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# When green is blue: Perspectives on inclusivity and recommendations towards reforming and demilitarizing law enforcement in US national parks

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Papers from the 2020  
George Wright Society Student Summit:  
“Systemic threats to parks and protected areas”

## Abstract

Park and protected area management has a rich history of discourse, in both scholarly and managerial realms, concerning the role and public perceptions of law enforcement. For as long as national parks have existed in the United States, they have been patrolled and protected by those in uniform. Although National Park Service law enforcement rangers primarily are concerned with protection of resources, their duties continue to evolve with changes in park use trends and societal and technological advances. This paper examines how the strong presence of law enforcement in national parks impacts the diverse visitor and provides recommendations for reform. Even while the National Park Service and its partners examine outreach initiatives to attract diverse visitors, law enforcement may serve as a constraint on doing so. As the world turns its attention to policing in the United States and recent uprisings in response to the George Floyd slaying, a rigid approach to national park law enforcement in the Hashtag Era will continue to serve as a hindrance to diversity in national parks—unless considerable change is undertaken.

## Authors’ note

The perspective provided in this piece is the product of the authors’ collective experiences, worldviews, and demographics and does not provide an exhaustive sample of the American or global public. We want to acknowledge that there are many other groups who are disproportionately affected by oppression at the hands of police, including Indigenous peoples who hope to connect with their stolen lands that are now managed by the National Park Service. This perspective is in no way comprehensive. In addition, intersectionality plays an important role in how individuals interact with law enforcement. Individuals mentioned in this paper who have a complex overlap of identities, such as Black trans womxn, are more vulnerable to brutality at the hands of law enforcement.

Repeated descriptions of the traditionally friendly ranger, who is as much friend as lawman and as much educator as cop, allow the ranger to enact policing authority that can go relatively unquestioned as such (Beauchamp 2020: 98).

On the evening of May 31, 2020, a national park defaulted on its mission. Lafayette Park in Washington, DC, like all national parks, was preserved for the people. In this space, this means providing open space for “freedom of public expression and assembly activities.” But as night fell, so did the park. Within view of the

White House, the government ordered violence against its own people. This show of force was carried out by US Park Police—employees of the National Park Service (NPS)—on an assembly of grieving protesters reportedly chanting “I can’t breathe” to the cadence of a single drum. The purpose of the assembly was to grieve and implore change in response to the homicide of George Floyd, among many others, who have been killed by police—in Floyd’s case, only days earlier on the asphalt of Minneapolis, suffocating under the knee of a police officer. As the night went on, grieving turned to frustration and some protesters reportedly



**FIGURE 1.** Before and After: US Park Police advance upon protesters in Lafayette Park (left) and protesters flee after being tear gassed (right). Photos by Koshu Kunii.

began lobbing disposable water bottles at the line of heavily armed officers standing between the park and the White House. The police responded with a heavy assault of tear gas, pepper spray, and other chemical agents. Over the next 24 hours, US Park Police continued to tear gas and shoot other projectiles into the assembled mourners. By the morning of June 4th, the park had been transformed into a fortress—surrounded by a solid steel fence and closed to public access. The people had lost their park.

This story is laced with threads of irony. First, Lafayette Park is dedicated to the memory of Marquis de Lafayette, hero of the Revolutionary War. It was Lafayette’s revolution against an abusive government that gave protection from tyranny, the freedom of speech and assembly, the compact that all people are created equal, and the country that would one day give rise to the national park idea. Second, the decision to launch a violent attack of police upon a group of unarmed individuals who were protesting the police’s killings of unarmed Black individuals seems to fit Einstein’s definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again while expecting different results. Finally, we are left to grapple with the role of NPS. This was not the first instance of park police, law enforcement rangers, or other NPS employees assaulting park visitors. In 1970, it was a violent assault on an encampment of hippie youth in Yosemite. In the 2000s and 2010s—yes, for two decades—it was river rangers sexually assaulting female rafting passengers in Grand Canyon. In 2017, it was the killing of unarmed Bijan Ghaisar by US Park Police on the George Washington Parkway. These are not isolated incidents, but examples. Evidence holds that NPS and its law enforcement rangers’ are

not immune to the systemic biases and abuse of power rampant amongst law enforcement in the United States. This may be a harsh reality to accept for some. The kindly bureaucrats of the mountains, complete with nifty Stetsons, badges, and pistols, are beloved American icons. We posit however, that the “green” preservationist ranger has become a “blue” polarizing officer and, as a result, the national park ranger has become an artifact of a bygone era—one in which the unacceptable was acceptable. We thus offer the following proposition: Law enforcement within NPS must be considerably transformed to meet the mission of the agency and recognize the needs, experiences, and histories of all Americans and visitors from around the world.

### **When Green was Drab: The legacy of the relationship between the parks and the military**

The history of park rangers and their uniforms cannot be undone from the historical relationship between NPS and the United States military, which is as old as the parks themselves. When Yellowstone became America’s first national park in 1872, army personnel became the first law enforcement agents in the park (McDonnell 2015). As early as 1890, cavalry units were also stationed as rangers in Sequoia, General Grant (now Kings Canyon), Yosemite, and Mackinac National Parks. The Yellowstone rangers were the early model for these subsequent law enforcement units, and it was later assumed that the practice would continue as new parks were added. Initially, Yellowstone and other parks needed a strong military presence in order to evict Indigenous inhabitants off the land by military force (Pennaz 2017). The relationship between the parks and military departments continued to grow

stronger in the 1930s when military sites were transferred from War Department oversight to that of NPS (McDonnell 2015). This relationship would ebb and flow through the turbulent eras of the 20th century, but the legacy of that relationship remains strong.

After World War II, the frontier soldier/ranger gave way to a tour guide and educator. During this period, rangers were unarmed—a far cry from the armed cowboy/soldier that was the image of the ranger at the turn of the 20th century. There were several reasons for this shift *away* from previously militarized imagery and duties. Now that local Indigenous populations had been removed from the lands claimed by NPS, the government was no longer taking land by force. The crime rate across the country also dropped significantly during the war. Finally, visitation was beginning to increase rapidly, and the parks (and their staff) needed to appear more welcoming. Because of this shift in the image and responsibilities of rangers, applicants were often uninterested in law enforcement. This would have long-term effects on personnel and policy within the park system as these rangers would advance into management positions in the following decades (Pennaz 2017).

In the 1960s, however, dramatic social shifts were reflected in park visitation, as a “new group of users were coming into the parks—back to nature people, civil rights people, anti-Vietnam people, people doing drugs, drop-outs, people trying to escape civilization” (Pennaz 2017: 247). Recorded crime, particularly “major crimes” such as rape, homicide, assault, and robbery, had more than doubled in the parks from 1966 to 1970. Many park administrators were of the post-World War II “ranger naturalist cohort” and didn’t like the idea of a visible law enforcement presence in the parks. These administrators wanted parks to serve as havens of peace and for park rangers to remain generalists. However, an internal agency conflict concerning the role of law enforcement continued until nationwide turmoil in law enforcement in the 1990s led to another shift. Within the parks, there were several high-profile crimes (serial car theft and several rangers murdered), which occurred right as the older “naturalist” administrators were retiring and law-enforcement-minded rangers were stepping in. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were the final catalyst that turned these general shifts towards armed law enforcement into firm park policy (Pennaz 2017).

Globally, there seems to be a one-way trend toward increased violence and militarized conservation practices. Militarization of park rangers in the “global south”

has emerged due to social conflict caused by conservation. And while Pennaz notes that “US park rangers’ undulating history from cavalryman, to a frontiersman sheriff-type, to happy ‘Ranger Rick,’ to a ranger with a ‘gun in the glove box,’ and finally to the Visitor and Resource Protection rangers we have today is a far cry from the one-way trend toward militarism ... that we see in [these] places [in the ‘global south],” (2017: 251) there are still components of this trend present in the National Park Service.

### **When Green was Black: The Buffalo Soldiers and westward expansion**

Countless researchers and managers of parks and protected areas tend to view the social disconnects that Black Americans experience in nature as cultural traumas and collective memories, but the omnipresence of the tangible and intangible discrimination and bias in national parks has proven to be a serious barrier to efforts of sustaining diversity and inclusion. We must acknowledge and assess the barriers that continue to limit the success of outreach initiatives by NPS and its partners. The overwhelming presence of law enforcement in many national parks will always generate an uneasy feeling for many Black Americans who are using parks to connect to their roots. The relationship between Black Americans and law enforcement is one full of years of critical discourse, but there is also a part in history that is sometimes glossed over: Black Americans served as park guardians in the earliest days of NPS. Highlighting the many hats Black Americans wore in the creation of America’s national parks can positively contribute to the erasure of hurtful master narratives and push for fresh counternarratives that describe an attachment to place many are discovering in adulthood. For counternarratives to supersede the traditional master narrative views of Black Americans in nature, we must confront the internal barriers that still exist within those parks.

As the national park movement gained more popularity during the westward expansion of the 1870s, the calls for these natural areas to be patrolled and protected increased. Due to a lack of funding toward this newest endeavor of the federal government, President Grant and Congress looked to the military to be the protectors of these natural landscapes and patrol the newly created parks to lessen poaching and other threats to natural resources, while simultaneously serving as interpreters in the parks. Many of the soldiers who patrolled California’s national parks were Buffalo Soldiers. These men were Black soldiers who served in segregated units. They are responsible for forging the occupation of national park ranger that would



soon follow. While Black soldiers have a rich history of patrolling these areas, the disconnect between Black Americans and natural areas still exists in our modern dialogue and reality (Mason 2019). With the history of police violence against Black Americans, one can understand why the presence of law enforcement in natural settings could serve as an additional barrier to Black Americans and how, conversely, the story of the Buffalo Soldiers might empower Black park visitors.

### When Green is Unfading: Agency culture's role in the militarization of park law enforcement

It is difficult to overstate the role of status, culture, and identity in luring and forming a career national park ranger. It is palpable in the bunkhouses, cabins, and double-wides that house thousands of seasonal rangers across the national parks each summer. Conversations are steeped in career aspirations and the need for modernization ranging from the hiring process to the standard-issue wool trousers. But the respect for tradition is undeniable and pervasive—from the books being read to the beer in the fridge. In this way, the agency's storied history has undercut attempts to modernize it. Pennaz's history of the national park ranger suggests that as park visitors became increasingly diverse in the 1960s and 1970s, the agency responded not by adapting to the needs and recreational considerations of emerging user groups, but through the "police-ification" (2017: 247) of rangers. The legacy of this decision resulted in the creation of two subcultures. The long-lived progressive, naturalistic, generalist ranger culture remained, but a new police subculture emerged (Pennaz 2017). Even as early as 1976, NPS Director Gary Everhardt created a task force to examine the police subculture and preserve the non-militarized image of the ranger (Pennaz 2017). However, the agency remains largely divided across binary law enforcement/non-law enforcement identities.

### When Green is Digitized: Perception of law enforcement in the Hashtag Era

Racism is not getting worse, it's getting filmed.  
— Will Smith, 2016

The truth spoken by Will Smith during a *Late Show* interview in 2016 is resurfacing on social platforms as tensions between law enforcement and Black Americans are mounting. I (Akiebia Hicks) write this section as a Black woman in the wake of the unjust police slaying of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man in Minnesota. Although people of all races are turning to social media to share their encounters with law enforcement, Black and Brown people are targeted at a disproportio-

tionate rate. The history of law enforcement and Black Americans can be dated back to law enforcement participation in lynchings in the early 1880s and more recently the Civil Rights protests with the attacking of protesters by K-9s, water hoses, tear gas, and batons. Over five decades after the 1965 "Bloody Sunday" in Selma, Alabama, many of the restraining and crowd control tactics used by police are still in heavy rotation during the George Floyd protests. The relationship between law enforcement and Black Americans has always been rough but is placed center stage now more than ever due to social media activism and the power of the #blacklivesmatter movement.

The #blacklivesmatter movement was created by several queer and feminist Black womxn, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, following the slaying of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. Liberation and the #blacklivesmatter movement gained momentum after the trial ended with the teen being viewed as the criminal. As protests persist throughout the nation, some are turning to the #blacklivesmatter movement for answers. Many perceive the #blacklivesmatter movement as a contributor to Black liberation and pro-Black behavior. Could this movement and protests over racial injustices result in Black Americans seeking to know more about their culture, hence visiting national parks, monuments, and sites to connect to their ancestors? What should we expect when Black Americans create counternarratives where they aim to spiritually connect to their roots and the land but arrive at parks and find heavy law enforcement presence amid the era of social media activism and intensified police brutality? Is it possible that strong law enforcement presence



**FIGURE 2.** Man filming himself while being taken away by the Greenville, South Carolina, police during the May 30, 2020, Greenville Protests. Photo by Akiebia Hicks.

during the Hashtag Era may erase the efforts of years of diverse outreach initiatives? Our recommendations address these valid concerns.

### **When Green isn't Rainbow: LGBTQIA+ oppression at the hands of law enforcement**

Police brutality has affected many communities in American history. The United States' LGBTQIA+ population is an integral part of this country and its landscapes. It is important to consider that many LGBTQIA+ individuals find peace, acceptance, and escape in parks and protected areas. Yet, however strong this motivation, law enforcement in parks can still be a major constraint for those within the LGBTQIA+ community. LGBTQIA+ individuals have suffered from police brutality and continue to have struggles with law enforcement. The beginning of the modern LGBTQIA+ movement started as an uprising against police raids and oppression, led by transgender people of color. The irony of having Stonewall National Monument, a unit of the national park system, monitored by law enforcement officials is striking. Law enforcement in national parks presents another opportunity for LGBTQIA+ individuals to be discriminated against, misgendered, and disrespected (Lambda Legal 2015). NPS rangers can fail

to use correct pronouns for transgender, non-binary, and other non-conforming individuals, causing feelings of isolation in space that was already designed for cisgender, heterosexual people. In addition, LGBTQIA+ individuals of color face more harassment at the hands of law enforcement. Specifically, transgender people of color can have fatal confrontations with police, exemplified by the May 2020 killing of Tony McDade in Florida and the further misgendering of him in a subsequent police report.

A long history of police brutality against the LGBTQIA+ community can constrain an individual's desire to engage in the outdoor spaces of parks. NPS must strongly consider how the presence of its park rangers can limit LGBTQIA+ engagement with places that allow solitude, acceptance, and peace for those whose identities are often questioned by mainstream society.

### **When Green is Ableist: Law enforcement rangers and persons with disabilities**

Americans with disabilities, a significant portion of the US population, also have complex and often unjust interactions with law enforcement officials. People with



**FIGURE 3.** NPS staff and volunteers marching at the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall uprising in June 2019. Photo by Bruce Monroe.



disabilities are a bigger target for crimes (Oschwald et al. 2011). While engaging with national parks and protected areas, individuals with disabilities are putting themselves into a vulnerable position that can lead to miscommunication, harassment, or worse. Calling law enforcement in those situations can exacerbate the problem. Law enforcement officials often lack protocols and training for interacting with individuals with disabilities (Oschwald et al. 2011). For example, deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals require American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters to interact with law enforcement. Without proper ASL accommodations, which are difficult to provide in national parks, armed park rangers may feel threatened by the lack of response to verbal commands and this could result in dangerous situations.

Similarly, individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder can be endangered in law enforcement interactions. Law enforcement officials often cannot recognize the signs of autism, which can lead to injuries and killings of autistic individuals due to these victimizations (Copenhaver and Tewksbury 2018), unfortunately demonstrated by the recent murder of Palestinian Eyad Hallaq at the hands of Israeli police. Individuals with autism have varying needs, and if current law enforcement practices are the first line of response within a park, then the US national parks are not safe places for individuals with autism and their loved ones.



**FIGURE 4.** The Seattle unit of Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park is designated as a safe place for victims of anti-LGBTQIA+ crimes and harassment. This provides an excellent example of how a park can take a step towards becoming a place of refuge for historically under-represented groups. Photo by Will Rice.

## When Green is Islamophobic: American Muslim perspectives on park law enforcement

Muslim-Americans have been the subject of suspicion for law enforcement for decades. After 9/11, Muslim-Americans were subject to unlawful surveillance and profiling. This suspicion has continued and is a serious constraint for Muslim-Americans, as many remain distrustful and fearful of law enforcement within the US (Pew Research Center 2017). Entering parks and protected areas can bring attention to Muslim-Americans, especially those who have faced discrimination in rural areas of the country (especially womxn being profiled for wearing hijabs or veiled coverings). Law enforcement is inherently biased to believe that Muslim-Americans are “out of place” while living in this country, and for those who enter the country’s national parks, NPS law enforcement rangers can potentially bring similar discrimination and humiliation.

## Recommendations

Yosemite Valley is not a proper place for a jail, for administrators, for police wearing park ranger uniforms. What should Yosemite Valley be? ... A holy place.

— Edward Abbey, on a visit to Yosemite National Park in 1971

In response to the observations made above, we offer the following recommendations to guide NPS in reforming its law enforcement with the objective of becoming welcoming to a more diverse set of park visitors.

1. The first step is an acknowledgement by NPS of the complicated histories and relationships between diverse Americans and law enforcement in this country. Once there is proper acknowledgement, NPS can work towards effectively redressing this history and improving the comfort and safety of diverse visitors within its parks.
2. NPS should take significant strides to create a culture that is as equally focused on transformation as it is on tradition. We encourage NPS to consider the same kinds of restructuring that many cities across the country are considering for their local law enforcement in the wake of George Floyd’s homicide. Examples of strategies to operationalize this goal include the aggressive recruitment of staff from other federal agencies across all levels of hiring, acknowledging and eliminating the existence of a police subculture within the agency, and expanding detail assignments and job descriptions that force employees to bridge the law enforcement and non-law enforcement divide (e.g., inter-

- pretation, fee collection, or resource monitoring).
3. If law enforcement rangers must remain a key component of park management, intensive, expanded cross-cultural and bias training must be required. Beyond that, we encourage the use of language training, LGBTQIA+ competency training, training for interacting with individuals with disabilities, and much more. Law enforcement's limited standards of training are currently being scrutinized as our society grapples with police brutality and we encourage NPS to consider more extensive training requirements for park rangers.
  4. NPS should improve outreach efforts to groups that have historically negative relationships with law enforcement. I (William Rice) recall the awkwardness felt by both parties when, tasked as a seasonal ranger wearing a hat modeled after that of

- the US cavalry, I performed educational outreach events on the Reservation of the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska—with their buffalo on my badge. NPS should create and expand existing outreach programs that are designed with a growing acknowledgement of diverse histories, abilities, and interests in mind.
5. Because of the complicated and oppressive historical relationship between diverse groups of Americans and law enforcement agencies, the image of the uniform itself poses a barrier to diverse visitor recruitment and retainment in the parks. Many studies have demonstrated the psychological influence of clothing, and this has often been used by law enforcement agencies to reinforce feelings of authority, legitimacy, and dominance (Johnson 2001). A change in the uniform of park rangers



**FIGURE 5.** The law enforcement-style uniform is also worn by non-law enforcement NPS rangers, such as educational specialists (top image; NPS photo). Park Canada has evolved its non-law enforcement uniform to be more comfortable and approachable (bottom image; Parks Canada photo). Updating the NPS uniform could serve as a means of improving relationships with communities who share a negative history with law enforcement.



away from the historical paramilitary style is highly recommended. Our recommendation would also include further research into best practices by other national park agencies, what clothing would be practical for the current duties performed by NPS rangers, and what clothing characteristics elicit feelings of accessibility and support, and promote our other goals outlined above.

6. Finally, there remains a gap in research on specific relationships with national park law enforcement and diverse visitors. More research is required both within NPS and externally to provide specific steps to ensure a beneficial park visitation experience.

### Endnote

1. That is, those who hold a federal law enforcement commission, as opposed to NPS naturalists and other “interpreters,” as they are called, who do not carry weapons nor enforce laws. As we shall see, encounters with these non-law-enforcement rangers may be just as problematic because they wear uniforms nearly identical to those of law enforcement rangers and because both groups are referred to generically by NPS as “rangers.” An exception to this is the aforementioned US Park Police. This unit of NPS operates only in the Washington, DC, New York City, and San Francisco metropolitan areas, and its officers wear a completely different uniform similar to that worn by most police departments.

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#### Authors’ note (added October 25, 2021):

We acknowledge that some language used in this paper is now seen as outdated in terms of inclusivity. In efforts to encourage accountability in academia and within ourselves, we are adding this author’s note to address the usage of the term “womxn” in this paper. The term no longer represents all women as it has been adopted by groups who exclude trans women. We do not align with such groups. Here, we offer a resource for more information on language and continuing the conversation on inclusivity beyond this paper:

[https://nasaa-arts.org/nasaa\\_research/inclusive-language-guide/](https://nasaa-arts.org/nasaa_research/inclusive-language-guide/).