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Assimilating an Indigenous Perspective in Sequoia Kings Canyon National Park

The 1800s was an age of industrialization, the abolishment of slavery, and continued xenophobia in the United States. The end of slavery and the establishment of the Union laid down the blueprints that would enable African slaves to seek citizenship in a country that inherently despised them. The Native peoples of this country also faced growing forced relocation and death as settlers moving west brought disease, firearms, and the same mentality of xenophobia that enabled their feeling of Manifest Destiny. In the late 1800s, as the modernization of the country had the West in its sights, the issue of the native people became more and more pressing. After drafting initial plans for the reservation system, idealized plans were drawn up to have the native people gain land rights as citizens of the United States.¹ This was quickly abandoned as gold was found in California, native land was prized for its natural beauty, and the location of their land was prime for building the first transcontinental railroad. The idealized solution for the native peoples was quickly abandoned and replaced by the gradual purchasing of native land. Indian schools were built on newly purchased land to begin assimilating them into white, civilized society. Agrarian equipment was delivered as well to ensure the waves of settlers were able to cultivate the land. The commonly held notion that became the United States Indian policy was that total Indian assimilation was a consequence of economic prosperity.² In this modernizing, white nation, there was no room for native people or their culture in the land they inhabited for countless generations. The permeation of Indian policy was absolute in the minds of those who settled in the West. From the early 1900s on, progress was synonymous with casting aside the Indians. Some of the last true homelands they inhabited were in the isolated forests of California. When explorers, spurred by the growing concern of preserving America's natural beauty, discovered native people in the regions that would become Sequoia Kings Canyon National Park, they were treated no differently. The Indian policy was a

¹ Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920*, 41-42.

² Hoxie, 53.

rule of thumb, those that remained after disease decimated their populations were relocated. The United States would become the steward of the land, as it had been done from time immemorial.

Sequoia Kings Canyon National Forest being formed at the height of white ethnocentricity in the United States created an opportunity for the assimilation of native people, their culture, perspectives, and history. The standard of xenophobia that existed in the policies the American government used to deal with native people was still prevalent in the minds of its citizens and generational cycles kept that mentality alive. This widely held mindset is the lens that white Americans lived through. Those who established Sequoia Kings Canyon were part of that generation of Americans. They created educational programs for interpretation that like-minded constituents used to form their telling of the information presented in the park. These interpretations were subliminally whitewashing and assimilating the native perspective that was of no consequence in their minds. Generations of staff continuing the cycle of whitewashing changed and belittled the significance of Native American history and the effects had long-lasting consequences. These consequences have impacted Native history as well as how minority groups participate in leisure activities, such as visiting National Parks.

At the outset of the formation of the National Park System in the United States, there were talks of making space for nature preservation as well as Indian culture. As we see in the history of our nation, the welfare of those seen as “other” quickly fades into the background. The formation of the National Park System is no different. The Indian populations in California had been diminishing exponentially from disease, murder, and forced relocation since the Gold Rush. The lands of many national parks were once home to a large population of native peoples but colonialist settlers forced out or killed all of the tribes that inhabited the lands. This was normal procedure for lands that would become national parks and many believed that those lands were virgin, ignoring the reality that native peoples had lived in the parks for generations. This was the case in Sequoia Kings Canyon National Park as well. In a statement written to a curious park visitor, superintendent E.T. Scoyen uses quotes from one of the earliest explorers of the park’s land. The man, Hale Tharp, gave his statement to Scoyen’s predecessor in which he states “When I first came to Three Rivers, over 2000 Indians were living along the Kaweah River... Their headquarters camp was Hospital Rock... the Indians were gradually forced out. Then, too, the Indians contracted contagious diseases such as measles, scarlet fever, and smallpox, and they

died off by the hundreds.”³ Tharp goes on to explain that the chief of the tribe pleaded to let them stay, but when it was clear they could not, the Indians decided not to fight the whites. Tharp states that by the summer of 1865, three years after the white settlers began to arrive, all of the native people of the land were gone. He then goes on to say that he “lost track of time” and that he did not know what happened to the native Indians. The mindset of seeing Indians as a nuisance drove every aspect of actions taken against them. The land they inhabited for generations, the land they dreaded leaving, was forcefully taken and disease brought by the settlers demolished them. Just like the people who came after Tharp, the native peoples were paid no mind and no efforts were actively taken to preserve their history. Scoyen offers no in-time words to the visitor, only to write again if they need more information. The matter-of-factness of Scoyen’s language and seeming indifference to the native people convey the shared attitudes of these people. In this vein, it is seen that truly, the oldest habit of conservationists and Park Service thinking had been to overlook tribal welfare.⁴ The chronology of Indian Policy in the United States set the groundwork for the National Park Service to do to the Indian legacy what the government did to the Indian populations all across the nation; assimilate and relocate.

A big factor in keeping the colonialist settler mentality thriving with the staff of the park is the vague educational program. Reading from the early guidelines for park staff to follow in giving lectures, the stories they should tell when presenting information, and the meaning of the park. In the Master Plan Development Outline introduction, it states that the interpretive program serves two basic objectives which are to provide enjoyment of these areas, and to conserve them and to leave them unimpaired for future generations.⁵ This all looks good on paper, a noble cause meant to uphold the act establishing the national park system in 1916.⁶ That standard, however, is steeped in the settler mentality that made it possible for the killing and relocation of native peoples. Breaking down the aspects of the interpretive program, this guideline for park staff identifies that they must present information that shares the natural, historical, and archeological.

³ SEKI Park Files, SEKI 00180, Folder 26, E T Scoyen, “Letter to Mrs. Giles W. Chapin.” Courtesy of the National Park Service, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

⁴ Keller, Robert H., and Michael F. Turek. “FROM YOSEMITE TO ZUNI: Parks and Native People, 1864–1994.” In *American Indians and National Parks*, 18.

⁵ SEKI Park Files, SEKI 00063, Folder 11, Wallace, “Master Plan Development Outline Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks b. Interpretation.” Courtesy of the National Park Service, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

⁶ SEKI Park Files, SEKI 00063, Folder 11, Wallace, “Master Plan Development Outline Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks b. Interpretation.” Courtesy of the National Park Service, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

This guide actively works to perpetuate the mentality of those who established Sequoia National Park. The historical section explains that there are only two relevant historical events that need to be shared with visitors, the first being the story of the logging of Sequoia, and the second as the discovery and explorations, the establishment of the parks, their early administration, development, and use.⁷ Well, what about the native people that inhabited the land first? In the archeological section, the guide states that park staff should also discuss with park visitors about the Yokut Indian tribes which visited such areas as Giant Forest and Kings Canyon during the summer and left few conspicuous relics of their presence.⁸ The actual events of what happened to these Indians were downplayed. Their fate at the hands of the original settlers is written right out of the guide. The history presented to those first park staff members, and subsequently those that visited the park ignored the truth. The indigenous perspective was white-washed, edited to fit the agendas of the people who set up the park. The changing of historical events was not reserved only for park staff. An Information Handbook about Sequoia Kings Canyon Park from 1945 outlines accommodations to essential information and was handed out to park visitors. Part of the handbook is a chronological history of the park. In it, there is only one entry about the Indians that lived in the parklands. The handbook states that in 1865, the last of the Potwisha Indians were forced out of the park area by white men.⁹ This entry does not acknowledge the disease and killings that wiped out the Indians. This entry also makes it seem as if the land had already belonged to the United States. The continuation of the original, xenophobic mindsets of settlers is in these guides. The whitewashing and editing of historical perspectives did take place. In a 1930 Plan of Administration of the Educational Activities of Sequoia National Park, Park Naturalist Frank Been wrote a more specific guideline for exhibits. In this, he highlights Hospital Rock and how in presenting the exhibit, park staff should include Hale Tharp's story, and how the tribes in the region lived.¹⁰ Again, there is no mention of the role Tharp and other settlers had in killing and relocating the tribes that inhabited the parklands. The true history of the park was

⁷ SEKI Park Files, SEKI 00063, Folder 11, Wallace, "Master Plan Development Outline Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks b. Interpretation." Courtesy of the National Park Service, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

⁸ SEKI Park Files, SEKI 00063, Folder 11, Wallace, "Master Plan Development Outline Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks b. Interpretation." Courtesy of the National Park Service, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

⁹ SEKI Park Files, SEKI 00063, Folder 12, "Information Handbook Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks." Courtesy of the National Park Service, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

¹⁰ SEKI Park Files, SEKI 00063, Folder 9, Frank Been, "Plan of Administration of the Educational Activities of Sequoia National Park." Courtesy of the National Park Service, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

not presented to those who visited the park. This pattern of white-washing the historical perspectives of the park can be tied to the racially charged attitudes of those running the park. This mentality also contributed to the racial disparity that still plagues our nation. In an article connecting the metaphorical philosophies of conservation and eugenics, historian Garland E. Allen uses five prominent political figures to bridge the gap between eugenics and environmental conservation. Allen highlights that the two movements were intimately connected in the minds of many during the first half of the twentieth century.¹¹ These intertwined ideologies affected social control, scientific management under the guidance of highly trained experts, formulation of state-regulated social policy, and the cult of efficiency.¹² The political and social climates of the first half of the 1900s made it possible for the heinous treatment of Native Americans to be rationalized. This extends to all people who were, and sadly are still, seen as inferior.

The first group of men to run Sequoia Kings Canyon National Park laid the foundations for their colonialist, xenophobic mindset to prosper in a generational cycle that perpetuated the white-washing of the Native perspective. 60 years after the park was established, the superintendent, E. T. Scoyen kept that original mindset alive. He received a letter from a man named Bart Leiper who was the Executive Director of Chattanooga Inc. inquiring about how the legendary Cherokee Indian, Sequoyah, was being honored at the park. The legendary status of Sequoyah comes from his achievement in creating an 86-letter syllabary of the Cherokee language. This was the first time the language could be transcribed. In a brief reply, Scoyen tells Leiper that the generic name Sequoia applied to the Coast Redwood and the Giant Sequoia, was given in honor of Sequoyah.¹³ Scoyen continues to state that the story of Sequoyah is told at lectures, and in exhibits so that there is no need for plaques, monuments, etc. because such devices could not do him the honor already acknowledged through the generic name of the species of trees.¹⁴ It stands to reason that since the nature of the lectures is predetermined by park staff and presented at their discretion, there is a possibility that the historical reference is never told to park visitors. This assumption is made with some inference in the language used between

¹¹ Allen, Garland E. “‘Culling the Herd’: Eugenics and the Conservation Movement in the United States, 1900–1940.” *Journal of the History of Biology* 46, no. 1 (March 13, 2012): 61.

¹² Allen, Garland E. “‘Culling the Herd’: Eugenics and the Conservation Movement in the United States, 1900–1940.” *Journal of the History of Biology* 46, no. 1 (March 13, 2012): 62.

¹³ SEKI Park Files, SEKI 00180, Folder 26, E T Scoyen, “Letter to Bart Leiper, Executive Director, Chattanooga, Inc.” Courtesy of the National Park Service, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

¹⁴ SEKI Park Files, SEKI 00180, Folder 26, E T Scoyen, “Letter to Bart Leiper, Executive Director, Chattanooga, Inc.” Courtesy of the National Park Service, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

park superintendents and regional directors at this time. A few weeks after this correspondence to Mr. Leiper, Scoyen sent out a memorandum to the regional director of Region Four summarizing the interaction between himself and Leiper. Region four is the one in which Sequoia Kings Canyon lays. In the memorandum, Scoyen states that we wrote informing Mr. Leiper that we had no special plaques or other man-made monument to Seqouyah, as we believed no marker could be erected that could compete with the Big Trees named in his honor.¹⁵ No mention is made to the regional director about the lectures and exhibits that Scoyen assured Leiper was being used to convey Seqouyah's historical importance. With no real monument or mention of Sequoyah set in plaques, his perspective and achievement are white-washed. If any mention of him and his legend is made it would be concerning the Sequoia tree, not his achievement. Did Scoyen tell Leiper what he wanted to hear to get him off his back? If this was not the case, Scoyen would have included the lectures and exhibits in the memorandum. The assimilation of the Native perspective was total in this generation of park staff. So completely embedded was the original mindset of xenophobia and colonialism that the white-washing of Native perspectives was done subconsciously. Since there was no effort to actively preserve Indian history at the beginning of the park, the lack of effort due to that mindset actively worked to assimilate that history.

The lasting effects of the mindset of those who established the park have direct impacts on Native American history and broader impacts on how minorities interact with leisure activities in the United States. The Regional Director of Region Four Lawrence C. Merriam sent out a memorandum to the other regional directors where he summarized a notice he received from a superintendent from another National Park in California. In this notice, the superintendent, Johnston, states that in his park, Lassen Volcanic, much valuable information has been lost to that area because no concerted effort was made to contact the "old Indians" while they were still living.¹⁶ The value assigned to the Native peoples that were killed off for their land was done as an afterthought. This memorandum from 1953 demonstrates that only decades after Lassen Volcanic Park was established and after the indigenous peoples were obliterated their history matters. Their history only matters in the eyes of the National Park Service at the

¹⁵ SEKI Park Files, SEKI 00180, Folder 26, E T Scoyen, "MEMORANDUM for the Regional Director, Region Four." Courtesy of the National Park Service, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

¹⁶ SEKI Park Files, SEKI 00180, Folder 26, Lawrence C. Merriam, "Memorandum to Regional Director, Region Four, Historical Research Projects." Courtesy of the National Park Service, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

time because Indian accounts of the first meetings with white explorers would be of great interest and would supplement other accounts of such events.¹⁷ The concern of the park regional directors does not pertain to the Native peoples who are now extinct, they are only worried about supplementing their white perspective. They want to preserve the story of the white explorers who “discovered” the land. The memorandum advises other directors to reach out to living members of native groups whose former habitat included what is now part or all of any of the national parks.¹⁸ No acknowledgment is made about how these native populations were killed and forced off their land by those only concerned with preserving the natural beauty they “discovered.” How the director describes the Native people’s homeland as a habitat also conveys that even 60 years after the parkland was taken from its indigenous peoples, those who colonized it passed down their mindset. The Indians originating from land that was taken for the national parks were still considered animals which only served to corroborate white stories. This mentality that stood the test of time and was exercised normally by those running the parks in the mid-1900s also impacted how other racial groups interacted with the parks. As Joe Weber and Selima Sultana highlight in their article, “Why Do So Few Minority People Visit National Parks?” They examine all the previous scholarships attempting to answer that question. They go through hypotheses of marginalism, subculture, discrimination, and cultural assimilation. They look at the varying factors of each and then present their own. Based on their work using the geographic location of national parks with the locations where racial groups live, they find that there is a relationship. The park's greatest visitation is done by white people and the least by Native Americans.¹⁹ This is a direct consequence of the relocation and killing of native tribes in parkland. The white settlers, spurred on by delusions of preserving the land, forced the native inhabitants to relocate. The differences in visitation to the national parks by racial groups in the United States can stem from the exclusion of such activities. That exclusion started with getting rid of the native tribes, white-washing their historical perspective, and creating a narrative that fit

¹⁷ SEKI Park Files, SEKI 00180, Folder 26, Lawrence C. Merriam, “Memorandum to Regional Director, Region Four, Historical Research Projects.” Courtesy of the National Park Service, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

¹⁸ SEKI Park Files, SEKI 00180, Folder 26, Lawrence C. Merriam, “Memorandum to Regional Director, Region Four, Historical Research Projects.” Courtesy of the National Park Service, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

¹⁹ Weber, Joe, and Selima Sultana. “Why Do So Few Minority People Visit National Parks? Visitation and the Accessibility of ‘America’s Best Idea.’” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103, no. 3 (July 5, 2012): 457.

the dominant group's agenda. In working towards social progress the new standard of the national park should not serve as a societal mechanism to minimize racial or cultural social interaction.²⁰ Social attitudes have shifted since the early to mid-1900s. The standard those generations of colonialist settlers created must be torn down. History repeats itself and the struggle of Native Americans seems unending. Their struggle for representation and justice has largely gone unheard. The legacy of the Indian Policy from Manifest Destiny America remains in the ignorance of the Native American struggle. Education of the truth is necessary for people to understand what happened and what is happening to Native Americans.

²⁰ Philipp, Steven. "Race and the Pursuit of Happiness." *Journal of Leisure Research* 32, no. 1 (March 2000): 123.

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