

Racism and Nature: A Personal Reflection and A Call to Action

By Steve Barg June 5, 2020

I am a white, 62-year old male currently leading the Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation, a land conservation non-profit in nearly all-white (97.2%) rural Northwest Illinois. I was raised in a lily-white suburb of Chicago in the 1960s and 70s buffered from racial disparities and underinformed about the social and economic experiences of people of color.

My childhood experiences in the wild places near my home, shaped my life and sent me on a 40-year career in land conservation and environmental activism. Caring for nature and sharing this joy with others, has been a lifelong mission for me. This is a story I want to be possible for all people.

Today, I watch as racially charged events come to light by the mighty power of the camera phone and social media. Christian Cooper, while bird watching in one of the few beautiful outdoor spaces of New York City, had his life threatened recently for the heinous crime of being black outside. Threatened, mind you, by a white woman breaking the law. Birdwatching in the beautiful natural spaces near my home is something I have done as a white male many, many times without even a hint of being concerned for my own safety. A relaxing, joyful experience in nature *must* be accessible for all people.

We now witness the nation in turmoil, sparked by the senseless murder of George Floyd at the hands of a white police officer. Hundreds of demonstrations of the Black Lives Matter movement have poured out into the streets of cities across the US. Once again, this outrage of racial injustice has crept into every corner and crevice of society. It is our time to finally see the systemic problems ingrained into our society since its founding, educate ourselves about injustices faced by people of color, and to work towards a future where anyone can walk down the street, in public places, on public lands free to enjoy their space without fearing for their safety.

My journey in confronting my own racism, and that of the land conservation career sector I am a part of, began at a Land Trust Alliance Rally in the late 90s. Rally is an annual conference that brings together conservation leaders from across the country. Peter Forbes, a conservation leader from Vermont, was

speaking to about 1,000 people. All but a handful were white. Among other excellent talking points, Forbes showed two short video interviews, one of an older African American woman fighting to save a ¼ acre of space for an urban garden in the Bronx and another featuring a young white male trying to save a 1,000-acre mountain top wilderness in California. His closing statement was simple, Peter said, “If we don’t understand that these two people represent the same movement that we deeply care about, then we are doomed. We need to diversify this movement and we don’t know how.” Where did the land conservation movement go wrong?

Next, was my daughter Hannah calling me out some 6 years ago on my white male privilege. I had never heard that term before and I was offended. My initial reaction was, how dare she! I’ve worked damn hard to *save* nature and I’ve done a lot of good. She challenged me to read about racism, wake up, do something – own up to my white privilege. At the time, I was so confused. I sought to heighten my understanding by beginning to read about racial injustice in our country. I thank her now for her courage and honesty in confronting me. Our children have a special way of getting through to us.

Over the last several years, I have started working with several leaders from Native American Nations that trace their heritage to NW Illinois. The Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation has preserved several properties that together contain hundreds of burial mounds, old village sites, ceremonial grounds and effigy mounds. We are eager to learn and implement best practices for how to care for these historically significant places. In conversations with Chloris Lowe and Jon Greendeer from the Ho-Chunk Nation, Kay Rhoads from the Sac and Fox Nation and Lance Foster from the Iowa nation, I have come to realize that even after 40 years in this field, I have a lot to learn about land conservation. How we have been caring for our natural/cultural preserves in a science-based, euro-centric perspective is coming up short.

Having these conversations has helped me to appreciate different cultural and historic ways of knowing and caring for the land; ways which acknowledge diverse perspectives that can better serve people and nature. These conversations have also shined a light on the Doctrine of Discovery; a series of Papal Decrees from the 15th and 16th centuries that shaped US land law in the 19th century. These

Decrees lead to the immoral genocide and unethical treatment of Native people that persists to this day. How can the land conservation community move forward without acknowledging, learning from, and incorporating these valued perspectives?

More recently I have had the pleasure of getting to know Sharon Bush and Genese Leach of the Grand Victoria Foundation. Sharon is the Executive Director and Genese leads their environment program including Vital Lands Illinois. I first met Sharon a number of years ago at the Grand Victoria Foundation's Vital Lands summit, an annual gathering of conservation leaders from across Illinois. She was the only black person in the room of more than 100 attendees. Sharon and Genese are respectively, the first two female black conservation leaders I've encountered in my 40-year career. They continuously challenge me to educate myself about social injustice, listen to those who are often not given a voice, and act as a leader of change for a better future for everyone. It was Sharon's encouragement and support that prompted me to write this reflection.

As a white, 62-year old male who admittedly still has a lot to learn about the people and places of this great country, I denounce racism in all of its forms. I support the right of every person to move freely in the outdoors without fear of harassment or threat of death. I realize now, that the joy I feel in nature has been part of my white privilege, as there are many people of color who are afraid to go into public spaces for fear of exactly what happened to Christian Cooper, *or worse?*

I thank Peter, Hannah, Chloris, Jon, Kay, Lance, Sharon and Genese for challenging me to grow and be a better person and better conservation leader.

Like these people did for me, I encourage you to do some *READING* about racism in the United States, I encourage you to *LISTEN* to people of color and reflect on their life experiences. And finally, I encourage you to *ACT* and to commit to *CHANGE*.

I suggest your start with these two books *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo and *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Discovery* by Steven T. Newcomb. Or join me in the coming weeks in reading *Black Faces, White Space: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* by Carolyn Finney or watching the movie *Just Mercy* (2019).

If the movement for land conservation and the environment is going to sustain itself, we need to make change now. How you will join me in making that change?