

We Have a Story to Tell: Interpreting the Piscataway Culture

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THE ACCOKEEK FOUNDATION IS AN EDUCATIONAL NONPROFIT located in Piscataway Park, Maryland, that oversees the nation's first land trust. This land is cherished by the Native Americans whom have called this land home for over 400 generations. The Accokeek Foundation understands the importance of this land to the native people. They are working with the Piscataway people on interpretive programs and exhibits that can honor and showcase this past with the respect and dignity they deserve. At the George Wright Society Conference, the president and CEO of the Foundation, Lisa Hayes, conducted the session, "We Have a Story to Tell," which focused on the importance of finding the best ways to interpret the native heritage and culture accurately to the public. The session began with a short play. In 2008, the Accokeek Foundation invited scholars and representatives from the three Piscataway tribes to discuss ways in which they could connect the public to their culture. The play was a representation of some of the discussions that took place at this scholarly colloquium. Lisa Hayes performed alongside two students and the professor from the drama program at Laney College. This colloquium made the Foundation recognize that there is a need for a greater understanding of the Piscataway culture in Maryland. Since this colloquium occurred, the Foundation has been working towards educating park visitors about the cultural significance of this land.

After the play, Ms. Hayes opened up the floor for discussion and invited anyone to share their experiences or provide input on how the park can interpret the native history and culture. There were several Native Americans in attendance who gladly shared their past experiences in visiting other parks' cultural exhibits. All of the Native Americans in attendance that afternoon agreed that the most important thing a park can do is to stay away from all of the stereotypes associated with Native American culture. The native people have been stripped of their identity for so many years; the best way to interpret their culture is to invite the natives to share their own stories at the park. It will make a significant impact by just having the natives tell their stories in their own language, or aid in translating interpretive signs into English.

The parks can also improve cultural programs by engaging the Tribal youth and providing more opportunities for them to become involved. While it's important to understand and appreciate the land's history and culture, what can the public learn from the Piscataway people? The native people appreciate and respect the land. They understood that the land takes care of them; therefore, they should always take care of the land. Their conservation efforts helped to leave the

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land full of resources that could be used for many generations of their people. The Accokeek Foundation wanted to continue teaching the conservation lifestyle displayed by the Piscataway people. They developed an ecosystem farm in the park over 20 years ago where they promote and educate the public on sustainable agriculture. The Accokeek Foundation understands the importance of the land to the native people and is working to provide interpretive programs that will demonstrate that.

Reflection

It was an interesting experience being a part of that discussion. Native American culture has been grossly misinterpreted for so many years. The experiences shared at the session helped me understand the frustration felt by the Native Americans, especially when they visit parks that were once sacred to their people that may not even acknowledge their existence. The first step in presenting their story accurately is to remove all of the stereotypes from the parks. Then, the parks should hire Native Americans to help develop and facilitate interpretive programs. While it can be useful for one to research information in books, etc., the best knowledge one can acquire will come directly from the source, especially when one is interested in learning about a person's culture. Therefore, if there is an opportunity to speak with someone directly about their culture, it should not be overlooked. It is encouraging to see that The Accokeek Foundation has recognized this and wants to improve their interpretive programs to better reflect the culture of the Native people.