CONSERVATION AND THE UNDER-REPRESENTED REVISITED
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In 2001, I wrote an article for AJES, “Conservation and the Under-Represented,” highlighting the need for conservationists to expand their outreach to non-white people who, according to the 2000 census, were on track to become the dominant population of the United States around the year 2050. The future protection of places like the Adirondack Park, I reasoned, would depend upon the success of our overwhelmingly white conservation and environmental organizations in enlisting a new, broader-based, racially mixed coalition of supporters and outdoor recreational users. I went on to discuss what a daunting challenge it might be to achieve this desired outcome due to America’s unfortunate history of entrenched racial prejudice. Sadly, topics like the future of conservation were part of a long list of urgent priorities which became deferred as New York dug itself out of the rubble of the World Trade Center following the attacks on September 11, 2001. Many years would pass while America retaliated and attempted to heal the wounds inflicted by this despicable attack.

In 2014, the issue of diversity began to re-emerge at a symposium entitled “Toward A More Diverse Adirondacks” held at the Newcomb campus of SUNY ESF and hosted by Associate Director Paul Hai. Among the participants were activists, educators and community leaders who endorsed the need for the Adirondacks to be more welcoming and inclusive. Furthermore, it was recognized that future support for this world-renowned region would depend upon making it relevant to an increasingly diverse population. Following the symposium, an Adirondack Diversity Advisory Council was formed, coordinated by Keene Valley activist Pete Nelson. A year later, the group re-organized as the Adirondack Diversity Initiative under the guidance of Nelson, Paul Hai, Martha Swan of John Brown Lives, Chris Morris of the Adirondack Foundation, and Willy Janeway and Rocci Aguirre of The Adirondack Council.
With advice and funding assistance from the Adirondack Council, the group was successful in earmarking $250,000 in the 2019-2020 state budget for the Adirondack Diversity Initiative to hire a director and develop diversity outreach programs for the Adirondack region. In the fall of 2019, the Adirondack North Country Association (ANCA), the grant administrator, announced the hiring of Nicole Hylton-Patterson, a talented and gregarious black woman, as the new ADI director.

Nicky's leadership got off to a promising start. Her message, aimed at building white support and racial tolerance, was welcomed by many local community leaders who understood that greater racial diversity would be key to maintaining the future viability of our Adirondack tourism economy. Optimism began to rise as local support for ADI's diversity agenda increased. Then came Covid-19 and the corona virus pandemic. By the spring of 2020 masks were being worn and the nation’s face-to-face interactions were shutting down. Nicky and her team scrambled to develop new methods of programming and outreach using social media platforms.

Around this time, the upsetting reality of Adirondack racism began to rear its ugly head. Hateful racist graffiti, targeting Nicky was found on a railroad bridge in Saranac Lake causing her to move from her home as a safety precaution. In other parts of the country people of all races were protesting against harsh police tactics being used against black men and women. Outrage boiled over after the horrific killings of George Floyd and Brionna Taylor by police. This led to the creation of a new movement called “Black Lives Matter” to combat racism and the use of excessive force by police. Almost immediately, the BLM movement was met with a backlash from fragile white people who felt their racial identity was threatened. As racial tensions grew, self-serving politicians sought to increase their popularity among white voters with inflammatory rhetoric. This pre-election political pandering only made agreement on remedies for police misconduct and excessive use of force even more difficult to achieve. Equally important, the long list of economic woes suffered by people of color remained in limbo.

These disturbing events underscore how important it is for people of color to have the help of white allies who will stand with them to fight injustice. Someday, in the not too distant future, it may be white conservationists who will need the support of a growing population of non-white Americans to help them protect natural places like the Adirondacks. A local Adirondack Diversity Initiative is the first step in building a diverse coalition of allies here in the Adirondack region. It’s success will also show how friendship and cooperation among all races can be a roadmap to help America find a better way forward for all. Let us take that first step without further delay. The time to act is now.

How best to proceed? For starters, we who live, work, and vacation in the Adirondacks, need to take a long hard look at ourselves through the mirror of racial identity. The image reflected back at us will be of a population that is overwhelmingly white, abundantly privileged, and blessed with advantages of white identity that we don’t even realize we have. Many of us envision ourselves as unbiased and welcoming to people of all races here in the beautiful Adirondacks. This is the rosy picture that we put forth in our tourism advertising. Unfortunately, numerous incidents of discrimination experienced by non-white people here in the Adirondacks tell a far different story. Men and women of color cite humiliating episodes of racial profiling by police and demeaning treatment at local shops and restaurants. Add to that the confederate flags, the racist graffiti and the unfriendly looks, all intended to say; “you don’t belong here”, and you begin to understand why many people of color choose to stay away. We must overcome such negative behavior in order to make the Adirondacks a more welcoming and inclusive place. The following suggestions would help:
• Make an extra effort to be welcoming and accommodating to people of color.
• Reach out to men, women and children who differ from you and make them feel more welcome in our communities, schools and organizations.
• Greet all people with a friendly smile; make eye contact during conversations; always be courteous.
• Be willing to discuss uncomfortable aspects of race with candor and honesty.
• Be a good listener. Learn from your faux pas and grow from them.
• Share helpful information and suggestions freely with all visitors.
• Increase hiring of qualified people of color.
• Demand an end to police profiling and harassment of minorities.
• Insist that police standards of conduct be transparent and professional.
• Speak out when necessary. Don’t expect non-white people to see you as a friend if you are okay with them being mistreated.
• Don’t claim that racism doesn’t exist—it does.

Adirondackers who want black people to feel more comfortable here must overcome the unfortunate legacy of our Adirondack prisons. Vast numbers of young black men were locked away in the Adirondack region for low level offenses under the harsh penalties of the Rockefeller Drug Laws. As incarceration rates increased, new prisons were built all across the north country to house offenders. White Adirondackers were delighted to have good paying prison jobs coming into our area. They showed little sympathy, however, for the awful collateral damage done to black families and communities when young black men were sent far away for so many years. Nor was there much concern shown for the wives and children of inmates, who endured discourteous treatment and long hours on prison buses just to have a brief visit with a loved one. We cannot undo our past racial insensitivity but we be can admit to it and try to be better. The example of the late Yusuf Burgess, a black man incarcerated in the Adirondacks, offers a glimmer of hope for all of us. Brother Yusuf (as he is fondly remembered) discovered his love of nature while in prison. After his release, he began to share that love of the outdoors while working with inner city youths in the Albany area. With the help of environmental activists and assistance from NYSDEC, Brother Yusuf organized many outdoor recreational trips and educational activities for black youths. His successful efforts can show us how people of different races working together can make a difference. Let us replace those dark prison memories by instilling a love of nature in young people of all races that will change their lives for the better. Let Brother Yusuf’s efforts be an inspiration to us all. We can do this.

REFERENCE
