

## BOUNDARY THINKING TRANSFORMED

MIKE WALTON, GUEST EDITOR

# Courageous Conversations: Risks, Race, and Recreation in the United States

*Harrison P. Pinckney, IV***ABSTRACT**

**The narrative remains unchanged.** The racial and ethnic demographics of the United States are changing, yet the agencies that manage our protected areas have not figured out how to prepare for these changes. Researchers and agencies working within protected areas are concerned with one simple question: How do we increase visitation and participation among communities of color? Several studies have focused on issues of constraints and barriers. Initiatives have centered on marketing strategies. Agencies have conducted surveys to examine their hiring practices. Sadly, these have not led to the desired outcomes. So, what are we missing, what ideas have we not explored, what are the appropriate next steps towards closing the perceived gap?

It is the position of this paper that researchers have prioritized research questions and methodologies with which they are most familiar and comfortable. Collectively, we have failed to take on the hard questions and processes that are necessary to truly unpack the meaning and impact of Race within the United States. Overcoming the difficulties associated with investigating Race and recreation in protected areas requires courage on the part of researchers. Courage to challenge the research findings and practices of their colleagues, expectations/goals of funders, and, specifically for White researchers, the recreation preferences of their peer groups.

Through personal stories and analogies, this paper presents three areas in which researchers need to practice the virtue of courage if we are truly to create safe spaces within our protected areas for Racially Marginalized Communities (RMCs).

**INTRODUCTION**

As a graduate student studying parks, recreation, and tourism, one of the most frustrating experiences was participating in class discussions about protected areas in the United States. These discussions were difficult because the information presented in research studies did not seem to align well with my own experiences or the experiences of so many of my family members and friends. While anecdotal experiences alone are insufficient as data, I still felt uneasy regarding the validity of these findings.

This uneasiness stemmed from my questioning of the methods used to collect data, as I perceived them as limiting our understanding of how Black Americans viewed the outdoors and the opportunities those spaces afforded. Additionally, it seemed like we were bean counting, where the focus was on getting non-White racial groups to participate at the same rate as the White majority. It was my contention as a student that our efforts should be turned towards exploring how Racially Marginalized Communities view the world and how these views affected their behavior. These were conversations my faculty and classmates would briefly acknowledge, but never truly engage in. Altogether, this led to me withdrawing myself from discussions because we weren't having meaningful conversations about what I perceived to be the critical issues and factors contributing to the reported participation rates among non-White groups. Almost twenty years later, I find that neither the driving research questions, nor the talking points, have changed much.

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It is understandable why very little movement has occurred. Investigating the meanings attached to Race and its impact on recreation in protected areas is uncomfortable. Such an investigation potentially forces researchers and agencies to reflect on the systems that have been created over the years to discourage non-Whites from embracing protected areas. This approach potentially challenges our current paradigms around conservation, land management, and uses of protected areas. These discussions may require us to push back against our colleagues and funders who have supported our work over the years. In short, we do not have the meaningful but necessary conversations about Race and recreation in protected areas, because they are not easy.

As I see it, the most appropriate solution is to have courageous conversations. Researchers of conservation, parks, and natural resources, along with the agencies they serve, need to become comfortable with the uncomfortable. Uncomfortable topics. Uncomfortable environments. Uncomfortable recommendations. The remainder of this paper will focus on three areas in which courage is needed to expand the boundaries of our thinking around Race and recreation in protected areas.

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### COURAGE AS A VIRTUE

At the time of preparing this article, I am teaching a Philosophy of Recreation course. We recently discussed the importance of virtues in our work. A paper by Daraio and Vaccari (2020) served as the foundation for this discussion. One virtue they suggest that is important for researchers is courage. Courage is characterized by one's willingness to risk one's own reputation for the purposes of protecting individuals, goals, or values. This is especially critical when it involves elements that are crucial to one's existence. I submit that this is the greatest shortcoming of the current discussions around recreation in protected areas and Race. Far too often we are unwilling to push the boundaries because it may cost us grant dollars, a publication, or praise of our colleagues. If we are really going to see a change in who visits our parks and protected areas, someone must take the first step to having courageous conversations. This entails moving beyond our comfort zones of where we collect data, who we invite to contribute to our exploration process, and how we envision the use of parks and protected areas in the future. This discussion aims to provide some insight for starting these courageous conversations.

### WHO ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

People of color (POC), Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and Underrepresented Minorities (URMs). These are just a few of the terms coined over the years to reference non-White communities. I submit that these terms gain popularity because it allows for people, especially members of the White majority, to feel comfortable engaging in conversations about racial and ethnic groups to which they do not belong. The dangers in this approach are many. First, these terms lump all non-White groups together. As a result, the unique histories, and identities of the specific groups within the umbrella label can be ignored. The genocide of Indigenous Nations or enslavement of people of African descent, for example, can be conveniently overlooked, if not ignored, when we adopt terms that provide a generic grouping of non-White populations. This contributes to a second danger. By ignoring the unique histories and experiences of each specific non-White population, agencies will never be equipped to effectively serve the needs of those individual communities. Lastly, the currently popular terms fail to bring much-needed attention to *why* these communities do not engage parks and protected spaces at rates comparable to those of the White majority. These visitation patterns of our parks and protected areas are a direct result of deliberate efforts to marginalize and oppress non-White populations. When an overarching term is necessary, care should be given to describing the groups under consideration *and* the circumstances that have contributed to their attitudes, behaviors, etc. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) developed a useful tool (CDC 2021) that can offer additional insight for identifying populations within the United States (see Table 1).

Recognizing the challenges around the use of language and labels, there's a need for researchers to consider two options. First, where possible, studies, reports, and assessments should focus on specific racial or ethnic groups. This includes examining historical practices and policies that may have created physical, social, and psychological barriers to a group's

Key Principles	Terms to Avoid	Preferred Terms
<p><b>Avoid use of the terms such as <i>vulnerable, marginalized, and high-risk</i> as adjectives.</b></p> <p>These terms can be stigmatizing. These terms are vague and imply that the condition is inherent to the group rather than the actual causal factors.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable groups</li> <li>• Marginalized groups</li> <li>• High-risk groups</li> <li>• At-risk groups</li> <li>• High-burden groups</li> <li>• Hard to reach groups</li> <li>• Targeted population</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Racial and ethnic groups</li> <li>• Racial and ethnic minority groups</li> <li>• Sexual/gender/linguistic/religious minority groups</li> <li>• Political minority group (Note: American Indian and Alaska Natives are the only federally recognized political minority in the US. Tribes hold a unique Government-to-Government relationship with the US.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Remember that there are many types of subpopulations.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minorities</li> <li>• Minority</li> <li>• Ethnic groups</li> <li>• Racial groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Racial and ethnic groups</li> <li>• Racial and ethnic minority groups</li> <li>• Sexual/gender/linguistic/religious minority groups</li> <li>• Political minority group (Note: American Indian and Alaska Natives are the only federally recognized political minority in the US. Tribes hold a unique Government-to-Government relationship with the US.</li> </ul>

**TABLE 1.** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention “Health Equity Style Guide”: Overarching principles and preferred terms.

engagement with parks and protected areas. Second, when it is necessary to discuss a group of populations, there should be intentionality in using language that’s precise in describing the group while calling attention to the systems that have contributed to the collective status of the groups under discussion. One such term that I have adopted is Racially Marginalized Communities (RMCs). While the CDC suggests avoiding using the word *marginalized*, I remain committed to this term as it places attention on the systems and social structures that have created the disparities we witness within education, housing, wealth, and even recreation. Furthermore, it allows me to be specific about which communities I am referring to. In the United States, people who identify as Indigenous, Black, or Latino have experienced unique challenges because of their racial and ethnic backgrounds.

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Elias and Feagin (2016: 6–7) define “systemic racism” as “the manifestation of historically developed, societally embedded ways of white Eurocentric thinking, of the organization of social groups according to a racial hierarchy separating Whites and people of color, and of an array of racially oppressive institutions devised by Whites that target people of color.” Within the broader system of racism, some groups benefit from policies, laws, institutions, and cultural norms, while other groups are oppressed by them. The National Science Foundation has coined the term “Underrepresented Minorities” to refer to racial/ethnic groups who have a smaller representation in science and engineering than would be expected given their numerical proportion of the US population (Rivers 2017). Black, Hispanic, Alaskan Native, and American Indian people are designated as URMs by the foundation. In our work, we use the term “racially marginalized” for several reasons. First, “minority” has been used as a term to signal numerical representation, but also refers to a position of subjugation without acknowledging the oppressive forces (such

as racism) that cause and sustain the numerical disproportionality. In the US, RMCs are the numerical majority (Frey 2019), and further, in a global context, people from colonized and racially marginalized communities are the numerical majority. Second, children and families from these communities are marginalized within the white supremacist systemic racism context in their everyday lives. By using “racially marginalized” we acknowledge and honor the position of subjugation that people from these communities have been placed in and actively fight against.

### Let me tell you about my grandmother’s favorite brother, Uncle Augustine, and the Candy Lady...

As a teenager, I remember visits to my grandmother. At that time, she lived in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and whenever we visited there was certain to be a fish fry while we were in town. In fact, when she came to visit us, she would travel with a cooler packed with ice and fish. (As a quick sidenote for readers under 35, there was a time before the Transportation Security Administration that you were allowed to hop on a flight with an entire refrigerator if you pleased.) So, why so many fish dinners? Well, it was because my Great Uncle Augustine Smith is an avid fisherman. Raised in the 1940s, he spent much of his free time on the water with his fishing gear. My great uncle is now 83 years old, and fishing remains one of his favorite hobbies. Last year, I had the great privilege of interviewing him as a part of a study I was conducting with colleagues at West Virginia University and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. He shared his experiences of growing up in the segregated South. It wasn’t a sad story of denied access, but a reflection on the outdoors as a way of life, a recognition that the narrative around Black people not appreciating the outdoors is false, an accounting of multiple friends and family members who also loved the outdoors, and a retelling of past events in which Black people gathered for the purposes of enjoying the outdoors together. But here’s the thing. Although agencies and researchers have expressed interest in understanding the experiences of Black people in protected areas, in the 84 years of his life no one had ever requested that my grandmother’s favorite brother or his friends participate in a study. I’m not suggesting that researchers should know to specifically contact my uncle, but when I reflect on studies examining Race in outdoor spaces, I do not recall methods where researchers have gone into the homes of people like my uncle and sit and listen to their stories. The efforts to interact with Black people has largely been isolated to the boundaries of public lands. Some studies have mailed or emailed surveys, but researchers largely have failed to go into the neighborhoods and homes of the communities they claim they want to understand.

### The Candy Lady

In the Black community, the Candy Lady is a staple. This is usually a woman in the neighborhood who sells a range of snacks to kids when they get out of school. The most popular snack of all time? Frozen cups, but that’s another article. The Candy Lady is one of the most powerful people in the neighborhood. Here’s why the Candy Lady wields so much power. She tends to know what’s going on with the youth more than any other adult in the neighborhood. The Candy Lady is known to keep track of youths’ grades, their relationships, and their whereabouts. Kids know they are not allowed to show up at the Candy Lady’s house before school is over or she will ask questions and report you to your family. The Candy Lady is a valuable resource within the community. Historically she has had the power to motivate kids to improve their grades, prevent after-school fights, and discipline children when their parents aren’t around. This person doesn’t represent an official institution within Black communities. She may have more influence than even the pastor because she



Uncle Augustine after a great day of fishing. COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

interacts with all the families (through their kids) regardless of religious affiliation. Most parents never visit the Candy Lady’s house but trust her with their kids. It is often stated that when working with communities, especially RMCs, you need to earn the support of the gatekeepers. Yet, it is my guess that most people reading this article are learning about the Candy Lady for the first time. When researchers want to gain access to these communities, there’s a temptation to find the established institutions (typically a church) and build a quick partnership with the leaders within that institution in hopes it will yield enough results to prepare a final report or write a manuscript for publication.

Brian Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative (2017) suggests there’s an importance to being in proximity with people who aren’t like us and allowing ourselves to be uncomfortable in those moments. He suggests it is only through these close, personal, and uncomfortable encounters that we can truly learn about others and challenge the inaccurate narratives that we’ve been presented with. This process is easier said than done. We need researchers to develop the humility to recognize they do not have the answers and their current understanding of challenges around Race and recreation in protected areas may be ill-informed. We need them to have the patience to forgo the temptation to run to the nearest perceived gatekeeper and instead build meaningful, long-lasting, and mutually beneficial relationships with the true leaders of each community they hope to investigate. Lastly, we need them to have the courage to sit in the homes of individuals and families and hear their stories, the good and the bad, to develop a rich and thorough understanding of the relationship between Race and recreation in protected areas. We need them to find my grandmother’s favorite brother and the Candy Lady.

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**A TABLE THAT WASN’T PREPARED FOR US**

Growing up in South Florida, crab legs, shrimp, and conch were staples at family gatherings. My dad, aunts, and uncles didn’t believe in a children’s menu, so by 4 years old each of the Pinckney children had mastered the art of cracking open crab legs. My siblings, cousins, and I are all adults now with children of our own and they too have developed an appreciation for seafood. But here’s the thing: I’m allergic to shellfish. So, when my immediate or extended family set a menu based on seafood, I was out of luck. In their excitement of planning the upcoming crab boil, everyone always forgot I couldn’t eat anything on the menu. It was usually right before we ate that I would ask, “What about me?” Without fail, my dad would run to the nearest McDonald’s and grab me a Happy Meal. In the ’80s, McDonald’s was a treat, but not when the rest of the family was having one of the best dining experiences ever.

Over 150 years ago the United States began its commitment to setting aside land for future generations to enjoy, creating legislation that would dictate the use of these spaces, developing fields of study to better understand the value of these spaces, and establishing agencies charged with managing these lands. Meanwhile, enslaved people were

An abbreviated timeline comparing the United States protections of public lands and the denied access to public spaces for RMCs.



gaining independence, Negroes were fighting for equal access to, amongst other things, public lands, and African Americans were demanding a seat at the decision-making table. Today, agencies like the National Park Service are hoping to increase its number of Black visitors but fail to acknowledge that this table was never prepared for us.

Like my childhood experiences with shellfish meals, a menu has been set that includes a philosophy of conservation, a recommended use of protected areas, and a list of designated lands, all of which have been determined by the palate of the White majority. Black visitors and potential visitors are told, *this is your space too, but you must enjoy it within a set of parameters that we've established without your input*. This leads to many asking, “What about me?” So, how do we prepare a table at which everyone is considered? Do we allow for consideration to repurpose all our public lands? Do we acknowledge that many voices were excluded in the early years, and resolve that there's little that can be done to correct the trajectory? Do we strategically look at each park and protected area and determine where Indigenous, Black, and Latino voices should or should not have input? I really don't know the correct path, but here's what I do know. We need agencies to have the courage to discuss how lands can be repurposed to cater to the needs and preferences of non-White communities. This includes giving those communities the power to make financial decisions. Most importantly, these agencies must have the courage to stand firm in the face of members of the White communities who demand that the protected areas remain unchanged in policies and uses.

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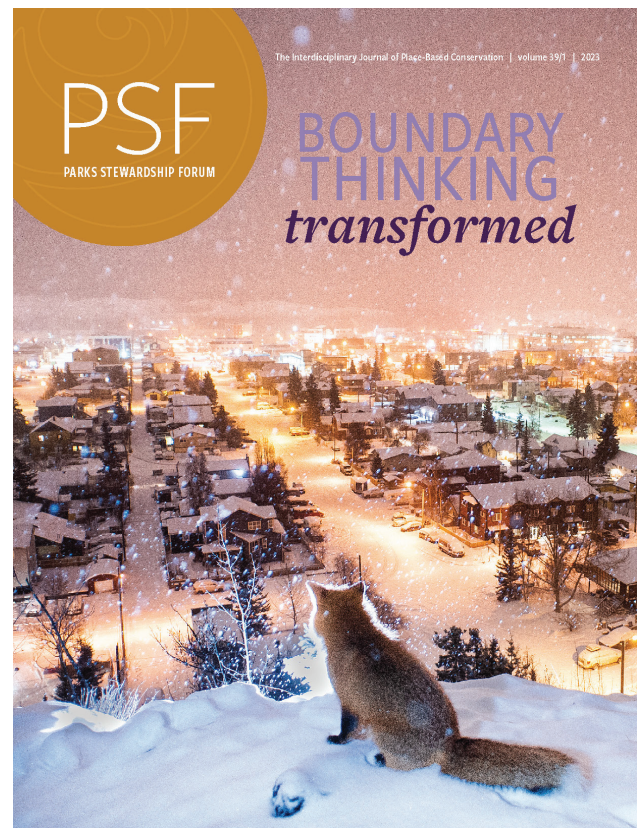
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**On the cover of this issue**

A red fox on the clay cliffs above the city of Whitehorse, Yukon Territory.  
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