

Investigating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Adirondack Region of New York State

Olivia Berson, Andres Durante, Lucy Janovitz

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Abstract

This qualitative research study investigated diversity, equity, and inclusion in the Adirondack region of New York State. The Adirondack Park is 6.2 million acres, and is the largest park in the lower 48. While the park is free and open to the public, not everyone who wants to access the park has the ability to do so. Race and socioeconomic status are two factors that have a major influence

from the NY State Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), and with this funding they were able to hire Nicole Hylton-Patterson, a specialist in diversity, equity, and inclusion work. Hylton-

writes that in order for people of color to feel comfortable in the outdoors, they need to first feel safe in these spaces (AP News, 2020).

This Action Research was conducted in collaboration with the Adirondack Diversity Initiative (ADI) to assist the organization in their research efforts, as well as to share ideas and recommendations on how to fix the problem of accessibility. To enrich the data that already exists regarding inclusivity within the Adirondack Park, we chose to focus specifically on issues of equity in recreational activities that occur in the area. In doing this, we found that while there are many efforts to improve diversity in outdoor recreation, not much has changed due to the root of systemic racism as well as a lack of behavioral change (Fields, 2020, p.1). We honed in on a smaller area of focus, investigating youth outreach programs in order to better understand how this lack of inclusivity and sense of not belonging can arise at a young age. One of the primary questions we posed in our research surrounds the concept and sense of safety in the Adirondack Park. If the Adirondack Park is meant to be a space that is inclusive and open to everyone, people of color should not feel unsafe or at risk for targeted acts of racism and racial biases, including young minority populations. The entrenched racism within the area has not dissipated, making the park much less inviting to people of color. This sense of unsafety may be passed down through generations, with incidents of racial profiling or racism in the Adirondack Park serving as a precautionary tale.

Incidents of racism in public lands are not isolated occurrences. In the Adirondack Park, incidents of racism have been seen just as frequently as in other areas. The Director of the Adirondack Diversity Initiative, Nichole Hylton-Patterson, has experienced this firsthand in an area that she called home. In July of 2020, Hylton-Patterson, a middle-aged Black woman, was running her usual route around Saranac Lake. On a bridge along that area, someone wrote a racist slur, seemingly directed towards her (Silvarole, 2020, p. 3). This area is a public space, supposedly an outdoor location inclusive to all that was funded by New Yorkers tax dollars. Despite this, the generalization made amongst New Yorkers is that people of color do not enjoy, and do not belong, in areas of wilderness like the Adirondack Park, as articulated by Donathan Brown, a professor at Rochester Institute of Technology (Silvarole, 2020, p. 3].

To ensure the validity of our research, we will also be reaching out to Indigenous groups and organizations to gauge their feeling of inclusivity in the Adirondack Park. It is important for us to tell the story of everyone being impacted by the exclusive and white nature of the area and think of the most applicable ways to solve the issue for everyone.

-founder Pete Nelson, we learned that ADI has not yet partnered with any local Indigenous organizations. This inspired us think of ways that our research and data collection may also serve as a means to create partnerships between organizations.

A lack of knowledge about the outdoors, and prior experience in outdoor spaces, may also hinder those from exploring it and feeling included. Different definitions of wilderness may result in some feeling comfortable in parks such as the Adirondack Park, and others feeling alienated. In past cen

2000, p. 172). Wilderness had the notion of being a retreat where people could go and be amongst the quiet and relaxing outdoors. However, this soon changed as people began to realize how easy it is for humans to alter the wilderness. It eventually became a resource that was perceived as existing to benefit us, and fulfill our needs or desires. It is said that three major factors account for the changing perceptions in regards to how wilderness is viewed:

, p. 173). These changing views of how wilderness can be seen introduced a new meaning to the outdoors that people once saw as inviting. Wilderness started to be seen as a place for middle- or upper-class white people to retreat. They had, and currently ha notions, leaving those of a different racial or economic background without a say or influence. Today, the people within this demographic perceive the wilderness as it once was: a place where they can ret

within the Adirondack Park. The Literature Review then delves into local, national, and internationally recognized innovative recreation and inclusivity programs that have promoted and facilitated a better understanding of minority youth engagement in recreation on public lands, and calls for more research in this emerging field.

History of the Environmental Justice Movement

-wide

environmental justice strategy and to ensure that any of its activities that substantially affect human health or the environment should be conducted in a way that does not

p. 159). The study also mentioned prior research surrounding pregnancy, and how time spent in green spaces has been shown to alleviate some of the potential health concerns surrounding pregnancy, such as mental health and cardiovascular and respiratory issues (Van Den Bosch, 2016,160). The study emphasized the positive impacts of natural green environments, like the Adirondack Park

p. 160).

Many studies have shown the benefits of access to outdoor spaces and recreation, for health and overall wellbeing. It has been revealed that this access has a particular benefit for younger demographics of people. Studies have found that:

ing time outdoors. For example, participation in various types of structured and unstructured outdoor activities can

(Chawla 20017; Wells and Lekies 2006), social relationships (Ginsburg 2007), mental health (Burdette and Whitaker 2005; Taylor, Kuo and Sullivan 2001), and physical health (Maller et al. 2006; Sallis, Prochaska and Taylor 2000).

p. 90)

The evidence pointing towards the benefit of access to green spaces and outdoor recreation and livelihood.

access to green spaces, including (but not limited to) race and socioeconomic status. Saporito and Casey investigated the

have generally shown that people of color and lower-income groups tend to live in neighborhoods with less green space than their more- Casey, 2015, p. 113). This economic separation, which is directly intertwined with race, influences the distribution of neighborhoods and their proximity to green spaces. This direct relationship has resulted in a gaping inequity between communities and their access to green

-Burt et al., 2014, p. 1). With this being said, it becomes apparent that access to a green space, such as the Adirondack Park, for recreational uses as well as maintaining a sense of wellbeing is important for everyone to experience.

access to National Parks (Scott & Lee, 2018, p. 73-82). Analyzing the inequities within national park access through the lens of constraining factors of color do not make greater use of NPS areas, particularly those parks that are remote and where outdoor recreation and scenery are major attractions (Scott & Lee, 2018, p. 73). The inability to have the time and resources for visiting a national park, and the ability to participate in recreation and leisure activities while feeling safe at the same time.

essential not only for addressing the racial and economic inequalities that permeate all aspects of life, but also for national park managers. For national parks to be a safe and welcoming space for people of color, park managers must understand these constraining

[accruing] to a broader cross-section of the population (Scott & Lee, p. 74-75). While this is important knowledge for park managers to have in order to make parks more inclusive, many of the factors are tied to broader systemic issues of racial and economic ethnic discrepancies

2018, p. 75). Many of these factors require systemic change, through political, economic, and social factors. The problem facing national parks runs deeper than race; it is arguably based on a long standing trend of marginalization, lack of access to the parks by minorities, and possibly, racial inequality (Scott & Lee, p. 447).

Beyond the immediate, concrete economic and social factors that cause this racial disparity in access to national parks, there are also deep-rooted sentiments that cause p/MCID 1b1t50058Tf1 0 0

Indigenous people from these spaces. As Muir writes "The Yosemite Valley, in the heart of the

(DeLuca & Demo, 2001, p. 552). Muir saw nothing wrong with the removal of Native Americans from Yosemite National Park because they did not fit into the elite, romantic wilderness that preservationists like himself were attempting to create (DeLuca & Demo, 2001, p. 554). Celebrating Muir and his wilderness preservationist narrative continues to exclude people from outdoor spaces like Yosemite National Park.

Wilderness and the Removal of Indigenous People in the Adirondack Park

Standing on top of a mountain in the Adirondack Park and looking out at the vast expanse of rolling hills and winding rivers, it is easy to imagine that no one has ever occupied most popular destinations for recreation in the Adirondack Park.

a place
, 2019, p.

Park as obstacles

to the resources they wanted. Racialized violence towards Indigenous people continued into the early twentieth century, including the murder of two Oneida men in 1912 (Ward, 2019, p. 110).

The Adirondack Park has been conceptualized as a place of wilderness since the 20th century, when The New York Times publisher Henry J. Raymond wrote a piece on the Adirondack Park rough, rocky, and barren wilderness (Ward, 2019, p. 138). Today, the Adirondack Park continues to bear the title

Adirondack Park as wilderness fails to acknowledge the violence and colonization that made this land uninhabitable for the Haudenosaunee people.

Exclusion Within the Adirondack Park

While there are many factors that may limit inclusion throughout the Adirondack Park, data shows that some of the underlying causes may be rooted in history. Through a study done at Azusa Pacific University, it was seen

(Ward, 2020, p. 1). Within this, it is noted that throughout history, white society as a collective has used its privilege to create exclusion and socially construct these racial categories. As there has long been deep-rooted racism on lands all across the country, it is now understood that to have the outdoors for African

p.

2). With the engrained history of exclusion present in lands such as the Adirondack Park, it is essential to break through the racism and understand another history, especially of those who were marginalized. The discrimination has been present for hundreds of years, as was noted by Golebiewski in his study of the treatment of people of color dating back to when they were enslaved by their white counterparts. Through all of this, it was seen that in recreation activities such as hiking, white tourists generally benefitted from the rewards that it brought.

The engrained racism in the park has

around the lack of trust in the Park Service for trying to diversify public lands. Without the trust of officials making parks around the country more inclusive, people may not feel compelled to do so either (Schiavo, 2016, p. 1). Through NGOs and the personal efforts of people around New York, as well as the country, there seems to be hope in creating a more inclusive space that others or the park service may not have time to prioritize. Specifically, Outdoor Afro is one such group helping people break down barriers and experience the Adirondack Park and other parks as they should be experienced by everyone. In particular, they help BI

visual narrative, and inspiring access to the most pristine nature as well as

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Sampling Techniques

Surveys were administered both in-person and online. Posters advertising the survey link were posted around locations within the Adirondack Park (specifically more diverse towns), as well as the MountainMan store in downtown Saratoga Springs, and on Skidmore College campus, where people scanned the QR code for accessing the survey. We traveled to towns surrounding the park to distribute the survey posters. The online survey link was advertised through Facebook and social media groups related to visiting the Adirondack Park, and through our contacts in the Adirondack Diversity Initiative. We also contacted the Adirondack Mountain Club and other organizations to gather information about the youth recreation programs. After this, we distributed our survey to these families as well as staff at AMC. Through purposive sampling, we administered the survey to people of color, to better understand their perceptions of inclusivity in the Adirondack Park. Through Facebook groups dedicated to hikers of color, as well as organizations such a

Through the course of our research, many limitations were encountered that hindered the project. The onslaught of COVID-19 prohibited us from distributing our survey in-person as well as across Upstate New York. We found that it was particularly difficult to travel to different organizations and put flyers with our survey near trails, since meeting places around trailheads has diminished because of the pandemic. In addition, we found that communicating through email with our stakeholders was extremely compromising and face-to-face interactions would have worked significantly better. Interviews with stakeholders and survey respondents took place over Zoom, which was difficult in that internet connectivity issues allowed buffering to occur in our meetings.

Findings

Survey Responses

After developing a survey, we sent it across Facebook groups, websites, and posted flyers with the link around town. In doing this, we garnered 570 responses. Of these, 434 people were white, 32 were people of color, and 30 stated other as their ethnicity/ race. Some questions included if respondents thought the Adirondack Park was an inclusive space for people of color to recreate.

These responses are seen in **Figures 1 and 2**, where responses are split up between white respondents and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) respondents.

When white and BIPOC respondents were asked which racial demographics were seen while visiting the park, 471 of the respondents noted white, 269 said Black or African American, 164 said Latinx, 81 said Indigenous, 272 said Asian, 29 said Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 35 said other.

Figure 2: n=420



Perceived Racism

Through dialogue and survey responses, it was noted that a large reason as to why there is a lack of diversity is that there is a strong presence of racism in the towns surrounding the park. One survey respondent wrote:

I have students (college) who have suffered racism when near or entering the park and who feared traveling to the park for fear that their car might break down or that they might meet unpleasant people at trailheads or on trails. Racism in the park is not an abstract concept; it is a dangerous and damaging reality for those who are not in the white majority.

This occurrence is not isolated, as racist incidences were seen to be a recurring theme amongst reasons for people not visiting the park, or as something that should be changed to increase visitation, as seen in **Table 1** with white respondents, and **Table 2** with BIPOC respondents.

Table 1 displays the answers white respondents gave to the question regarding what aspects should be implemented to enhance their experience in the Adirondack Park.

Table 2: BIPOC Respondent Answers to How Their Experience Can be Improved in the Adirondack Park

Fees/ Parking	Recreation/ Education Programs	Overcrowding	Training and More Rangers	Transportation	Time
Any program that somehow reduces the traffic and parking close to the trailheads - e.g. better shuttle services.	Any educational programs that improve trail etiquette	Overcrowding is an issue as is leave no trace education	More BIPOC individuals employed there	Better public transportation	It is kind of difficult to find time to travel to the park between school work and other work. I think creating a program through school that had going to the Adirondack Park as part of it would get me to go more than I do now.
Programs which provide affordable temporary housing for groups to utilize, since the cost of living in the Adirondacks are the largest hindrance to my staying there and enjoying the park.					
At some hiking trails, the state currently restricts parking, thus affecting access to the wilderness. NY state can encourage more visitors to the parks by decreasing regulations.					

Need for Funding and Issues of Overcrowding

Many respondents noted that a lack of funding has prevented positive change to occur. Due to issues of overcrowding on the trails, respondents stated that more staff should be employed to help monitor proper trail etiquette as well as ensure that overcrowding be minimized. One respondent noted:

visitors so that parks can be safely shared by all members of the public. Long-time recreators like to blame newcomers trace practices and the like. NYS should better fund agencies and organizations to help care for on-site needs. More funding within existing educational systems can also allow for outdoor recreation to be included within school PE programs. The disparity in access to outdoor recreation by class and race in

This funding will provide those who have never been to the trails before with important educational information on how to take care of the land as well as make sure everyone feels included in the area. With the instances of more people visiting the park, respondents have noticed that there are more occurrences of litter and vandalism, which is starting to deter some from continually visiting trails.

Adirondack Park) and how they promote welcoming environments by educating new hikers without judging how much (if any) related knowledge they already hold.

In our interview with the NY Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), we learned about how their organization functions as an educational tool for people who are new to outdoor recreation. They spoke about how many people who are new to outdoor recreation are discouraged by the overwhelming number of places to recreate in the Adirondacks. To address this issue, they created a reservation system which uses a series of questions to match individuals with a location that is right for them. The DEC also spoke about their first-time camper program, in which all necessary gear is provided. At the end of this program, the campers are able to keep their gear and use the skills they learned on the program to go camping on their own. By educating people who are new to camping how to recreate safely outdoors, they hope to make outdoor recreation more accessible.

Staff Hiring/Training

Table 4: Stakeholder Perspectives on Ways to Make Staff Hiring Processes More Accessible and Strategies for Implementing DEI Staff Training

Nicky Hylton-Patterson	Eagle Island Camp	Adirondack Mountain Club	NY Department of Environmental Conservation
(The importance of) making sure that black and brown and Indigenous children understand what these spaces are theirs to	The campers are going to feel safer if they can see themselves in the staff, so you want to make sure that they're reflected back and who we hire.	For a nonprofit to be truly successful in things like diversity initiatives, the board needs to be representative of those initiatives and supportive of those initiatives.	As a committee, we usually choose a training or a podcast or a video where we all watch and then we have a meeting and conversation about those
They deserve and have the right to be here, and those careers are not exclusionary to rich white middle class.	Who do you recruit first and how do you make sure that you're creating the safe space for each party?	We would really like to work towards better representation of more diverse people in the outdoors so that they can say, oh, I do fit in these spaces.	We provide resources and trainings to each other and then we celebrate the cultural month that we're in

Another trend in our semi-structured interviews with stakeholders was the topic of diversifying staff and training current staff about diversity, equity, and inclusion. In our conversation with Nicky Hylton-Patterson, she spoke about the need to promote jobs and leadership positions in outdoor recreation not only to middle/upper class white folks, but also to BIPOC of all backgrounds.

Staff members at Eagle Island Camp have been working with Nicky for a year on how to make their hiring and training processes more inclusive. They described how this process started with self-reflection and becoming aware of the elements of their camp that may be barriers to BIPOC. While everyone we talked to at Eagle Island Camp expressed a need to diversify both their staff and their campers, they were unsure of where to start. As she explained:

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But should we want to bring in a whole bunch of diverse staff and then put them in charge of a bunch of rich white kids? That doesn't feel good either. So

how do we make sure that we have that balance and recruit? Who do you recruit first and how do you

Eagle Island Camp is doing the meaningful work of asking themselves challenging, and important question such as this. They are also taking concrete actions to make their job applications more accessible to BIPOC. Some changes they made to their applications were including any salary information upfront, adding a sentence at the top of their hiring page and job descriptions saying they are welcoming bipartisan members of the community to apply, and minimizing the amount of previous experience needed. The explained their decision about to minimize the amount of previous experience necessary for job positions as follows:

e had previously listed that experience with camp activities was a requirement. But we could take a step back and realize that it's not really a requirement because that's very classist. To say that you've been able to canoe in the past. Is that really a requirement or do we just want you to be willing to learn? So, it now says that you just have a willingness to learn about camp activities. Because honestly, when I thought about it, having a counselor who doesn't know how to canoe is almost just as valuable as someone who doesn't know how to canoe, because that means there's somebody alongside that camper going, I don't know how to do it either. And I'm scared.

Relations With Indigenous People

Table 5: Stakeholder Perspectives on Ways to Build Relationships with Indigenous People in the Adirondack Park

Nicky Hylton-Patterson

David Epstein-Halevi

Our research team received some

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