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New Parks director faces a 'huge task'



Charles Sams

Record annual attendance numbers. Low morale among employees. Billions of dollars in maintenance needs.

Those are just some of the challenges Charles 'Chuck' Sams III will have to tackle as director of the National Park Service after officially taking leadership in a swearing-in ceremony in December. Sams becomes the first Native American to hold the position.

His boss is Deb Haaland, Laguna Pueblo, the Interior secretary and first Indigenous person to hold a cabi-

net-level position.

net-level position.

Sams' background and citizenship with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation also means some are optimistic he'll work to improve how the agency and its hundreds

of national parks, historic sites, monuments and recreation areas work with tribal nations and incorporate their history and culture.

"Everyone should have access to the outdoors no matter where they live, how much money they have, or what their background is," Secretary Haaland said.

"Chuck Sams understands the importance of connecting people to nature, and I am thrilled to work with him as the Interior Department works to make our national park system accessible to all Americans."

CRITFC welcomes new director

Aja DeCoteau grew up on the Yakama Indian Reservation in Washington, and she fondly remembers fishing in the Columbia River Basin and hunting with her family as she learned about the importance of Indigenous First Foods.



Aja DeCoteau

Still, she thought she'd end up working as a medical doctor someday. But after high school she got a job with her tribe's forestry department, and then during breaks and summers in college, she kept finding herself working in natural resources.

"I have great memories of going hunting with my brother and sister and trout fishing with my dad. I feel like I've always had an interest in my environment," Ms. DeCoteau said.

"And, of course, knowing the importance of what we call First Foods to our culture and our religion is something that has always been a part of who I am."

Those summers working in forestry for her tribe led her to a career in natural resources instead of medicine. Eventually, that led her to the Portland-headquartered Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, CRITFC, which represents the interests of the four Columbia River treaty tribes in policy, advocacy and management of the basin. The Confederated Tribes are among the charter members of the organization.

Now, 12 years after joining CRITFC, Aja was named its executive director, marking the first time a woman has

the Cayuse, Nez Perce and Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians—has always wanted to hold since coming to CRITFC.

"I am honored and excited to lead CRITFC and work together with our member tribes to bridge traditional knowledge, scientific expertise and cultural connection to ensure that we have salmon and other natural resources for generations to come," DeCoteau said.

While she's excited for the opportunity—and honored to be the first woman leader of CRITFC in its nearly 50-year history—she takes over at a pivotal time for the organization amid a series of challenges, including climate change, dwindling salmon populations and questions over the future of dams and hydropower.

ever held the position.

The organization announced DeCoteau as the new executive director in November, after she had served in the role on an interim basis since April, after the previous executive director, Jaime Pinkham, was appointed to a high-ranking job with the federal government.

It's a position that DeCoteau—who is a citizen of the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation and descendent of

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