

Black Faces, Natural Spaces



How history and lack of diversity keep minorities from enjoying the great outdoors

By Don Corrigan

The Culture of Cinema, Magazines, and Media

- ▶ Hollywood has a history of placing “white guys” in movies set in an outdoor environment.
- ▶ Reese Witherspoon trekked 1,100 miles on the California Crest Trail in the 2014 movie, “Wild,” and who did she run into? Mostly white guys.
- ▶ Robert Redford and Nick Nolte braved the outdoors attempting to conquer the 2,200-mile Appalachian Trail in the 2015 movie, “A Walk In The Woods,” and who did they run into? Mostly white guys.



The Culture of Cinema, Magazines, and Media

- The front pages of today's men's outdoor and health magazines spotlight adventures and personal journeys into the outdoors, but overwhelmingly show only “white guys” participating in the pleasures of outdoor pursuits and challenges.
- The “white guys” are kicking up powder taming the ski runs in the Colorado back country.
- The “white guys” are dangling off ropes showing the mountain face who is the conquer.



Questioning The Status Quo



- What may actually surprise us is that more and more people are starting to question the absence of African-Americans being portrayed in the outdoors.
- The question is why are African-Americans so underrepresented when it comes to involvement with nature, environmental issues and outdoor recreation?
- There are several black authors trying to answer that question, like Carolyn Finney, James Edward Mills, Evelyn White, and Eddy Harris.
- Let's focus on Carolyn Finney and Eddy Harris for a few minutes.

Carolyn Finney

“Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African-Americans to the Great Outdoors”

- Finney looks at the effect of slavery, Jim Crow Segregation, and “the white privilege of geography.”
- Finney argues that there would be more of a black presence in the outdoors if mass media and educational institutions highlighted the African-American outdoor legacy.
- Finney says a big part of the issue is that blacks were literally at work in the weeds during the discovery and development of our national outdoor sites.



Carolyn Finney On The Hollywood Ethnic Gap



- Finney says black people are in the outdoors, but we have to look at the people who are making the movies.

Clip from Environmental Echo podcast interview with Finney, January 2015.



Finney Points To History

- California's Sequoia National Park have trees named for presidents and war heroes: Washington, Sherman, Lincoln, and Grant. What about black men like Charles Young, who carved Sequoia into a national park?
- What about the all-black company 1743 of the Civilian Conservation Corps who toiled in Missouri's Washington State Park leaving behind an impressive legacy of rustic stone architecture?
- Black folks made substantial contributions in creating Americas national parks for all American's to enjoy the outdoors, yet, only 7% of visitors to the national park system are black.
- Finney suggests more blacks might hike the trails and canoe the rivers of our nation's parks if they had a better picture of the contributions made their ancestors.



Bad Things Have Happened To Blacks In The Outdoors



- Finney says another explanation for limited engagement with nature by black Americans is the black paranoia rooted in history.
- Under the hot sun slaves toiled with backbreaking labor.
- Slaves felt the terror of being tracked by dogs in the swamps on the road to freedom.
- And the symbol of the “white tree,” where blacks were hung and hanging bodies mutilated by whites in the south and Klansmen in the Midwest.

Eddy Harris

“Mississippi Solo”

- Harris decided to take a canoe trip down the Mississippi River, alone.
- As a young man he traveled from Minnesota to New Orleans.
- Twenty-five years later he decided to travel the same route.
- He overcame the racial barriers and hurdled beyond all the walls to bridge the nature gap.
- He wrote a book, “Mississippi Solo” about his adventure and the experiences he had along the way.



Overcoming Fears Of The Past



- Harris has taken on many of nature's challenges in his life, but still cannot escape the kinds of concerns that haunt many black Americans from the past.
- In an essay, "Solo Faces," Harris describes an incident at his river campsite where two white hunters "materialized out of the forest lining the river and aimed their shotguns at me."
- Harris describes firing a shot from his pistol and racing to the middle of the river in his canoe. But he wonders if he overacted.
- Harris admits he may have acted prematurely based on nightmares of racial malevolence that haunted him throughout his trip.

Conclusion: The Gateway To Inclusion

- The media needs to highlight the positive historical legacy of blacks in the outdoors.
- American cinema and popular culture need to be careful how they portray black males. Achievement is often defined by urban street life, success in the drug trade, sexual conquests, and surviving criminal violence.
- Adventure groups and environmental organizations need to reach out to urban black youth and offer participation in outdoor experiences.
- Educational opportunities for black youth to develop a sense of connectedness which can lead to individual explorations and responsibility for one's surroundings.



A Thought To Take With You

Quote from Eddy Harris "Solo Faces" Essay

"The natural world, however, is neither black nor white. It is forest green, desert ocher, deep ocean-blue. If there are barriers that keep us all from immersing ourselves in it and savoring its riches, they may be reducible, in part, to economics, to geography, to history, and to culture. But mostly they exist in our minds, in the fears and misperceptions that continue to keep us suspended in our separate limbos, unable to come together, even in a place as universally inviting as the world outdoors."

