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## National Parks or Indigenous Land (Episode 7)

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## National Parks or Indigenous Land Podcast Script

<<theme music>>

**(0:06)** Rosa: Hello everyone! This is an episode of the OtterPod from CSU Monterey Bay. Hosted by Rosa and...

Adele: Adele!

**(0:16)** Adele continued: With summer now approaching and covid-19 cases going down, national parks are now opening up to more visitors. With this increase in mind, we want to unpack the racist roots of the National Parks Service System and how we can offer a new perspective that honors the original stewards of the land.

<<theme music>>

**(0:36)** Rosa: Hey Adele! I heard you were out and about in Yosemite last week. Can we hear a bit about your experience there just to set the scene of what it's like there right now?

**(0:45)** Adele: Yea! It was last Saturday afternoon, we were driving into Ahwahnee also known as Yosemite Valley. We found ourselves eventually piled up behind thousands of Chevy Suburbans and Honda Odysseys filled with vacationing families all in line to go experience the few dynamite made hikes, eat their overpriced pizza after, and stay at the Curry Village Lodge where they can then continue to watch their college football. Welcome to "Yosemite National Park" right now.

**(1:17)** Rosa: Wow! This is another side of national parks that we are really not seeing advertised on social media. So much of it seems to be glorified but this seems to be more of the reality. We should really think more about the history of national parks that have brought us to this point.

<<theme music>>

**(1:38)** Rosa: Now that we have sat down and researched more about this topic. Let's talk about how national parks were established all throughout the United States.

**(1:48)** Adele: So I did some research on this and found a whole bunch of information. A lot of the history towards the beginning of national parks started out with heavy acts of dispossession towards the indigenous populations that were originally there. We justified a lot of their removal from the land by saying that it was “empty” or not used properly by the indigenous people.

**(2:10)** Rosa: Oh yes! I read a little about this. When the National Park Service Organic Act of 1916 was created to establish the National Park Service, the whole idea around it was to conserve the scenery and wildlife for the enjoyment of future generations. Masking the reality of taking away the land from the indigenous populations that lived in these “uninhabited” lands. (Kantor, 2007, pg. 42)

**(2:33)** Adele: Completely! You can see this in the Wilderness Act of 1964 where it defines wilderness as, “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” Pretty much this is claiming that the wilderness is an area of undeveloped land with absolutely no history of human habitation upon the land. This preservation of an uninhabited landscape devoid of human presence completely disregards a really long history of indigenous use. The language of this act is the very definition of an unpeopled landscape. (Kantor, 2007, pg. 42)

**(3:10)** Rosa: Yes! I read about that! Would care to elaborate?

**(3:14)** Adele: Well, a perfect example would be our local National Park, Ahwahnee where I just visited. It was declared a National Park in 1864 after years of clashes with the Ahwahneechee, who were native to Yosemite Valley. The land shifted from “wilderness” to “preservation”, the Ahwahneechee were forcibly removed and their homes were burned down. This is just one of the countless examples of the violence and terror that indigenous people have faced since National Parks were created. (Bloom & Deur, 2020, pg. 14)

Adele continued: I think a lot of this has to do with our current colonial mindset that human and nature are separate, which is very different from what most indigenous cultures have been practicing. There are some amazing books, such as *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer, that touch upon this by claiming that we are nature and if we actually begin to think of ourselves as being a part of our ecosystem, then we begin to cherish and take care of it a whole lot better too. (Kimmerer, 2016, pg. 30)

**(4:10)** Rosa: We have thought of conservation as us having to set ourselves apart from nature. We have viewed any kind of human footprint as being negative. But Indigenous people have found otherwise. Indigenous ways of living on the land are being blocked by the ideas of conservation that prevent the coexistence of land and humans. Some indigenous tribes like that of Ojibwe people have regained access to lands that were previously taken from them in the form of the Frog Bay Tribal National Park. Here, under conservation easements, the Ojibwe peoples are able to participate in sustainable extractive activities, practice cultural ceremonies, gather plant materials for medicine and traditional crafts, and be governed by a committee of elders. This goes on to show how returning lands to the indigenous peoples who have originally lived in it, can practice conservation while still being part of the land. It is a really radical idea that goes against the long American history that wants us to be separate from nature and only observe from afar. (Carroll, 2014)

**(5:14)** Adele: I love that Rosa! I feel as if this is just a reminder that Indigenous stewardship does not try to remove people from the land. It understands that we are a part of it and with balance and proper consent from the land, we can actually be a part in the further growth and health of it too. We have originally believed that making areas into designated National Parks, that limited the access to sacred spaces for many people, would promote and improve the overall well-being of the ecosystems in it, but that does not really seem to be the actual case. In that book *Braiding Sweetgrass* that I mentioned earlier, the author Kimmerer says, “The more something is shared, the greater its value becomes. This is hard to grasp for societies steeped in notions of private property, where others are, by definition, excluded from sharing. Practices such as posting land against trespass, for example, are expected and accepted in a property economy but are unacceptable in an economy where land is seen as a gift to all.” (Kimmerer, 2016, pg. 27). I think this is super important to remember.

**(6:15)** Rosa: Yes! This is very important to remember when understanding the history that has brought us to today with National Parks. The idea of private ownership is capitalist and it has entrenched the national parks of the nation as places where nonindigenous people go for pleasure. Deborah Taffa has written about this notion as she describes herself visiting the Coconino National Forest in the Yuma region. She reflects on not thinking more about the \$20 backcountry pass and coming to see the sea of RVs, mostly white visitors, and trauma that has

probably kept many people of color from visiting the land. Taffa describes it as feeling like Disneyland. All around her she saw sacred beauty and her ancestors wandering through there freely for centuries—it was their place to pray—but she saw no acknowledgement of her people or their memories. (Taffa, 2019)

**(7:06)** Adele: And that's a mic drop if I've ever seen one. That's so powerful. We really have chosen to give space in these national parks to big lodges, grocery stores, gift shops and housing for all their employees and rangers, but we still refuse to give space and recognition to the original stewards of this land that are still fighting to be acknowledged.

**(7:28)** Rosa: So where do we go from here?

**(7:30)** Adele: So, Not all Indigenous communities want to work with national park systems due to the simple fact that the land is stolen. Even today only 22 percent of National Park visitors are people of color (Taffa, 2016). This is not surprising given the history of back country lynching and Native American removal campaigns. A lot of our stunning landscapes here in the states trigger memories of trauma for many. To this day, the animalization of Native peoples as a tool for conquest makes some people fearful of the outdoors.

However, supporting Indigenous folks that do work with national park teams can look like advocating for fishing and hunting permits, land management rights, sacred sites reservations, but it doesn't stop here.

Learning about and sharing the name and stories of indigenous communities, or simply existing and enjoying these spaces as BIPOC are acts of resistance against the white imperialist roots of the National Park System.

Loving National Parks means advocating for the original stewards of this land.

<<theme music>>

**(8:30)** Rosa: Executive producers of the OtterPod are Dr. Sara Salazar Hughes and Liz Zepeda, the Editorial Board also includes Dr. Chrissy Lau. Theme music by Eric Mabrey. Script writing by Adele Jankauskas. Audio editor, Rosa Elena Zavala Morales.

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