

Connections to Land and Water

Main Takeaways

While many of their stories have often been buried and ignored, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color have connections to the land, and all play an important role in conservation.

By sharing stories, we can deepen our understanding of how history plays a role in the many ways that people connect to public lands and waters.

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, Black Americans, and other racially and ethnically diverse communities have largely been actively erased and ignored throughout United States history, these groups played and continue to play a role in the preservation of federal public lands, wilderness, and other shared public spaces. The widely publicized stories of John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, Henry David Thoreau, Edward Abbey, and Aldo Leopold are a piece of public lands history, but to understand a more complete story of public lands we must give thoughtful attention to the environmental perspectives of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

This module explores the various ways in which people connect with the shared legacy of land and water, and provides a more all-encompassing history of the conventional stories around public lands. Some of these 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 and in your communities. Doing so is one way to uplift those who have been discriminated against throughout U.S. history and the conservation movement.

Racially and Ethnically Diverse Leaders in Conservation History

Due to historical racism and discrimination, many early examples of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in conservation are in service positions. Later in the module we highlight several examples of BIPOC leadership in conservation.

In the 1770's, **Brister Freeman** and **Zilpah White**, freed Black Americans, 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 people, served as an inspiration to Thoreau.

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.

The Buffalo Soldiers, an all Black American army regiment, were among the first park and backcountry rangers, patrolling Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks on horse and bicycle. They served as park rangers between 1891 and 1913 when the United States Army was the official administrator of these National Parks. The Buffalo Soldiers were also recognized for

their exceptional horsemanship. They protected the parks from illegal grazing, poachers, timber thieves, and wildfires. They also oversaw the construction of park infrastructure, including the first trail to the top of Tumanguya, also known as Mount Whitney — the highest mountain in the contiguous U.S. — and the first wagon road into Sequoia National Park's renowned Giant Forest.

Tie Sing, a Chinese backcountry cook, worked for the U.S. Geological Society as they mapped and explored Yosemite National Park in 1915. Sing led an expedition of men who would eventually be instrumental in the management of federal public lands, including Stephen Mather, first director of the National Park Service.

Charles Young (1864–1922) was a military veteran who became acting superintendent of Sequoia and General Grant National Parks in 1903, the first Black 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 a Black American agricultural scientist, botanist, and environmentalist who developed methods for improving soil in order to maintain sustainable harvests.

Black 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. Black American enrollment was capped at 10% and thousands of men were turned away. While a few camps were racially integrated, most Black Americans lived and worked in segregated camps. Their involvement in the CCC is largely undocumented though some Black American companies worked on special projects. In an area of Forest City, in Rutherford County North Carolina, for example, Company 5423-C workers gullied and fenced over 3,000 acres. They planted hundreds of trees and shrubs to reshape the land and stabilize the erosion. Indigenous people also participated in the CCC-Indian Division (CCC-ID) developing infrastructure on reservations. The CCC-ID was administered by tribal leaders with the assistance of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Connections to Land — Examples of Dispossession and Placemaking by Black Communities

Historically and currently, racially and ethnically diverse communities of all types have been blocked from access to United States public lands. Colonization, eminent domain, segregation, and other forms of structural violence made existing on public lands nearly impossible for Black Americans for centuries. The federal public lands system in the United States was initially developed during a time when Jim Crow laws enforced legalized discrimination against Black Americans. This form of segregation extended to some national parks in Southern states which established “Negro Areas” within the parks. Beyond being unable to camp and picnic in areas where they could be seen by white visitors, Black visitors were often forced to use bathroom facilities, picnic grounds, dining rooms, coffee shops, cabins, and

parking lots of inferior qualities to their white peers. Despite the segregation and violence that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color have faced in the outdoors, their connections to the land remain strong. In the United States, Black people in particular have faced a uniquely intense legacy of violence and discrimination. White supremacy that grew out of slavery and ensuing anti-Blackness have plagued the United States since its inception. The following stories highlight how specifically Black communities have been historically dispossessed of public lands in the United States, and have also built places of safety and community amid the violence and injustice they faced and continue to face. In more recent years, efforts have been made to shift systems of power, such as through the #LandBack movement, whereas the majority of the stories documented here are examples of BIPOC folks working within existing systems of power.

Seneca Village

One of most well-known urban public spaces in the United States is New York City's Central Park. Maintained by the Central Park Conservancy, the 843-acre park was first established in 1855 on the ancestral homelands of the Lenape people. The land was formerly a farm that was parceled out and sold by its owners to Black Americans, a practice rarely done at the time. Owning land was largely a gate-kept right, as it was a sign of Black American families' upward mobility, level of education and attainment, and a step to obtaining the right to vote. Of the 100 Black American New Yorkers eligible to vote in 1845, 10 lived in Seneca Village, however Black Americans who could legally vote still faced massive barriers to voting.

A group of free Black Americans who were associated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church were the first to purchase property on the land currently known as Central Park in 1825 — two years before the city of New York ended slavery in 1827. This community of mainly free Black Americans, called Seneca Village, was integrated and included some Irish and German residents. The community consisted of 70 buildings, including three churches and a school- one of the first schools available for Black American students at the time.



Historians believe that Seneca Village was a middle class community as there were many skilled Black American tradesmen residing there. Seneca Village's geographic distance from the established New York City neighborhoods allowed for many residents to take up jobs that were not primarily manual labor-based- which was atypical for many Black Americans. At this time in New York City's history, most of

the city's population lived below 14th Street; the region above 59th Street was only sporadically developed and was semi-rural or rural in character.

In 1855, planners in New York City decided to establish a public park on the site of Seneca Village to increase the city's economic value and desirability. Plans were made and the land was seized from Seneca Village community members without consultation. While landowners were compensated, many residents felt that their land had been undervalued. This example of community destruction and displacement was one early and prominent example of the use of eminent domain in United States history.

Today there are few indications of the history of Seneca Village in the landscape. Since the late 1990s, a group of historians and archaeologists have been working to uncover the history of Seneca Village. In 2011, members of the Seneca Village Project organized an archaeological research effort focused on uncovering the identities of these former residents.

American Beach

As discussed in Module 2, segregation kept Black people from freely enjoying United States public lands and spaces for Black people to recreate and relax were few and far between. When and where recreation was allowed, in a segregated world Black people were always at risk of being subjected to discrimination and humiliation. However, Black people across the country worked to make spaces for themselves in whatever capacity they could. One of these individuals was Abraham Lincoln Lewis, Florida's first Black millionaire and founder of Afro-American Life Insurance Company in Jacksonville, Florida.

In the 1930s, in the coastal counties of Nassau and Duval, there were no beaches open to Black people- "Whites only" signs covered Florida beaches. As Black people attempted to enjoy public lands, often they were subject to verbal harassment and physical beatings from local residents and the police. Lewis recognized the importance of having outdoor spaces for enjoyment and mental health and in 1935 he founded American Beach, Florida's first Black beach. American Beach was originally founded to give Lewis' employees a place to recreate but it became a safe haven for Black people throughout Florida and the South. Throughout the mid-20th century, American Beach was advertised as a place for Black people to enjoy "Recreation and Relaxation Without Humiliation." It drew Black people from all backgrounds, even celebrity authors and musicians like Zora Neale Hurston, James Brown, and Ray Charles. Desegregation in the 1960s decreased visitorship, but in the 1970s MaVynne Betsch (Lewis' granddaughter), also known as the Beach Lady, fought for its preservation. Her dream was realized when American Beach was recognized as a National Historic Site in 2002, three years before her death.

Idlewild

Idlewild is a small community in Michigan currently with a population of 732, but in the first half of the 20th century it was a booming resort for Black people looking for reprieve from the segregated world. Originally the homelands of the Odawa/Ottawa people, it was homesteaded and developed by four white couples who saw an opportunity to sell land to a growing Black population. When Idlewild was first established

'The Negro Motorist Green Book'

Often simply called 'The Green Book', this series of books was first published in 1936 and were the brainchild of Harlem-based postal carrier Victor Hugo Green. Green, like many Black people at the time, had become frustrated with the risks of interstate travel. Many Black travelers couldn't find places to eat or sleep and needed to avoid "Sundown Towns" that required Black people to leave their city borders before sunset. Though largely unknown to white people, 'The Green Book' eventually sold upwards of 15,000 copies per year and was widely used by Black business travelers and vacationers alike. In his memoir "A Colored Man's Journey Through 20th Century Segregated America," Earl Hutchinson Sr. described purchasing a copy in preparation for a road trip he and his wife took from Chicago to California. "The 'Green Book' was the bible of every Negro highway traveler in the 1950s and early 1960s," he wrote. "You literally didn't dare leave home without it." For many Black people and other People of Color, this level of precaution when leaving the house was not novel, and public parks have also been unsafe for Black travelers during times of segregation.

Similar efforts to make travel for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ people safer are being created today in various other formats like [misterb&b](#), [noirbnb](#), and [Inclusive Journeys](#).

in 1912 it was only the third resort in the United States that catered to Black visitors. As one of the few places in the country Black people could relax, buy property, and build prosperous lives, Idlewild attracted an array of prominent Black historical figures, including Madam C.J. Walker and W.E.B. DuBois. After World War II ended, an influx of Black entrepreneurs began to invest in Idlewild. Businessmen like Phil Giles, Arthur "Big Daddy" Braggs, and William N. "Sunnie" Wilson developed elaborate nightspots and business centers that added to Idlewild's appeal. During the height of visitation tens of thousands of people would come throughout the summer for recreation and entertainment. The lakes and wilderness of western Michigan offered beaches and boating opportunities when outdoor recreation was largely inaccessible for Black people in the United States. Idlewild also became a regular performance spot for Black performers and hosted famous musicians like Louis Armstrong, Aretha Franklin, The Four Tops, and many others. In its peak, Idlewild was known as "The Black Eden of Michigan." Once segregation was outlawed, Idlewild suffered a sharp decline in visitation as Black families and community members sought new frontiers in an integrating United States. In recent years, the current residents of Idlewild have taken steps to preserve the historic town and save its legacy.

Sag Harbor

In the 1940s another Black beachfront community sprung forth in the midst of segregation to provide safe space for rest

and relaxation when most public lands were unwelcoming to Black people. Sag Harbor, Azurest, and Ninevah (or SANS) were subdivisions in Sag Harbor, New York. Before the American Revolution, East Hampton was a Black and Native American enclave, however when Sag Harbor became a United States entry port, the Black and Native population were pushed to an area southeast of the town. Maude Terry, a Brooklyn school teacher, vacationed in Sag Harbor in the 1940s and envisioned an investment opportunity for a Black summer community. The owner of what would become Azurest was struggling to sell on the marshy area and made a deal with Terry to partner together. In a world where buying property was gatekept from the Black community, Terry had huge success selling plots to Black people. She went on to manage the Azurest Syndicate, which made it possible for Black people to receive loans and mortgages to buy parcels and fund construction in the Sag Harbor area. The area grew in popularity for affluent Black people and Sag Harbor, Azurest, and Ninevah became cornerstone vacation spots throughout the Civil Rights Era. Today, residents and visitors are fighting for the preservation of the historical site.

Allensworth, CA

Allensworth, California was another early haven for Black Americans looking to live a life safe and secluded from racism and segregation. It was originally established by Colonel Allen Allensworth, who was born an enslaved person in 1842 and escaped behind Union lines to serve as a chaplain for the 24th Infantry. He eventually retired as a lieutenant-colonel in 1906 with the highest rank of any Black United States soldier. After retirement, Allensworth met Professor William Payne and they worked together to establish a “Race Colony” with the goal of advancing Black people socially. It was governed and built entirely by Black community members and reached a peak population of around 300 residents in the early 1920s. It was home to the United States’ first Black elected officials- Josephine Allensworth, Oscar Overr, and William H. Hall were elected to the school board in 1912. However, the community was short lived, as the Pacific Farming Company broke its deal to deliver sufficient irrigation water to the community- building only four wells as compared to ten in a neighboring white town. After fighting expensive legal battles with the company, Allensworth’s population dwindled. In the 1960’s high levels of arsenic were found in the water and most of the remaining residents left, leaving Allensworth a ghost town. In the 1970’s California Parks and Recreation established Allensworth as a Historic Park to preserve its history as a haven for Black people.

Oak Bluffs, MA

Martha’s Vineyard is a beautiful remote island location for New England’s affluent vacationers, though many are unaware of the Black history that took place in the small town of Oak Bluffs on the island. Originally inhabited by the Pauquunaukit Wampanoag/Pokanoket and the Wampanoag people, enslaved Africans came to the island, forced to work on white farms. However, in the 18th century freed Black Americans, Black laborers, sailors, and whalers came to the island to make a living off of whale oil. White landowners were willing to sell them land in an area known as Cottage City and this very early population of Black people laid the

foundation of a Black community on Martha’s Vineyard that would continue to grow. Once slavery was abolished, more and more Black people came to Martha’s Vineyard and, in the early 20th century, Cottage City was renamed Oak Bluffs, for the grove of oak trees that grew across the town. Eventually, middle class Black people began buying and renting vacation properties in the area. Oak Bluffs was branded “Inkwell”, a pejorative term referring to the skin color of Oak Bluffs’ inhabitants. Still, the rest of the island, like most of the country, was closed to Black people, so Oak Bluffs became one of the few places where Black people could vacation and enjoy the outdoors safely. In 1912, Charles Shearer and his wife, Henrietta Shearer opened the first inn for Black people on the island: Shearer Cottage. The Cottage was a great success and was often overbooked throughout the summer. Through its heyday, Shearer Cottage hosted Black celebrities including Madam CJ Walker, Ethel Waters, Paul Robeson, and later Lionel Richie and the Commodores. While much of Oak Bluffs’ history goes unrecognized and the town itself is now over 89 percent white, Oak Bluffs and Shearer Cottage are some of the few historic Black places that remain intact today.

Contemporary Stories of Connection

The work to make public lands accessible and welcoming to all people requires understanding and respecting how people connect to the outdoors. Only when people forge & rediscover their own connections to the land around them will they feel inspired to protect nature and work to ensure that all people can access the benefits of public lands. The following stories illustrate examples of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color and organizations leading the conservation and environmental justice movement.

The city of Tucson, Arizona is home to **Saguaro National Park** and about 44 percent of Tucson’s population identifies as Hispanic and/or Latinx. Despite Latinx representation, of the park’s roughly 650,000 annual visitors, less than two percent self-identify as Hispanic. In an effort to become more culturally relevant and increase visitorship, the park created and hosted a viewing of a potential advertisement to a Latinx focus group. The ad featured a 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 Greenway 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 in partnership with the Houston Parks and Recreation Department. This survey aimed to capture the voices of Black 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- community connectivity was ranked last among priorities for Black 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.

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

There are a handful of **modern examples of Black placemaking** in the United States. In her article ‘Black and Brown Placemaking Rooted in Identity and Ownership’, Ebony Walden writes “Local projects that I have worked on as an urban planning consultant that desire to reimagine once prosperous Black neighborhoods in our current landscape have craved this rootedness in cultural identity, art, business and prosperity. These values and ideas were reflected in the recent neighborhood plan for the area of Jackson Ward, VA and the Staff Hill Small Area Plan that I worked on in Charlottesville’s Vinegar Hill, a Black community razed by Urban Renewal. Both projects’ values and goals were rooted in equity and Black prosperity and created a vision for homeownership, entrepreneurship, and cultural arts rooted in Black American history and culture. There are models for this type of placemaking around the country. There is Domino Park in Little Havana in Miami, a park infused with art, community and play specifically for Latinos; or Homecoming, an art project that preserves and celebrates Black stories and presence in the Hill Neighborhood in Pittsburgh.”

In August of 2018, Jolie Varela and Indigenous women from **Indigenous Women Hike** traveled 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 which protects the rights of Native Americans to exercise their traditional religions, 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 dispels this stereotype as it reports that:

- 9-in-10 (92%) Latinx voters agree that they “have a moral responsibility...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 federal public land as national monuments.

MaVynne Betsch donated 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 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, Francis 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.

Farmer and homesteader **Israel Lafayette Jones**, who was likely born into slavery, 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 in 1980.

Black/Land (<http://www.blacklandproject.org>) is a project that brings together and amplifies the stories, knowledge, and language Black Americans across the country are already

using to discuss their relationship with land and place. Through personal interviews, founder and director of Black/Land Project, Mistinguette Smith, collects and analyzes these stories of connection to build a shared resource, for and by these Black communities, of their “powerful traditions of resourcefulness, resilience, and regeneration.”

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	Greening Youth Foundation	Outdoor Afro
Asian Pacific Environmental Network	HECHO (Hispanics Enjoying Camping, Hunting, and the Outdoors)	Outdoor Asian
Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition	Hispanic Access Foundation	PGM ONE (People of the Global Majority in the Outdoors, Nature, and Environment)
Black Freedom Outfitters	Homoclimbtastic	Pride Outside
Brothers of Climbing	Indigenous Women Climb	Queer Nature
Brown Environmentalist	Indigenous Women Hike	Soul River
Brown Girls Climb	Latino Outdoors	Team Blackstar Skydivers
Brown People Camping	LGBTQ Outdoor Summit	The Gwich'in Steering Committee
Color the Crag	Melanin Basecamp	The Venture Out Project
Diversify Outdoors	Native Women's Wilderness	Tierra Libertad
Earthtone Outside	Natives Outdoors Nepantleras	Trail Brothers Initiative
Fat Girls Hiking	Next 100 Coalition	Unlikely Hikers
Flash Foxy	Nuestra Tierra Conservation Project	Utah Diné Bikéyah
Green Latinos	OUT There Adventures	Women of Color in Nature