

Queer ecology through national park social media

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Born out of 19th-century ideas of wilderness, national parks of the western United States has long been associated with traditional imagery of the rugged outdoorsman, testing his masculinity against lush forests, unforgiving terrain, and all manner of beasts that reside there. But he is only a visitor, entering a natural space for recreation and leisure, who may return home to civilization: the two exist distinctly. This dualist idea is reinforced in the words of the Wilderness Act of 1964, where wilderness “is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” Earth and its community of life are separated from man, who is seemingly detached, dissimilar from nature. A national park, then, is a natural space set aside for man, by man, and given these conditions there are prescriptive ways we interact with and understand these spaces (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010).

Masculine is Natural. Natural is masculine. Rugged, bleak, masculine Nature defines itself through contrasts: outdoorsy and extraverted, heterosexual, able-bodied—disability is nowhere to be seen; physical wholeness and coordination are valued over spontaneity.

— Timothy Morton, “Guest Column: Queer Ecology” (2010)

I didn’t grow up going to national parks; the first time I visited Zion, where I am now employed, was when I was touring colleges in the area just a little over a decade ago. I remember vividly, viscerally, the feelings that closed in around me with the encroaching canyon walls as I made my way into the park. The instigating landscape is virtually the same today: ancient towers of vermilion sandstone presiding over courts of desert grasses, cacti, and wildflowers on sun-baked earth, whose slopes are incised by a river and a road winding parallel through the canyon. On that road, in a hot, crowded shuttle bus, I first felt a deep, all-encompassing sense of insignificance. Instead of the suffocating grip of existential despair or anxiety that one might expect to feel when confronted with one’s own cosmic-minuteness, I felt something more akin to relief. The canyon was indifferent to me.

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Here, in this canyon, I am not alien. My identity is unquestioned, my existence is natural and easy. I am divorced from the social constructs, systems, and hierarchies that tell me I am wrong, unnatural, *weird*, or otherwise different. Millions of years of geologic time stand over me, where they have stood and will continue to stand when I am not even a memory, and it reminds me that my experiences of feeling alienated and out of place stem from human ideas rather than anything inherent to nature. Rather than the 19th-century narrative of masculine-man dominating wild environs from which he is distinct, I was *part* of earth and its community of life. My understanding of the outdoors was no longer tied to the vision of wilderness that I had read from early Transcendentalists and Romantics.

QUEER ECOLOGY

There are two questions before us. The first is ontological: a question about what queer ecology is, an analysis of its being. The second is axiological: a question about what queer ecology contributes to the

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world, an analysis of its value. These two questions—the ontological and the axiological—are generally very difficult to parse. Indeed, the philosopher David Hume famously described this difficulty, arguing that ontological description (what something is) is often structured by axiological adjudication (what something ought to be or ought to do), and vice versa. To begin, then, I would say in response to our two questions: what we imagine queer ecology to be emerges in tandem with what we hope it contributes to the world.

— Robert Azzarello in “Queer ecology: A roundtable discussion” (Anderson et al. 2012)

In the mission of the National Park Service, natural and cultural resources are parsed into two separate domains, though in practice, culture influences our interactions with and ideas of nature, while nature, in turn, often influences our cultural practices, beliefs, and systems. Recognizing this interconnectivity is a crucial tenet of queer ecology (also called “queer environmentalism”): societal ideas of what is considered “natural” versus “unnatural” are determined through the anthropocentric lens we use to view the world. As a result, received cultural perspectives can leave us with an incomplete concept of nature, as they are based on human-centered assumptions in lieu of more holistic interpretations of the natural world and our place within it.

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A queer ecological perspective, on the other hand, decentralizes human interpretations of natural processes and challenges many dualisms, including the divergence of “natural versus unnatural.” Here, I focus on the idea of natural versus unnatural because it is an incredibly common frame among those who insist that our world, or society, are put in danger by the mere existence of anything that—and anyone who—subverts their concept of *natural*:

For example: We can’t allow gay marriage—it’s *unnatural* for a man to be attracted to another man. We can’t support gender-affirming care—it’s *unnatural* for anyone to change themselves *that way*. You can’t identify outside of a gender binary—it’s *unnatural* to reject your chromosomal identity.

These and other sentiments have echoed through my life, shaping the experiences I have within my queer identity. Because, in a lot of ways, I find myself outside of what is considered normal or natural, I am drawn to the inclusivity shown to all things through the lens of queer ecology. We, as humans, aren’t distinct from nature in this perspective. And so, in my career working with the National Park Service, there are times when I have been able to use this perspective to inform my practices, interpretation, and work.

In 2022, park rangers at Stonewall National Monument reached out to me with a request to collaborate with them on a social media post for National Park Week. The goal of the post was to draw connections between the cultural resources of the Stonewall Inn and the natural resources of Zion National Park. This was an intriguing opportunity to work within a framework of queer ecology to talk about, however briefly, the interconnectedness of nature and culture.

The resulting post was a combination of text and graphics (Figure 1).

Within the character limits of Facebook and Instagram, I combined factual information with opportunities to challenge preconceived perspectives, without explicitly asking questions. Challenging heteronormative ideas of what we consider “natural” when it comes to sexuality, as well as reproductive assumptions some take as axiomatic, often meets resistance—regardless of how it’s presented. Audiences who engaged with this post shared many different reactions, from hostile exclamations of “woke agendas” to breakthrough connections about parallels between personal identity and the natural world. I did not define a metric, qualitative or quantitative, to gauge success in sharing this post, and therefore cannot speak to it in terms of outcome. Behind the scenes, in emails, chats, texts, and face-to-face conversations, there were many professional peers, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and others with positive feedback about what they interpreted as the refreshing approach of the post. My park also received a few complaint emails.



Zion National Park

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Let's talk about sex, baby, let's talk about... me and me?

That's right! For some creatures in Zion, reproduction only involves one individual. Which isn't technically sexual reproduction, but we had to get your attention somehow...

One species that you may have seen in the park is the plateau striped whiptail (*Aspidoscelis velox*). Rather than needing eggs and sperm to create offspring, these reptiles are able to reproduce through a process called parthenogenesis, which is sometimes referred to as "virgin birth" since it does not require sperm to fertilize an egg. Hormone cycles cause their cells to change before forming an egg – doubling the number of chromosomes available and ensuring genetic diversity in offspring. To trigger ovulation, these same-sex lizards will simulate mating behavior where one will take the role of the "male" and one as the "female", despite neither of them carrying sperm.

When a species only reproduces via unfertilized egg, like the plateau striped whiptail, it's known as obligate parthenogenesis. But some species choose to reproduce this way, in a process called facultative parthenogenesis. In a study published late last year, researchers described two instances of facultative parthenogenesis in one of the park's famous species: the California condor!

So why are we airing out the private lives of these animals in the first place? Well, we're sparking a connection to our friends over at Stonewall National Monument. @stonewallnps preserves the legacy of queer activism and shares the stories of those who have fought for LGBTQ+ civil rights and liberation. Oftentimes, humans have definition for what is considered normal and what is not – but don't confuse "common" with "normal". Like the whiptail and the condor, nature can be very queer!

Learn more about Stonewall and find more connections by visiting www.nps.gov/ston

#NPS Pride Road Trip #FindYourPark #EncuentraTuParque

PLATEAU STRIPED WHIPTAIL
QUEER ECOLOGY

Let's break it down! →

ALL PLATEAU STRIPED WHIPTAILS ARE THE SAME SEX

XXY

All plateau striped whiptails are triploid - they have 3 chromosomes that determine sex: two Xs and one inactive Y

MATING BEHAVIOR FOR HORMONE STIMULATION

Whiptails don't need to have sex, but they will simulate mating behaviors which may promote ovulation by affecting hormone levels.

PARTHENOGENESIS NOT-SO-SEXUAL REPRODUCTION

One parent + 2 Genetically diverse offspring

Since only one parent is providing genetic material, egg cells need to start out with 46 chromosomes rather than the 23 that sexually reproducing lizards do!

FIGURE 1. A social media post for National Park Week 2022, produced through a collaboration between Stonewall National Monument and Zion National Park.

With my interest piqued, I soon created another post offering a plant-based perspective on sexual reproduction in relation to (perceived) sex and gender in fourwing saltbush. It is typical for reproduction to be taught and understood in terms of “male” and “female” parts existing in separate entities, coming together; but fourwing saltbush plants do not match this dichotomy. On June 9, 2022, we posted the following text with graphics on Facebook and Instagram (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. A follow-up social media post focused on sexual reproduction in plant species.

Zion National Park ✓
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A common but unique species seen throughout the park is fourwing saltbush (*Atriplex canescens*). While it is a common sight throughout the park, fourwing saltbush is unique because it can be dioecious OR monoecious!

When a plant is dioecious, that means that the flowers of the plant either have the ability to fertilize another plant by producing pollen/sperm OR contain an ovary that can be fertilized. Basically, individual plants are unisexual. On the other hand, monoecious plants have both kinds of flowers on the same individual.

Typically, plant species are either dioecious or monoecious, but fourwing saltbrush plants can be either! It has also been documented that these extremely adaptable plants can exhibit hermaphroditic characteristics. Hermaphroditic characteristics mean that both stamen and carpels are found on one flower, not just on the same plant (monoecious).

Another unique characteristic of fourwing saltbush is that under the right conditions, it can exhibit trioecy, which means it can have up to 3 sexual states! When these plants are under environmental stress, most commonly experiencing higher ploidy levels, they are able to switch which reproductive parts they have in order to reproduce, depending on what is needed in the population at the time. Ploidy levels within fourwing saltbush are simply the number of chromosomes in a cell, and when these are higher than normal, the plant may make the switch!

The National Park Service is dedicated to preserving queer stories as a part of the mission of preserving stories of all Americans: starting with the natural and cultural heritage found within the United States.

#GreatOutdoorsMonth #PrideMonth

FOURWING & SALT BUSH
QUEER ECOLOGY

Let's break it down! →

MONOECIOUS
"SINGLE HOUSE"

Monoecious species have flowers with either reproductive part (stamen or carpel) on the same plant.

DIOECIOUS
"TWO HOUSES"

Dioecious species have flowers with either reproductive part on different plants.

HERMAPHRODITIC
AKA PERFECT OR BISEXUAL

These flowers have both reproductive parts in the same flower.

This means they can self-pollinate!

TRIOECY
3 SEXUAL STATES

Fourwing saltbush can switch up their reproductive parts as needed.

IT'S ALL NATURAL

EXAMPLES OF WHAT IS CONSIDERED QUEER ARE ALL OVER!

The National Park Service is dedicated to telling diverse stories. These stories are not just in human history, but extend throughout the natural world.

Again, this challenge to the male-female dichotomy evoked a range of reactions, though it was popular with peer networks, friends, and local LGBTQIA+ organizations. To date, the two examples shared here are the only two that I have explicitly labeled “queer ecology.”

By queering our interpretation of national park spaces, we can move closer to new ways of enjoying and understanding these sites.

My hope for what queer ecology is, and what it can contribute to the world, is a more compassionate perspective on humanity’s place within, or rather, *part of*, nature. By queering our interpretation of national park spaces, however subtly, we can move closer to new ways of enjoying and understanding these sites, while connecting to historically marginalized segments of the public we seek to serve.

If our (collective) tendency for critique is too strong, if we already know the answers to our investigations before we start them, then we run the risk of failing to appreciate the queer exuberance of ecosystems when we encounter it.

— Gavin Brown, in “Queer ecology: A roundtable discussion” (Anderson et al. 2012)

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TO VIEW THE ORIGINAL SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS ON FACEBOOK

Figure 1: <https://www.facebook.com/zionnps/posts/342532914576731>

Figure 2: <https://www.facebook.com/zionnps/posts/381993827297306>



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On the cover of this issue

“Strength,” a Tarot illustration representing a radiation of power coupled with inner understanding and love. | [HENRY CRAWFORD ADAMS](http://henrycrawfordadams.com)