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As America's
population
becomes more
diverse, will
its changes be
reflected in
park visitors?

Expanding the palette

THE STORY NEARLY ALWAYS BEGINS AT SUNSET with someone perched on the rim of the Grand Canyon, accompanied by a friend or family member... spellbound by the roar of Old Faithful in Yellowstone... or weary from a long hike, but exalted atop Half Dome in Yosemite. The first warm glow of a life-long love affair typically washes over the park visitor at one of the crown jewel national parks or a stunning natural setting courtesy of Wilderness with a capital "W."



More than 90 years into the national parks' era, this version is increasingly dated—not only because of the variety of the system's 392 units but the changing cultural and racial face of America itself. Saoran Reouth, 22, American-born of Cambodian emigrants, proudly wears a Park Service uniform at the first national park she set foot in, Lowell National Historical Park, in her Massachusetts hometown. Shandra Roberts, 33, an African-American mother of five from North Homestead, Florida, represents what can happen to an unlikely visitor to Everglades National Park. Mariajose Alcantara, 20, reared in San Francisco's Mission District by Salvadoran-born parents, never would have visited Yosemite and Grand Canyon had she not been blessed with an extraordinary "gateway" park experience within an urban park in her native city.

Three new faces on three new paths to three very different parks (see sidebars). And with the imminent release of the latest comprehensive study of park visitation demographics, their stories are especially timely as new leadership at the Department of the Interior and the Park Service refocuses the complex debate over the whys and what-to-dos about the longstanding under-representation of minorities in the parks. As far back as 1962, a presidential initiative called the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission found that minorities visited national parks and forests far less than white Americans. For years, the prevailing theories pointed to populations that were marginalized because they lacked the means or transportation to escape the city for the fresh air and captivating vistas of distant wilderness.

More recently, there's been increasing talk of the need to bridge a different gap. Before his eloquently rendered passion for the parks made him a celebrated talking head in Ken Burns' documentary, Yosemite park ranger Shelton Johnson was quoted at length as one of 20 featured role models in a 2006 book by Dudley Edmondson called *Black & Brown Faces in America's Wild Places*. Johnson grew up in Detroit, more than 2,000 miles from Yosemite, but he recalls feeling "philosophically and psychologically at a much greater distance."

And why wouldn't he and other African Americans, argues Carolyn Finney, an assistant professor of environmental science, policy, and management at the University of California, Berkeley, citing the results of her ten-year review of the photos in



RANGER SHELTON JOHNSON in a replica of the historic uniform worn by Buffalo Soldiers, Yosemite National Park, California

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SAORAN REOUTH

Lowell National Historical Park

What brought Saoran Reouth to Lowell National Historical Park? Not her Cambodian parents, who settled in Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1985. "Truthfully, I didn't even know the park existed, and I don't think my parents did, either," she says. She first set foot in the park her freshman year at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell. Needing a job to help pay her tuition, she signed on as a youth facilitator with an environmentally oriented work-study option called the River Ambassador Program, which involved some canal cleanup in the park.

Little did Reouth realize how fateful that choice would turn out to be. But then, neither did she know that her hometown national park was increasingly becoming a model of outreach to its ethnically diverse community. Roughly one-third of the city's 100,000 residents are of Southeast Asian ancestry. So nowadays, when park rangers tell the story of Lowell's founding on the Merrimack River as a booming textile mill town settled by Irish and French Canadians, they include their Asian neighbors in Lowell's ongoing story by broadening the discussion to the challenges of immigrating to a new country. Moreover, the park has a history of strong ties to the community by virtue of a summer-employment program called the Spindle City Corps, which is administered by a local community-service organization. The eight-week program delivers some two dozen local students to the park for maintenance work, from painting railings and cutting

grass to removing brush along the park's waterways. Educational components help students understand the park, introduce career opportunities with the Park Service, and spell out environmental issues surrounding the Merrimack River watershed.

Reouth now works in the park four days a week in the interpretive division while she attends graduate school. "I love the Organic Act [the parks' founding legislation]," she says, "how it's good for future generations, to protect and preserve. That's why I brought my niece over here, to help her think the same way as me."



Outside magazine. Of some 6,980 photos with people in them, Finney counted only 103 photos depicting African Americans. "Almost all of them were well-known black male sports figures in urban settings," she says, stressing, "The media plays a powerful role in terms of what stories we tell about black people and the environment."

There's more to this psychological gap than an unfamiliarity with hiking a ridge, pitching a tent, or cooking over a campfire. There's fear. Plain and simple. And not simply fear of wild animals. "There are thousands of people alive today who experienced discrimination in the parks," says Nina Roberts, associate professor of recreation and parks management

at San Francisco State University. Moreover, she says, because of the collective memory of groups of people, "the stories are passed down generation after generation and many [African Americans] don't see the parks as safe havens." Roberts, a former education and outreach specialist for the Park Service and the biracial child of a white father and an East

SHANDRA ROBERTS'S Everglades National Park

Until her family was tapped for a local public television program called *Into the Wild*, Shandra Roberts had never been to Everglades National Park, only a 20-minute drive from her home near Miami. The idea for the reality show, which depicted the family's overnight experience in the park, bubbled up in a brainstorming session of Everglades Park officials led by Alan Scott, head of interpretation. Scott knows only too well the startlingly low park visitation statistics among local residents. Although metropolitan Miami is home to some 6 million residents, of whom 54 percent are Hispanic and 14 percent are African American, these groups represent only about 3 percent and 1 percent of visitors to the park, respectively. That imbalance augers poorly for the long-term health of the park, he emphasizes.

"Everglades was the first national park established because of what's alive—its plants and animals—and and it cannot survive on its own," Scott says. "This is one of the most endangered national parks in the country. It's the downstream recipient of all water-management decisions, and the people who live next to it have a huge impact on the park and its health and its wildlife." More numbers put a finer point on his concern: A 2005 south Florida population study related to the comprehensive Everglades restoration plan found 54 percent of [of people] were unaware of Everglades National Park or Everglades restoration plans, and 34 percent of local residents had a negative attitude towards park resources.

The goal of the fall 2009 *Into the Wild* broadcast was to help spread the word about a planned offering called CAMP, or Camping Adventure with My Parents, a facilitated camping trip for area residents unfamiliar with the park and camping in general. If not for the strong desires of the Roberts's three oldest children, the family would never have agreed to be filmed at home and then followed throughout their overnight experience in the park. "I did know the park was there. I just didn't care to go," Roberts says. "My biggest fear was alligators and

how close they would be. And sleeping outdoors—I didn't know who was out there."

The night before their Everglades park experience, Roberts slept poorly. But when she saw the campground, she thought: "This isn't bad. It's not woodsy. There's an actual campsite and other people around who are very friendly." Her family had a wonderful time. Aside from a bit of a panic attack in a canoe, Roberts did, too. "We made s'mores around the campfire and talked about our experiences." Exhausted from the day's events and lulled to sleep by the ambient evening sounds of the Everglades, Roberts enjoyed a good night's sleep.

The trip was such a success that the family signed on to return for the first of two CAMP weekends this year—and planned to bring the two youngest children this time. Roberts, who spoke about her experiences at Audrey and Frank Peterman's "Breaking the Color Barrier in the Great American Outdoors" symposium last September, has been talking up the CAMP program to family and friends ever since. And she's learning what the Petermans and other diversity advocates discovered long ago: Inertia imposes a tough hurdle.

"There are some people who want to go, but there are more dead set against it," says Roberts. "I tell them not only is it safe out there, but the family time is great. There's no TV and no phones and you don't hear the police sirens. It's really peaceful. But my best friend, she still doesn't want to go." Early this year, in frustration, Roberts wrote on her Facebook page: "Why is it so hard to get us [African Americans] to camp? It's like pulling teeth."



Indian mother, has been studying the parks' diversity divide for decades. A few years ago, in Denver, in the shadow of Rocky Mountain National Park, her research brought this admission from a local resident: "My granddaddy told me the KKK hangs out in those mountains. Why would I go?"

She's not alone. Mickey Fearn, National Park Service deputy director for communications and community assistance, also evokes the ultimate racial horror. "I can only say it as clearly as I can say it: Every picture you see of a lynching is in some kind of rural area. For Native Americans and Hispanics, their situations are

ism and discrimination in the city's employment ranks.

But if Fearn has one foot planted solidly in urban affairs, the other is planted just as firmly in nature. He's one of four people featured in a documentary film about people who had transformative experiences in the redwoods. "Man's heart away from nature becomes hardened," he says, quoting Chief Luther Standing Bear. Even so, he's quick to point out that wilderness experiences don't necessarily appeal to everyone, and that to believe they do is to misdirect efforts to increase the diversity of national park visitors.

"You can't change people by using your value system if they have a different value system than you do. The underlying assumption that people

ground, eat dehydrated food, and not be around people like me for two or three days."

Of course, the National Park System has grown to encompass far more than a cache of stunning wilderness vistas. It now also includes national monuments and memorials, Civil War battlefields, lakeshore and seaside sites, scenic rivers and trails, and national historic sites. It was to a historic site—the Atlanta birth home of Martin Luther King, Jr.—that Carolyn Finney took her father some years ago. Throughout Finney's childhood, her father was the chauffeur, gardener, and caretaker on a 13-acre estate in Mamaroneck, New York, and her mother was the housekeeper. "My father worked outdoors all his life, but going to a national park was not

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different. But for black people, I think in the back of their minds, it's 'I don't feel safe in those places.'"

Fearn, who is 63, stood alongside the reflecting pool on the National Mall on August 23, 1963, when Martin Luther King invoked his dream of a more equitable America. In college, Fearn chaired the affirmative-action committee at California State University, Sacramento. He began his parks and recreation career working with gangs on the playgrounds of East Los Angeles. He spent more than four years as manager of Seattle's Race and Social Justice Initiative, spearheading former Seattle Mayor Gregory Nickels' effort to end rac-

seemed to be making is that the only reason a person in his or her right mind would not go camping and hiking is because they didn't know about it or have the money or transportation," Fearn says. "That's been the assumption for well over 40 years, which means the perception is: We need to go out and change or fix the people who just don't know what a great deal this is and tell them what a great deal this is and they'll come, when in fact, the challenges are much deeper than that."

"I used to kid people about this," Fearn continues. "Sure I want to drive an hour, put 30 pounds on my back, walk in five miles, sleep on the

something that really interested him," says Finney. But that day, in the visitor center at the King historical site, after listening to the voice of Dr. King and seeing decades-old photographs and filmed footage, her father suddenly grabbed her arm.

"I thought he was having a heart attack," she says. "Then he started laughing nervously, and I asked if he was okay." Father and daughter stood facing a replica of a sign that said "WHITES ONLY." The museum displays brought back such vivid memories for her father that he had flashed back to his youth and believed for a moment the sign was real, that they weren't supposed to be

there. "At the end of the day he told her, 'You know, I didn't think this was going to be very interesting, but I really enjoyed this.'" Her father didn't expect the park site would resonate so personally or engage him so profoundly, she says, underscoring that his national park epiphany "wasn't in Yosemite or Yellowstone."

Indeed, few of the most successful diversity programs take place at the big-name parks with the most iconic views. Moreover, these little victories merit attention; thanks to effective community outreach,

some of what other parks are doing?" asks Nina Roberts. "From what I see, it's very piecemeal."

There's evidence that new leadership in Washington is committed to addressing the issue. It's helpful, of course, to have the country's first African-American president vacation with his wife and daughters in Yellowstone and Grand Canyon during his first summer in the White House. Helpful, too, that Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar sees diversity from the vantage point of a Latino with a 400-year family history in

and all the staffs are connected, but we have this tendency to want to disconnect things, to have randomness, this ad hocism. I think that's one of the things that nature teaches us, that everything's connected."

Dudley Edmondson wrote his book to encourage African Americans to make nature and the environment a part of their lives. He did so because in his two decades as a professional photographer in national parks and other public wilderness areas, he has almost always found himself the only African American

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dedicated and creative program directors, and the help of local friends organizations, they are blazing trails every bit as important as those that lead to Yellowstone's Lower Falls or the Grand Canyon's north rim. With demographers predicting that in 50 years the nation's Asian population will double and the Latino community will triple, leaving white Americans the country's new minority, much more of the stewardship support for the parks will need to come from ethnic groups not currently flocking to the parks.

Happily, there are many new faces on new paths to the nation's parks—human bridges, if you will, across the diversity divide that plagues the national parks. But not nearly enough. "There are a lot of success stories and best practices, but why aren't more parks trying to recreate

the United States. In February, Park Service youth coordinators joined representatives from a host of youth corps and service organizations for a day-long symposium in Washington, D.C., to discuss best practices. Admitted George McDonald, youth programs manager for the Park Service, beforehand: "This will be our first meeting face to face in years. It's long overdue."

Mickey Fearn agrees. Although he is new to the Park Service—or perhaps *because* he is new—he has begun to speak up within the ranks. "I've said to people in the leadership of the National Park Service how much we deal with ecology on a day-to-day basis and how well people in this agency understand ecology. But they do not understand that our organization is an ecological system. The historical, cultural, and physical—

or person of color. And yet he's optimistic that will change, but only if today's young African Americans and Latinos and Asian Americans, and years from now, their children, feel a connection to America's public lands. That connection can be forged in any one of the Park System's 392 sites, but forged it must be. "Because the reality," Edmondson says, "is that people protect what they love and understand. And having that sense of ownership is extremely crucial to people of color if you expect them to ever really latch on and feel that public lands are important to protect and preserve." NP

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MARIAJOSE ALCANTARA

Golden Gate National
Recreation Area

Mariajose Alcantara, who this summer will celebrate her second anniversary as a ranger at Marin Headlands, part of Golden Gate National Recreation Area in California, is the first in her family to attend college. And there's little chance she'd be wearing the Park Service Stetson hat or working toward her college degree were it not for a vibrant high-school internship program at Golden Gate called I-YEL.

Short for Inspiring Young Emerging Leaders, I-YEL dates to the early days of the Presidio-based Crissy Field Center, a partnership project run by the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy in concert with the National Park Service and the nonprofit Presidio Trust. Now in its tenth year, the Crissy Field Center was established expressly to draw diverse communities to the park. Last year, the center's workshops, field trips, and other youth programs served more than 20,000 kids, 80 percent from underserved communities. Additionally, in the last three years, some 2,000 outdoor ingénues have camped in groups on forestland on a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Group leaders from need-based organizations receive advance training on camping skills and leading nature hikes from yet another dedicated local partner, Bay Area Wilderness Training, which also provides necessary gear.

"I-YEL helped me gain confidence and leadership skills," says Alcantara. "You go through a lot of training, but we had no idea we were learning all this stuff because it was fun. While we were doing it we were hanging out with some amazing people and learning how to teach workshops and speak to a large crowd"—which she did after graduating from high school, when I-YEL helped get her a summer job as a park ranger at the Grand Canyon.

Following through on its goal of developing young leaders, I-YEL not only inspires its interns to set their



sights on college but workers help with applications, submit stellar recommendation letters, and even lead group overnight trips to tour California colleges. As a result, 42 of the 51 alumni of the program (83 percent) have either graduated college or are currently pursuing a college degree. "I've got kids who didn't think they were going to graduate high school and they're going to Dartmouth, Smith, Berkeley," says Christy Rocca, director of the Crissy Field Center. Alcantara began at Cal State-Hayward and is continuing her studies online through Phoenix University because the demands of commuting to school and her job at Marin Headlands became too much.

A career in the Park Service appeals to Alcantara for many reasons. Perhaps foremost is her pride in being a young Latina park ranger. "I can tell all my friends about the park, and when I see a Latin family, I can approach them and say hello in Spanish and make them feel welcome," she says, "because I know from experience that sometimes when Latin people see a person in uniform, they might feel they are going to yell at them, because maybe they're parked wrong or something. I feel I can be a role model and help make people feel welcome."