

TESTIMONY  
February 8, 2022  
Peter Forbes

I'm grateful to the committee and its staff for this opportunity to address very important issues. Thank you, Chairman Grijalva and Ranking member Westerman for your leadership.

I want you to know me as someone who works and earns a livelihood from the land, who lives in a rural part of this country, is a weekly ambulance driver on an all-volunteer squad, someone who has never before given such testimony.

As a farmer, I can't join this conversation without honoring the contributions to our country made by Black and Brown farmers, that topic deserves its own hearing.

I believe in the relationship between land and people; I also believe in the promise of our public lands to tell a story about this nation that brings us together, gives us meaning, prepares us for the future. My physical connection to the fields, forests and animals of our farm creates caring. And to care isn't Republican or Democrat, conservative or liberal. To care is not reserved, even, for environmentalists. To care is simply human.

These beliefs led me to a career in conservation where I became an insider to national and global organizations as an employee, leader, organizer. But my bedrock belief in people often made me an outsider to those same institutions where I mostly saw my own privileged, white world celebrating the land while denying -through intention and blind neglect- those same benefits to others as well as their very history and experience with it.

I come to you to share my own experience and to dialogue.



My culture has always thought of itself as white angels. This isn't my concept. It's been demonstrated over and over since John Gast painted it in 1872. His *American Progress* became the symbol of the doctrine of discovery and manifest destiny. My culture has never reconciled what manifest destiny created: the two American atrocities of human enslavement and genocide. Every acre taken by manifest destiny was stolen from someone else, often violently. We have an opportunity to create healing and reconciliation through an honest telling of history and its impacts.



separated.

This is a map of Indigenous land loss on this continent. Despite white settlers' best efforts over hundreds of years, Indigenous people and their cultures were never removed from this continent. Though powerfully dispossessed of land and lifeways and still oppressed today, the people and their ecological wisdom are here. Environmentalists must care about the people equal to the wisdom; the two can't be



“good” without engaging it.

Here's a map of land conservation gain during the same time period.

While conservationists inspire themselves at staff retreats with stories of land conservation's growth, rarely does conservation talk about the other history of Black and Indigenous land dispossession that was unfolding at the exact same time. Doing so goes against our perception of ourselves as good, but environmentalists can't actually become

Too much, we persist in seeing ourselves as white angels, saving the day and the land, having all the right answers, paternalistic and reducing the agency of BIPOC communities, even as we preside over existential challenges such as species extinction, climate instability, social unrest, and a burning continent. Our poets write their last love letters to last places while environmental culture remains insulated from other knowledge and wisdom that has always existed right here within other people who have different answers.

We're great at raising money, but less good at changing practices that open us to other worldviews. For example, Green 2.0 Transparency Report Card found that while 99% of NGOs have resources set aside to finance their JEDI efforts and 84% have written an explicit policy, the majority of surveyed NGOs don't have concrete ways to elevate Black and Indigenous voice in their organizations.

It's an obvious truth that not enough has been done, but genuine progress is being made.

Some organizations are taking responsibility for their own change, going beyond words into action. These groups aren't outsourcing their own shifts by asking to Black, Brown and Indigenous people to educate them, but beginning to create a different future by understanding and speaking of the past betrayals. Addressing race and history may be for

some an attempt to prove wokeness, but for others it's a genuine invitation to Americans to enter a dialogue on more equitable terms about what the planet needs and what our relationships with one another need.

Organizations are elevating BIPOC leadership and centering their knowledge. National Parks Conservation Association is in that process: they've publicly challenged themselves to have 50% of their staff be people of color within 5 years. They've elevated staff of color into senior program roles and their executive team. This changes the conversations and actions that are possible. If you want to see where this can go, look at Grand Canyon Trust whose years of consistent Indigenous leadership on their board has led to innovative, successful local and national programs that are strengthening Indigenous communities, improving the health of the canyon itself, and changing what conservation means.

The role of white leadership is to create our own culture shifts, never to represent BIPOC voice. For example, in Maine, with our country's whitest population, 65 conservation groups there have organized themselves into a collective called First Light to take direction from a Wabanaki Commission and to follow Wabanaki direction on what lands must be returned, or opened to their uses, and how all lands might better be cared for. These lands trust have granted rights to 78,000 acres with much more to come. The shared goals are equity for Wabanaki people, yes, and also better land management for everyone's benefit. There's a similar collaboration among 22 conservation groups in Oregon to develop sufficient relationship and trust to take direction from Tribal leaders around returning rights, access and land.

This isn't conservation being white angels tossing breadcrumbs to seagulls; this is about taking direction from Black, Brown and Indigenous leadership to better care for the land and changing conservation to be about everyone's wellbeing through learning from those who we have ignored and dismissed the longest.

There's abundant evidence confirmed by my culture that biodiversity, fire management, climate adaptation and basic land-use all can be done better with traditional ecological wisdom. These practices have had significantly longer success than ours. That longevity in results may be the difference between knowledge and wisdom.

The Nature Conservancy, who manages over 100 million acres worldwide, has announced its own commitment to sharing power and knowledge with Indigenous people, the benefits of



which are seen vividly here in this photograph of the different results in land health around fire when done with and without the ancient knowledge of the Klamath Tribe in Oregon. For almost 100 years, my culture thought it was absolutely right about fire suppression and wouldn't hear anything or anybody else.

There are many Americans who love this landscape, care well for it, but would never call themselves environmentalists. Conservation needs to join them. Doing so requires fundamental change through relearning, recentering, returning –if we are to join others in protecting our planet. For organizations doing the relearning, recentering and returning, this is not mission drift but mission maturity. This is the work of bringing our country's best minds to solve problems together.

These changes are real, and while heartening, this is certainly not a time to be congratulated. It's a time to work harder to be trustworthy to the many people who have been left out and denied. It's time for white-led conservation groups to build a practice of listening, to not take any bows but, instead, to bow our heads and to keep working.

Problems persist. Many white-led environmental institutions still put themselves first: being around for 100 years is more important than creating the change that's needed in the next five years. This has led to a hoarding of resources that can be seen in 10-figure endowments. Who really benefits from these endowments and resources? What will we do with that privilege? Will our actions be bold or soon enough?

Justice, equity, diversity, inclusion between people has always been essential to caring for the land, long before this moment, but ever more important right now. The path forward requires my culture relearning history, recentering BIPOC leadership, returning resources; the hope is better care for this land we share and to replace that doctrine of discovery from 500 years ago with a new doctrine of relationship.

Thank you, and I'd be happy to answer any questions.