

Fear of the Boom Box: Death Knell for Our Public Lands?

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A 1994 ARTICLE IN *National Parks*, the magazine of the National Parks Conservation Association, addressed the National Park Service's need to reach out to racially diverse communities and harness the power of this fast-growing demographic group. Each of the four letters published the following month in response to the article intensely decried the effort, and some used vituperative language to describe what they saw as the inevitably negative effects that would result.

“Please do not (defile) our oases...” “We come to these places to get away from the problems caused by ethnic minorities...” “Bringing more blacks and Latinos into the parks would only lead to an increase in robbery, murder and other crimes...” “If blacks and Latinos do not enjoy this type of recreation, then do not force them...”

When we first saw the article and the letters in 1995, my husband Frank and I had just returned from a life-altering, 12,000-mile, 40-state trip around the country, visiting national parks from coast to coast. Awestruck by the unworldly beauty of Acadia, the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, Yosemite, Olympic, Zion, and the Petrified Forest, among other national parks, we had been equally astounded to find ourselves the only Americans of color among visitors. (It wasn't until we reached Olympic that I saw another black woman.)

Returning home to Florida, we couldn't stop talking about the national park system. This, surely, was among the greatest gifts our country could give to its citizens—our most compelling landscapes preserved for our enjoyment and inspiration, along with the relics of Native cultures and the salutary places in our country's history.

Who needed to go anywhere else on vacation when there was so much in our own country to discover?

Our friends and relatives, that's who. Many of them had been uneasy when we told them our plans to hike and camp in national parks, amazed that we would make ourselves so vulnerable. Their concern was less about our being attacked by wild animals and more about being accosted by hostile white men. Frank and I had responded that we did not feel a need for protection since, as Americans, we were merely going out to see our country. Wasn't that every American's right?

While we were busy telling them how completely pleasurable our trip was, the letters in *National Parks* magazine woke me up to the fact that the hostility our friends “perceived” was indeed real. There are people who don't want their Great Outdoors



experience to include the diversity they experience in the cities, or the changing face of America.

In the ensuing 11 years expended in trying to bridge the gap so that the national parks and public lands are attractive and welcoming to African Americans and Latinos, we have found a tremendous drag on both sides.

The mainstream environmental segment, including public land management agencies and nongovernmental organizations, whose job it is to reach out to these “non-traditional” users with a public information campaign, instead bemoan the “lack of interest” in communities of color, who have not been informed to begin with. Despite all evidence to the contrary, they persist in expressing that “all Americans fondly remember our experiences in the national parks...” Outreach programs are small, sporadic and are the first to be cut because “we just don’t have the budget.”

Simultaneously, many African Americans have been slow to embrace the outdoors and believe “environment” has nothing to do with them. Appeals highlighting the connection between natural resource protection and our air and water have been met with, “White people are going to have air, so we’re going to have air. There are more pressing things I have to worry about.” Even the 2005 catastrophe on the Gulf Coast has not been recognized as an example of how disastrously black and poor people can be affected by environmental decisions in which we are uninvolved.

A jarring conversation this year with a colleague who is also president of a prominent non-profit made me realize how far we still have to go. I was explaining to him that, when we take African Americans to the parks, they are just as awestruck as anyone, and as motivated to help conserve them. We’re all human beings, and share a common humanity, including a reverence for

great natural beauty,

“So, does that mean everyone has to visit the parks?” he challenged. “Does that mean we have to have the boom boxes and everything?!”

I gently reminded him that boom boxes have been out of style for a while, and almost everybody uses an iPod. Moreover, we have visited more than 100 units of the national park system and I have never once heard a boom box. We are also seeing many more visitors of color. This Columbus Day weekend in Sequoia National Park, I saw so many African Americans and Latinos, I finally had to stop running up to every one of them and talking to them.

The premise of the offensive boom box carried by marauding urbanites is just as damaging and offensive as the expectation that people in the great outdoors should show hostility to African Americans. These stereotypes are reinforced by mass media images of outdoor activity, which show only white people participating. Although conservation and protection of our environ-

ment is the most fundamental issue linking Americans and all humans, the all-white group on the cover of the 2006 “Earth Day Issue” of *Vanity Fair* magazine dramatically illustrates the schism in America’s thinking about the environment: Environmental protection is the forte of white people. “Environmental justice,” addressing the ill effects of pollution overwhelmingly experienced by the poor, is the forte of people of color. Never the twain shall meet.

This false dichotomy almost completely ignores the superhuman effort being put out by many African American and Latino groups around the country, who are doing everything they can—including investing their own money—to raise awareness that public lands exist for our recreation and enjoyment. If public land managers and NGO leaders can get over their fear of the boom box and support these emergent leaders, we could conceivably succeed in protecting our treasured places for the sustenance of future generations.

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