

Parks, conservation groups aim to attract minorities

By Erin Kelly, Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON — On their two-and-a-half month tour of national parks, Frank and Audrey Peterman were awed by the beauty of America and warmed by the friendliness of fellow campers, who shared their firewood and offered tips about the best hiking trails.



White ibis fly from bushes in the Everglades National Park, Fla. 90% of visitors to this park and others are white.

By Wilfredo Lee, AP

But among all of the tourists at the 16 parks they visited, the Petermans saw only two fellow African-Americans.

"We met Frenchmen, Germans, Norwegians — people from all over the world," Frank Peterman said. "It just seemed a bit bizarre to us that there were no African-Americans."

He discovered that many blacks felt no connection with the parks and feared they would be unwelcome at sites in predominantly white, rural states such as Idaho, Montana and Wyoming.

Since that trip 10 years ago, Peterman has been on a crusade to change that perception. He's now leading a new Wilderness Society program called "Keeping It Wild" aimed at encouraging more black Americans to visit the nation's parks, forests, and other public lands that they help pay for with their tax dollars.

For environmental groups, the success of Peterman and other minority conservationists is key if they are to move beyond their white, middle-class core and reach the increasingly diverse Americans who will determine the fate of the nation's wild places in the decades ahead.

"This is not just some feel-good issue," Peterman said. "This is about survival for both the conservation groups and the land they want to protect. If you are not involving the communities who will make up a larger percentage of the voting population in the future, how do you then expect them to make decisions that will protect these places for posterity?"

Caring, but fearful

The problem is not that blacks don't care about the environment. Just the opposite is true.

Surveys in 1990 and 2002 by researchers at the University of Michigan showed no significant difference on most environmental issues between whites and blacks. Blacks sometimes felt even more strongly pro-environment than whites, said Paul Mohai, a professor of natural resources and environment.

Representing those views, members of the Congressional Black Caucus consistently receive higher marks than any other group of federal lawmakers on environmental-group scorecards.

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Source: National Park Service

And blacks have created more than 800 "environmental justice" groups throughout the country to fight back against polluting factories and toxic waste dumped in minority neighborhoods.

"The notion that blacks don't care is such a fallacy that it's laughable," said Dorceta Taylor, director of the Minority Environmental Leadership Development Initiative at the University of Michigan.

So why are black faces so noticeably absent among visitors to national parks and forests?

Although the National Park Service does not keep overall statistics on the racial makeup of park visitors, studies done on behalf of the park service at individual parks show that whites continue to make up the vast majority of tourists. Surveys in 2002 showed more than 90% of visitors at Florida's Everglades National Park and California's Sequoia and King Canyon National Parks were white.

Peterman, who is based in Atlanta, said part of the explanation can be found in his own relatives' reactions to the news that he and his wife would be touring national parks in the West.

"There had been a lot of press about the militia in Montana and Idaho, and our family members in Chicago were so worried about our safety that they brought us a bevy of guns and urged us to take some with us," Peterman said. "We said no thanks, and we never had any problems. But we found fear to be a tremendous factor. African-Americans still think of some of the dirty deeds that were done by the Klan out in the woods."

More education is needed to tell young blacks how their heritage is linked to many of the park sites, said Robert Stanton, who during the Clinton administration served as the nation's first black director of the National Park Service. Historic sites run by the park service include the homes of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and abolitionist Frederick Douglass and buildings connected to the Underground Railroad that helped slaves escape to freedom.



Handout
Sequoias attract many visitors to the California park.

public lands.

"Most people don't know that it was the Buffalo Soldiers who patrolled and protected the redwood forests that are now national parks in California," Stanton said.

More black workers

Stanton said a key to changing how blacks view the parks is recruiting more young blacks into the park service. The park service's permanent workforce is about 80% white, 9% black, 5% Hispanic, 3% American Indian and 2% Asian.

Groups such as the Student Conservation Association are working to get more blacks and Latinos into conservation jobs by offering high school and college students job training and internships in national parks, forests and other

Ronnie Williams, 22, said his life changed when he left his inner-city Boston neighborhood for the first time to work as a student tour guide in New Mexico's Bandelier National Monument, home to thousands of Pueblo dwellings and more than 23,000 acres of wilderness.

"When I first got there I was scared," said Williams, a participant in the Student Conservation Association program. "There were no skyscrapers, no noise, no TV, no radio and no other black people. There was nothing but desert. I was ready to turn around and go home."

But Williams said he began to settle in and enjoy the experience. His tentative five-minute tours turned into hourlong journeys as he learned more of the history of the American Indians who once occupied the land.

"It gave me a real sense of confidence," Williams said. "It let me know that anything is possible."

Peterman, who helps organize Wilderness Society hikes for blacks, said he makes new converts to the conservation cause on every trip.

"Every black person we've taken into the Georgia mountains or Bryce or Zion national parks has been transformed by it," Peterman said. "One black businesswoman from New York had traveled the world but was in tears when she saw what she had been missing in her own country. The land converts people to the cause for me. All I have to do is get them out there."

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