such as fishing, picnics, camping, and visiting national parks and monuments are important to them and their families.
- Nearly 7-in-10 (69%) Latinx voters say they would support the president designating more public land as national monuments.

MaVynee Betsch gave away all of her wealth, including her home, to environmental causes starting in the 1970s. She convinced the National Park Service to protect 8.2 acres of sand dunes on Amelia Island's American Beach. Her great grandfather had purchased it in the 1930's so that black people could live on and visit the beach in Florida during Jim Crow segregation.

Marquette Goodwine (known as Queen Quet), along with her community in South Carolina, was instrumental in establishing the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. Designated in 2006, the federally recognized heritage site celebrates the unique culture of the Gullah Geechee people who have traditionally resided in the coastal areas and the sea islands of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

Starting in 1972, **John Francis**, the Planetwalker, spent 22 years refusing to ride in cars walking across the U.S. to spread a message of environmental respect and awareness of the harmful effects of oil spills. For 17 of those years, John did not speak. During his vow of silence, he completed three college degrees, including a PhD in Land Management from the University of Wisconsin - Madison, which he walked to from Montana.

Contemporary **Acequia farmers** in Southern Colorado and Northern New Mexico are Indo-Hispanic farmers who have a unique understanding of high desert ecology that informs their farming, seed saving practices, water sharing practices, community relations, and erosion prevention. Though often not marked as "conservationists" by the environmental community, their farming practices and place-based knowledge certainly center around conserving the health of the land and community.

The **Ancestral Land Corps Program** is a Southwest Conservation Corps program currently run by and for Indigenous Peoples who are engaging in various projects to improve land and community on Native land.

Likely born into slavery, farmer and homesteader **Israel Lafayette Jones** bought three islands in Key Biscayne, FL in the late 1800s. A guide and naturalist, his son **Lancelot Jones** resisted developers and sold the land to the National Park Service to create Biscayne National Park.

Black/Land Project: The Black/Land project is self-described as - “Black/Land gathers and analyzes stories about the relationship between black people, land, and place.

The **National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers** was founded in 1998 to bring together tribal government officials who work to preserve the culture and traditions of Indigenous Peoples in the United States. Occasionally partnering with the National Park Service, the association is committed to tribal sovereignty, confidentiality within religious places, and the preservation of Indigenous cultures beyond the boundaries of reservations.

Many Indigenous-led organizations, like the **Native American Fish and Wildlife Society**, promote the conservation of natural resources on tribal reservations and around the world using Indigenous methods, called traditional ecological knowledge (TEK).

Organizations and People to Follow

There are many people and organizations who are committed to amplifying and telling a broader range of stories surrounding conservation and recreation. The landscape is ever growing and changing. Several of these organizations

and people are social media influencers in the space. Look up the websites, social media feeds, and events for the following organizations and continue to update this list on your own.

Adventures for Hopi

Asian Pacific Environmental Network

Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition

Black Freedom Outfitters

Brothers of Climbing

Brown Environmentalist

Brown Girls Climb

Brown People Camping

Color the Crag

Diversify Outdoors

Earthtone Outside

Fat Girls Hiking

Flash Foxy

Green Latinos

Green Muslims

Greening Youth Foundation

HECHO (Hispanics Enjoying Camping, Hunting, and the Outdoors)

Hispanic Access Foundation

Homoclimbtastic

Indigenous Women Climb

Indigenous Women Hike

Latino Outdoors

LGBTQ Outdoor Summit

Melanin Basecamp

Native Women's Wilderness

Natives Outdoors

Nepantleras

Next 100 Coalition

Nuestra Tierra Conservation Project

OUT There Adventures

Outdoor Afro

Outdoor Asian

PGM ONE (People of the Global Majority in the Outdoors, Nature, and Environment)

Pride Outside

Queer Nature

Soul River

Team Blackstar Skydivers

The Gwich'in Steering Committee

The Venture Out Project

Tierra Libertad

Trail Brothers Initiative

Unlikely Hikers

Utah Diné Bikéyah

Women of Color in Nature

Module

3

Lesson

1

Voices in the Conservation Movement

Lesson at a Glance

Diversity and Access (25 min):

Participants will read stories of diversity in the outdoors and discuss.

Conclusion (5 min):

Reflection and questions

Learner Outcomes

Participants will:

- Understand the importance of diversity in the outdoors.
- Name one way they can help honor all connections to public lands.

Getting Ready

Time: 20-30 minutes

Materials: Printed stories

Location: Indoor or outdoor with room to sit in a circle

Objective: To provide examples of stories from people traditionally under-represented in the conservation community.

Diversity and Access (25 min)

1. Explain that as we work to bring every American into the conversation on our public lands, we need to include the host of ways people connect with nature. The often-told stories from Muir, Leopold, and Theodore Roosevelt are important, but we also want to make sure we are paying attention to all environmental perspectives. Here are a few stories that help round out the narrative about how someone can connect to the environment.
2. Pass out printed stories and have each participant read out loud a different story about diversity and public lands.
3. Debrief:

Have you heard of any of these individuals or organizations?

Did these stories surprise you?

Why is it important to tell these stories in addition to the typical stories of John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Theodore Roosevelt, etc.?

Do you know any other organizations or individuals who can help create a more inclusive narrative of the conservation movement?

Conclusion (5 min)

1. Ask participants to share one way they will help honor these connections to the land and stories from people whose voices traditionally haven't been represented in the conservation movement.
2. Allow time for questions.

Adapt the Lesson

Participants can also research their own stories and present to the group if time allows.

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In the 1770's, Brister Freeman and Zilpah White were freed slaves who lived around Walden Pond, famed retreat of writer, environmentalist and activist Henry David Thoreau. Walden was a settlement for freed slaves prior to Thoreau's residency and the stories of Freeman and White, among other freed slaves and individuals from marginalized communities, served as an inspiration to Thoreau.

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Outdoor Afro continues to give voice to the myriad of African American and black experiences in the outdoors. One connection that is often talked about is the healing aspect of nature. They support #HealingHikes for those who are healing from traumatic experiences or those who just need to de-stress. One Outdoor Afro group recently explored portions of the Appalachian Trail that overlap with the Underground Railroad, following a path that Harriet Tubman may have taken.

Latino Outdoors has been working to tell the myriad of stories about the outdoors in the Latinx community. Latino Outdoors is a network of leaders committed to engaging Latinxs in the outdoors, connecting families and youth with nature, and supporting a community of storytellers to explore and share their personal experiences.

Nepantleras are a group of young Chicana women have begun hiking together and navigating “nepantla,” or the in-between space they find themselves in while navigating their own Indigenous identity and the Western culture of hiking. Together, they hike in public lands and build their own connections to land as it relates to their identity.

More than 9-in-10 Latinx voters (94%) say outdoor activities such as fishing, picnics, camping, and visiting national parks and monuments are important to them and their families. Therefore, it doesn’t come as a surprise that Latinx voters express strong support for the protection of public lands.

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NativesOutdoors is working directly with tribal governments, community organizations, and individuals on increasing access to outdoor recreation and connecting resources and opportunities within the outdoor industry.

