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Parks Stewardship Forum

Title

Tilting at the “Best Idea” Windmill

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bv1r05d>

Journal

Parks Stewardship Forum, 42(3)

Author

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Publication Date

2026-09-14

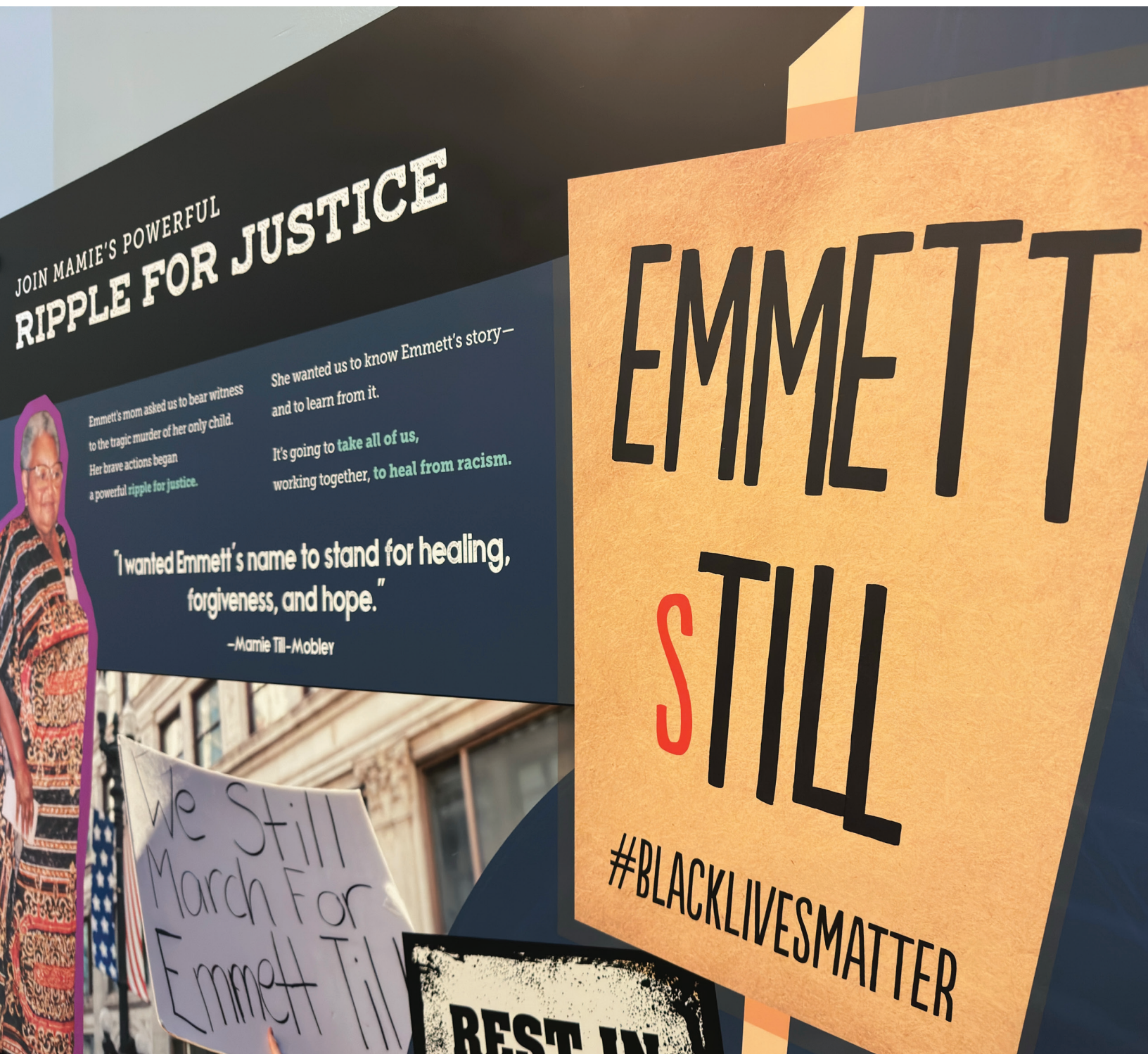
DOI

10.5070/P5.69175

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REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?
REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS



Tilting at the “Best Idea” Windmill

ALAN SPEARS

In 1983, when Wallace Stegner proclaimed that national parks were America's best idea, he was responding to two basic themes then running through American culture and politics. First, he wanted to capture in one phrase his immense pride in and gratitude for a nation that had made and sustained its commitment to protecting public lands in perpetuity for the benefit, enjoyment, and inspiration of the public. Second, it was Stegner as environmental advocate who wanted to put the legislative and the executive branches of government on notice about the bad budgets and policies emanating from both that threatened to undermine the well-being of these uniquely American places.

For giving us that phrase, that energy at that time, we owe Wallace Stegner a tremendous debt of thanks. And it is with respect for the author's words and his defense of national parks that I suggest it's now high time to retire the "best idea" concept from the public lands lexicon. For good.

Oratory can inspire and unite. Think Tom Paine's "These are the times that try men's souls." Or Michelle Obama's "When they go low, we go high!"

Problematic rhetoric can divide. How the Dallas Cowboys became "America's team" remains a presumptive slight that discomfits me to this day.

The challenge with the "best idea" concept, the spine of the sentiment behind those words, is that it is inherently cliquish and divisive. It's a small, even elegant phrase that carries with it an Amtrak baggage carload of assumptions about what national parks should mean for all of us, when our history demonstrates clearly that not all Americans approach their relationship to national parks and public lands from the same starting point.

National parks are not America's best idea if a National Park Service (NPS) visitor center has been planted squarely in the middle of your ancestral homeland. National parks are not America's best idea if you've dedicated your life to the preservation of the African American experience only to watch that history be disappeared from NPS sites across the nation seemingly without care or consequence.

Concerns about equality and human rights are not being assuaged by a National Park System strongarmed into scrubbing references to Transgender people from websites and taking the Pride flag down from its post at the Stonewall Inn in Manhattan. And if you follow the aphorism "Show me your budget and I'll show you your

priorities," then clearly national parks are not regarded by Congress or administrations past and current as America's best idea.

We're experiencing an unprecedented assault on our national parks that's inflicted generational harm. In 2025, terminations and fork-in-the-road buyouts reduced NPS staffing levels by 25%. Draconian budget cuts and the freezing of congressionally authorized funding by the Trump administration jeopardized the operations of national park sites and agency partners. Staff morale is at an all-time low.

And erasure and censorship efforts in the name of restoring "truth and sanity" have been crippling. They are leading not just to the removal of interpretive materials about race, slavery, gender identity, Indigenous culture, and climate science at scores of national parks, but to a chilling of research and accurate, just, and inclusive interpretation at all NPS sites. Our national parks are in trouble, and they need all the advocates and stewards they can get.

But our expectations for support must consider the experiences of the audience we're seeking to engage. They cannot be couched in rhetoric that exclusively appeals to and comforts the initiated because (generally speaking) the relationship of people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds with national parks has been different from the jump. Here's a little history for you.

Ten years after Yellowstone was established as America's first national park the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) became the first law to prohibit immigration based on a specific nationality. In 1916, the year the National Park Service was established, at least 50 African Americans were lynched in this country. And two months after the National Parks Association (now known as my beloved National Parks Conservation Association) was founded in

Washington, DC, in May of 1919, the nation's capital was convulsed in a four-day race riot.

The founding era of our national parks is certainly replete with more positive history connected with people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. In 1927, George Meléndez Wright started his career with the National Park Service. In 1934, the Indian Reorganization Act began a reversal of decades of discriminatory federal policy by restoring Tribal self-government. This is our history bending back and forth along that long arc of moral justice. Still, it must be remembered that as many in this country were learning to love national parks, others of us were occupied literally with the pursuits of life, liberty, and equal protection under the law.

Beyond the policies, however, are the lived experiences of this wonderfully diverse population who make up what Frederick Douglass called our “composite nation.” My parents Emily and Wallace weren’t “park people.” They were, in the 1970s, looking for inexpensive and educational things to do for their only child. The twice-annual visits to Antietam, Gettysburg, and Harpers Ferry that they organized for my benefit changed my life for the better.

But it must also be noted that my dad, a scoutmaster for troop 580 from the Episcopal Church of Atonement in northeast Washington, DC, for more than two decades, never took his scouts to Shenandoah or the Smokies. Born in 1919 in rural West Virginia, my father experienced racial segregation in its most virulent forms. Responsible for the safety of his scouts and determined to build the confidence of those young Black men, it never occurred to my father in the 1950s and '60s to take them to a place where their race might make them unwelcome due to someone else's dumb prejudice.

I suppose he didn't think that national parks were America's best idea either.

This, I think, explains why many people of color view our national parks differently. Given our history it should be perfectly understandable why some of us, if asked to

submit a list of America's best ideas, would lead with the Emancipation Proclamation; the 1st, 4th, 13th, 14th, 15th, and 19th amendments to the Constitution; the G.I. Bill; the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the Voting Rights Act of 1965; Head Start; and marriage equality. Note to readers: your lists may vary.

And it may also shed light on the curious way some grassroots organizations run by people of color have responded to the current emergency facing our national parks, including the history erasure crisis.

In January 2026, employees of the National Park Service, acting on the order of the president of the United States, removed interpretive panels about slavery from the President's House at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia. A lawsuit was immediately raised by the city of Philadelphia in collaboration with the Avenging the Ancestors Coalition (ATAC).

In the 1990s, ATAC had led the fight to have the interpretive panels about the enslaved Africans that George Washington had brought with him to Philadelphia from Mount Vernon installed. They regarded the removal of the displays as a racist betrayal of African Americans. And they largely laid the blame on the National Park Service.

As the fight to restore the panels raged in the courts, it was clear that ATAC was advocating for the preservation of a specific chapter in the history of slavery in America, *not* for the survival or well-being of a national park. The President's House might as well have been managed by Home Depot. Preserving the history of Austin, Christopher Sheels, Giles, Hercules, Joe, Moll, Ona Judge, Paris, and Richmond was their objective. Defending the Park Service from the horrible policies that led to the removal of those panels was at best a tertiary concern.

Turning ATAC into a park advocacy organization should not be anyone's goal. Rather, we who live and breathe park advocacy should be highly motivated to work collaboratively with any group so dedicated to the preservation of American history and with such a close connection to a national park. The question we must



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ask ourselves is not why ATAC isn't fully with us in this moment of crisis, but rather, How have we failed utterly to appreciate, court, and empower their leadership?

Such missed opportunities abound.

Examine the priorities of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the League of United Latin American Citizens, the Urban League, the National Congress of American Indians, and the National Center for LGBTQ Rights. All lead the fight for racial justice, human rights, economic parity, and political enfranchisement. They represent people and cultures whose stories are captured honorably in our National Park System. None have an overt policy plank regarding national parks and public lands.

The composition of most major conservation and preservation organizations remains largely White. The same may be said of National Park Service staffing. And although the numbers of people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds who visit our national parks appears to have increased over the last decade, the presence of people of color remains far below representative numbers.

All these absences point to the gap that still exists between people of color and their public lands. Simply telling us that national parks are America's best idea repeatedly while hoping we don't notice the self-evident truth of this exclusion is, frankly, an insult.

We need new blood, new allies, and the strength of this nation's diversity to save our parks and public lands. We can get that by working in a genuinely collaborative fashion and by understanding that while national parks can bring us together, we should never ask anyone to forget their origin stories as the price for admission into the Club.

To state that there are reasons why Black, Brown, Tribal, and LGBTQ people approach their public lands differently

is not to suggest that they don't or shouldn't care about them. It is to confirm that a gap exists and that those of us who regard ourselves as advocates for national parks should move heaven and earth to close the distance between "us" and "them."

This is how we win more often. On park funding and NPS staffing levels. And on the preservation of our shared national narrative unimpaired for future generations. This is, in fact, how we strike a blow for democracy. How we heal and come together.

Wallace Stegner had a fundamental belief in the power of national parks to be transformative. He wasn't wrong about that.

But his best idea concept, like the pair of striped bell bottom jeans I wore as a ten-year-old boy on my first trip to Gettysburg National Military Park in 1974, has long ago seen its best days. We should let it go and not succumb to the temptation in challenging times to re-embrace it as though it were a chicken soup aphorism for the troubled souls of conservationists.

A less well-known quote from Stegner is this: "Wisdom is knowing what you have to accept." Now those are words to live and to organize by.

My deep love for American history was born in the 1970s during those visits to the hallowed grounds at Antietam and Gettysburg. I became a historian because of the National Park Service.

National parks are not our best idea, but they are certainly worth fighting for. And as we approach the reconstruction or refoundation of the agency, how well and broadly we organize will determine our success by ensuring not just that the second century of national parks will be more glorious than the first, but that these unique places will have any future at all.

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