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MY TURN

■ Marie Lo



Red, white, and green

The National Park Service is trying to find ways to appeal to minorities. A 2011 study conducted by the University of Wyoming and commissioned by the National Park Service has found that about one out of every five park visitors is nonwhite and roughly one in ten is Hispanic.

The results of the study don't surprise me at all. My observations are purely anecdotal, but the statistic is pretty reflective of my own family. I'm the only one in my family of five who likes camping, and even then, I'm definitely a camper-lite. My idea of camping includes flushing toilets and an inflatable air mattress.

My parents and both my brothers have little interest in camping. We didn't grow up hiking or camping, and no one we knew in our predominantly immigrant and working-class neighborhood did either. To my parents, venturing into the woods was like going to another country wearing only your underwear. Not only do you not speak the language or understand the culture, but you're also totally exposed.

My parents were so busy trying to figure out how to navigate this new country they had immigrated to that they didn't have the time or energy to travel to another one. Even if they were interested, they didn't have the resources. The thought of buying gear that would only be used once or twice a year seemed wasteful and extravagant. Besides, bringing all your supplies with you to another location to replicate what you could do at home seemed redundant.

My early camping experiences were through school. When I was 13 and 14 years old, I took a bus across town to a school that made camping and outdoor education an important feature of its curriculum. I spent a week hiking in a rainforest, and I biked and camped throughout the Gulf Islands. The school had a weekend ski trip as well. But even then, I was acutely aware I was an interloper. My sleeping bag was thin and I was often cold at night. I had to pedal extra hard to keep up with everyone because the gears on my borrowed bike kept slipping. I spent my time on the mountains going down the bunny slopes while my classmates talked about the moguls they conquered.

Still, I had a blast. I canoed. I climbed. I swam in cold clear lakes. I felt so lucky I was able to visit places that I would have never had a chance to go, places that weren't far from home yet seemed a world away. But, deep down, I also knew the great outdoors were for the rich, white kids I went to school with, and not for people like me. Though my school wasn't all white, in my mind, those kids of color who regularly camped appeared more assimilated and more "white" by virtue of their ease in nature. They belonged. And, the fact that their parents didn't have a thick foreign accent like mine seemed to confirm my theory.

Though preservation, public education, and access are at the heart of the National Park Service's mission, sometimes there is still the perception that these spaces are not really for everyone. Not everyone has a car or the finances to travel to and enter these parks. Plus, a lot of supplies are needed if you plan to stay overnight.

The tagline to the National Park Service is "Experience Your America," and I can't help wondering, in the wake of the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the widespread protests against police brutality and racial profiling, just how radically different our "Americas" are from each other. We do not all get to enjoy public spaces in the same way. There is an America for whom national parks and the great outdoors represent a chance to experience the country's magnificent natural beauty and escape from city life. For others, it affirms another space of exclusion. We don't all have the same ease of mobility, just as some of us can travel without the fear of being pulled over based on the color of our skin. As the protests highlight, there are large communities who are excluded from public services such as police protection and collective resources like national parks.

The success of the National Park Service's outreach efforts to increase the diversity of its visitors is inseparable from a broader and more systemic accounting of the uneven distribution of collective resources. When we talk about "national" parks, whose national resources are really being affirmed? Who are its people?

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