“I often hear Conservationists talk about how they are saving this or that parcel of land for future generations. But how often do they think about what those future generations will actually look like?”
— Marcelo Bonta, Center for Diversity and the Environment

What’s in store?
People are discussing the changing demographics all across America. The latest U.S. Census projects that by 2042, the white majority will shrink to minority status while minority groups will represent a national majority. Every racial/ethnic group is expected to grow in coming decades but none more than Hispanics. The Hispanic population is expected to triple in size by 2050 at which point nearly one in three U.S. residents will be Hispanic. America’s school-yards are also shifting. By 2023, “minorities” will comprise more than half of all children and by 2050, one in three children will be an immigrant or have immigrant parents. These demographic changes are already starting to influence the behaviors of agencies and organizations nationwide.

How ready is the National Park Service for these demographic communities? What might these new communities represent to parks and why should 21st Century parks prioritize relevance for these new user groups? This briefing explores these questions and others in building the business case for relevance. It is the third of three briefings prepared for the NPS Intermountain Region (IMR). The first relates to overall demographics of the U.S., racial/ethnic groups for regional focus, and community engagement strategies. The second relates to building a business case for diversity and preparing the workforce for tomorrow.

Throughout the past century, Parks have enjoyed enduring public support from a mostly middle class and white majority. Through contributions, votes, and lobbying initiatives, white Americans have continually thrown their weight behind the preservation of species, wildlands, and special historic places. At the same time, these populations have fueled a new generation of visitors who enjoy parks for educational opportunities, outdoor recreation, and more. Support from the white majority has contributed significantly to the National Park Service we know today.

Current park visitation figures for the Intermountain region, however, suggest that parks have yet to prove their relevance to user groups beyond this white majority. IMR visitors today are 90.1% White, 3.7% Hispanic, 3.2% American Indian or Alaska Native, 2.1% Asian, 0.6% Black or African American, and 0.3% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Further, of the five (of eight) IMR states (Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado and Oklahoma) for which data was received, Oklahoma appears to receive the highest percentage of American Indian/Alaska Native park visitors (10.4%) in the region. Similarly, Utah has the greatest percentage of Asian (5.7%) and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (0.5%) park visitors, and New Mexico has the greatest percentage of Hispanic (7.5%) and Black/African American (1.4%) visitors. Additionally, IMR park visitors are 49.4% female and 50.6% male. The under-representation of most communities of color in IMR parks underlines the urgency of addressing parks’ present day relevance challenges.

For 21st Century parks, relevance is a sink or swim proposition. If today’s visitation patterns persist, the probability of lower park demand for National Park experiences increases. In such an event, parks face certain difficulty in competing against other public policy interests for increasingly scarce funds.
To gain the support of tomorrow’s new American majority, parks must immediately articulate their relevance to racial and ethnic minority groups who have historically been absent from the national parks.\(^5, 6\)

The practice of relevance in parks must begin with an internal assessment of organizational readiness for engaging new and ethnically diverse communities. Once leadership, priorities, and resources are aligned, individual parks in the IMR must prioritize specific populations of interest almost down to specific neighborhoods. Park staff must then prepare the right messengers with reliable messages for new neighborhoods, invest in long-term relationships with new constituencies, and identify common ground on issues, interests, and needs. Park representatives must establish a presence in diverse communities and, at the same time, extend warm and personalized invitations to community members to visit parks in culturally desirable ways. In every way, the relevance of parks to the well-being of adjacent (and/or other interested) communities must be made explicit. In so doing, parks will maximize their chances of gaining the buy-in of the next generation of supporters.\(^7\)

This briefing focuses on the reasons why parks must prioritize ‘relevance’ to the new, and increasingly powerful, American demographics. First and foremost, new demographic groups represent considerable power through numbers alone. Second, these groups are wielding increasing influence through more and better political organization. Third, the pro-environmental attitudes of emerging demographics make them natural allies to parks. Fourth, communities of color are connected to powerful growth trends including increased buying power, increased leisure time, and increased heritage travel. For these reasons and more, Parks must recognize that gaining the support of communities of color is essential to their very survival.

Why cultivate the new demographics?

The New Demographics: Power in Numbers

As national parks watch their traditional support base of visitors, contributors, and voters dwindle, employees must actively go in search of new constituencies. There are over 100 million people of color in the United States and the vast majority of them have yet to be engaged by either the national parks or the mainstream environmental movement.\(^8\) If respectfully courted, these millions have the potential to take national parks to a whole new level. Due to the size of the emerging populations this country is experiencing, the opportunities for the IMR are unprecedented and the needs/interests of varied communities go unnoticed at your peril.

Increasing Power and Influence of New Demographics

Reinforced by both numbers and active leaders, communities of color are strengthening their political influence with every passing day. “Communities of color have mounting influence on society and politics, including the distribution of public finances, the way cities develop and grow, and the strength and creation of environmental laws and policies.”\(^8\) Twenty-first century parks must take swift and definite measures to establish themselves as trusted allies of these influential groups.

The Latino community specifically has bolstered its political prowess in recent years. Despite challenges such as immigration status and language barriers, the Latino community, for example, is registering more and more of its own voters.\(^9\) Further, the number of Latino elected officials in state government and the number of Latinos in Congress have both more than doubled over the past 20 years.\(^10\) These elected officials will no doubt use their voting, lobbying, and fund allocation powers to ensure their constituencies are authentically well served. Is the NPS ready?

Natural Green Allies

For decades, natural resource educators, the environmental movement broadly, as well as society-at-large have explained away the lack of diverse community participation in mainstream environmental politics through the perpetuation of a theory that communities of color didn’t care about the environment. Today, however,
a depth of academic research suggests that such an assertion is entirely unsupported. In fact, many communities of color are profoundly pro-environment and, in some cases, have demonstrated greater environmental tendencies than their white counterparts.

These environmental and resource protection tendencies translate into an increasingly green voting record for communities of color. For example, a 2002 exit poll for a multi-billion dollar bond issue for open space protection in California revealed that 77% of African Americans, 74% of Latinos, 60% of Asians and 56% of Caucasians approved the measure. Additional research from the University of Michigan supports the fact that ethnically diverse communities are supportive of protecting the air, water, ozone, open space and wilderness. Further, in Western states, there is evidence that minorities are counterbalancing more conservative voters on the ballot. The increasingly green voting record of communities of color represents a force that must be taken seriously.

Researchers report the Latino community, specifically, is building its green voting record. In 2002, a national study concluded that Hispanics were significantly more likely than whites to endorse pro-environmental beliefs. In 2004, an Albuquerque, New Mexico-based study found that Hispanic respondents were more concerned about general environmental problems and more willing to spend federal funds on these issues. Also in 2004, a national public opinion survey, commissioned by the Nature Conservancy, found that Latinos demonstrated a higher level of support for environmental issues than the population as a whole. Further, the number of Hispanic environmental organizations is on the rise. National parks must position themselves to take advantage of the green voting record of Latino communities. If the IMR parks elect to ignore this reality, where do they suppose future support will come from?

Similarly, research suggests that African Americans are also friends to the green cause, dispelling an old myth that these voters don’t care about the environment either. In 2000, for instance, a study analyzed questions from the National Opinion Research Center’s General Social Survey and concluded that African Americans, and those with lower incomes, were shown to have more pro-environment attitudes than the average respondent. Researchers have hypothesized that this greater environmental concern may stem from a higher incidence of environmental burdens experienced by the communities in question. In 2002, a different study found that members of the Congressional Black Caucus were more consistently likely to vote pro-environment than their white counterparts, even when controlling for party affiliation. Further, a University of Michigan scholar found that African Americans are as likely as white Americans to belong to environmental groups - though rather than joining traditional environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club or the World Wildlife Fund, for example, African Americans frequently form their own groups and mobilize on a grassroots level. Clearly, there is natural alignment between parks and African American constituencies. To believe otherwise is to reduce potential valuable connections as well as risk having the Black community challenge the IMR on why parks and NPS opportunities are still not relevant to their interests and desires.

Growth Sectors Represent New Opportunities

The growth in communities of color represents a variety of additional opportunities for national parks in the IMR. First, expanding ethnic minority populations are enjoying increased buying power, meaning they are able to consume more goods and services. Second, many ethnic minority populations have more leisure time than they used to as a result of improved social and economic status in society. Given this trend, it should be no surprise that people of color also represent one of the fastest growing sectors in the travel industry. In New Mexico alone, 26.2% of visitors to the state were Hispanic, more than five times the national average. Further, between 2000 and 2002, U.S. travel by Latinos increased 20%; travel by Asian Americans jumped 10% and travel by Blacks rose 4% – twice the rate of Americans as a whole. All of these exciting trends should position communities of color at the center of the IMR agenda.

Further, a new sub-sector of the travel industry called ‘historical interest,’ or ‘heritage’ travel, is on the rise. Experts suggest that the traditional “family vacation” is slowly being transformed into a history lesson as families flock to heritage travel sites to learn about their past. “We’re seeing
a big increase in historic trails tourism, on a level we’d never imagined,” said Gary Long, a recreation specialist for the Bureau of Land Management. Remarkably, a whole new breed of travel agents, “heritage travel specialists,” is emerging to help travelers navigate America’s historical back roads. This travel trend is exceptional news for national parks who have long recognized the value of preserving historical lessons for the benefit of future generations. National parks, including National Historic Sites, are superbly positioned to capture the interest of the 21st Century heritage traveler. Between increased buying power, more leisure time, and a growing interest in historical travel, communities of color may be poised to find what they’re looking for in national parks. Is the IMR ready to immerse itself in the work of connecting to culturally diverse communities or is it in avoidance mode and fearful of the unknown?

National parks must work with urgency to close the relevance gap if they are to gain the buy-in and support of new American demographic groups. The sheer magnitude of these populations, in combination with their increasing political power and natural green tendencies, make communities of color ideal partners to national parks. The IMR can and should determine how best to collaborate, or risk criticism. While some efforts have been successful, many have failed or not been sustained. By either augmenting the current state of relevance to ethnically diverse communities or creating relevance at all, parks in the IMR can be special places for minority communities just as authentically as they are for most white visitors. In so doing, the IMR ensures its survival and reputation for community engagement well into the future.

Parks committed to relevance must ask themselves the following:

- When thinking of the communities or constituencies you serve, who do you think of? Who should you think of?
- For whom are you protecting these lands?
- What cultural norms or values currently inform the work that you do?
- How will you expand your work to reflect more and different norms and values?
- What kinds of new skills will you need to engage ethnic minority communities effectively?
- What fears threaten to hold you and/or your colleagues back? How can you overcome these?
- What kind of movement are you going to hand over to your children and grandchildren?

“Our unwavering goal is to keep each park relevant to every segment of American society. This requires our constant attention.”

~ Mary A. Bomar
Former NPS Director

“We have to develop and practice the skills that will make us as relevant with those people who are Americans now and those who will be Americans in the future, as we have been with many of the people who have been Americans in the past.”

~ Michael Snyder, NPS IMR Regional Director
Endnotes

1 The term “Latino” is generally used throughout this briefing, except in cases where the original source (including the U.S. Census and other government agencies) uses the term “Hispanic.”


4 NPS Park Studies Unit, University of Idaho, Moscow. Received 16 February 2009. More information: http://psu.uidaho.edu

5 The historical absence of minority groups from National Parks can be partially traced back to the Jim Crow era, when campgrounds, lodges, and beaches, both inside and outside of the National Park system, were segregated by race.


7 For more on strategies for community engagement, see the first of these three NPS IMR briefings titled, “The America of Today versus the America of Tomorrow: Are you Ready? Do you Care?”


14 Burger, et al., 2004 as cited in Ard, 2006

15 Dominguez, 2004 as cited in Ard, 2006

16 Uyeki & Holland, 2000 as cited in Ard, 2006

17 Mohai & Kershner, 2002 as cited in Ard, 2006


21 Relevance and Diversity Executive Steering Committee Newsletter. (2008, December). National Park Service, Intermountain Region