

Yet another case of cultural differences. Published November 28, 1994, this article is copyright 1994 by The Los Angeles Times and reprinted with permission.

Ethnic Imbalance Threatens to Erode U.S. National Parks

By Frank Clifford

It has been almost 100 years since President Theodore Roosevelt stood beneath the majestic stone archway at the north entrance of Yellowstone National Park and proclaimed the democratic ideal that has become the informal credo of the national park system.

"It is the preservation of the scenery, of the forests, of the wilderness life and wilderness game for the people as a whole, instead of leaving the enjoyment thereof to be confined to the very rich who can control private reserves," Roosevelt declared.

The people *have* enjoyed — in numbers that annually outstrip the National Park Service's ability to accommodate, look out for, or clean up after. But in Yellowstone and elsewhere in the park system, Roosevelt's vision of democracy does not square with reality.

As the nation's population has grown increasingly diverse, the system's 368 parks, monuments, historic places, seashores, waterways and recreation areas have remained largely the province of middle-to-upper class white people. Blacks, Hispanics, Asian-Americans and American Indians each make up a tiny fraction of those who visit the nation's most treasured natural preserves.

"If it weren't for a handful of urban parks, the national park system would be white and elitist," said Gary Machlis, a Park Service sociologist whose office has surveyed 20,000 visitors at 60 parks. Those surveys indicate that nearly 50 percent of visitors had household incomes of more than \$40,000 a year.

The issue of ethnic imbalance has troubling implications for the future. If coming generations of Americans, 50 percent of whom won't be white by the middle of the next century, are indifferent to the nation's most spectacular outdoor places, what will happen to public support for protecting natural resources? "No diversity. No biodiversity," one Park Service official said.

Alarmed by the trend, National Park Service Director Roger Kennedy said in a recent interview that the parks must attract a broader slice of the American people or eventually risk losing taxpayer support for their \$1.5 billion annual budget.

The imbalance is partly a byproduct of one of the parks' great virtues — their remoteness from the clamor of urban life. With minorities and immigrants typically cloistered in large cities, only the more affluent are likely to know about the parks, let alone go to them.

Moreover, some minorities who do use them express wariness about traveling to remote places through rural America.

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Park Service officials shoulder some of the responsibility for the absence of diversity.

"We're victims of our own isolation," Kennedy said. "We need to make stronger connections with school systems. We need to start putting visitor centers in the middle of cities. We can't assume that you already know it's neat to go camping in the Santa Monica Mountains because you have a family camping tradition that grandpa started."

"What if grandpa wasn't around? What if he was living somewhere south of Chihuahua?"

A recent Park Service survey at nine sites found that minorities made up 7 percent of visitors. (They constitute one-quarter of the nation's population.) The survey looked at several of the most popular parks, including the Great Smokies in North Carolina, Grand Teton in Wyoming and Gettysburg in Pennsylvania.

Studies reveal a similar pattern in California. A 1991 review of visitors at Yosemite, conducted by researchers at Texas A&M University, found that more than 80 percent of visitors were white, less than 6 percent were Asian-American, less than 5 percent were Hispanic and less than 3 percent were black.

Move to the Cities

The current Park Service administration is not the first to grapple with the issue of diversity. For more than 20 years, the agency has tried to reach out in various ways.

In the early 1970s, it began creating big city parks such as Gateway National Recreation Area in New

York City and Golden Gate National Recreation Area in San Francisco close to ethnically mixed urban neighborhoods.

Jerry Belson, a black man who directs Park Service operations in southern Arizona, believes the Park Service could go a long way toward making minority visitors feel more comfortable simply by hiring more minority employees.

"Park visitors are comfortable with people they can relate to," Belson said. "If you're not going to have people of color working in the parks, you are not going to attract people of color as visitors."

Nationwide, the Park Service's professional staff, including rangers, is 87 percent white, 6 percent black, 4 percent Hispanic, about 1 percent Asian-American and about 1 percent American Indian.

Workforce Under Represented Too

Park Service officials insist they are trying to diversify the workforce but point out that low starting salaries — about \$14,000 for a ranger — and shabby living conditions at many parks have hampered their efforts.

In the meantime, the Park Service has been looking for new ways to highlight the role of minorities in American history.

Last year, it opened the Manzanar National Monument at the site of a World War II detention camp in Central California. Its purpose is to tell the story of Japanese-Americans who were interned there.

At established sites, the Park Service is exploring the past with a pointedly populist flavor. With the aid of letters and oral histories, the American experience is being presented from the perspectives of ordinary people.

"It may be interesting for a minority person to go to a site dedicated to a president or a general or a captain of industry," said James Horton, a special assistant to the Park Service director. "But you won't hold their attention long if you don't let them see their own history writ large in these places." ■