

## Centering Communities to Protect Our Parks

By Mark Rose

**T**o tackle the most urgent threats to our national parks, from climate change to air and water pollution, we have to look beyond their borders. This regularly leads us straight to the communities that lie directly next to the smokestacks, tail pipes, oil fields and other polluting sources harming our parks. These disproportionately affected communities, frequently home to majority low-income persons of color, are too often treated by industry and decision-makers as sacrifice zones for this pollution.

California's San Joaquin Valley is home to many of these communities, with Valley cities like Fresno and Bakersfield ranking among the top five dirtiest cities in the nation for multiple different air pollutants. In addition to polluted air, the entire region faces a variety of environmental justice threats, such as pesticide exposure, climate-driven wildfires and heat waves, drinking water contamination and water scarcity. Because the San Joaquin Valley is directly adjacent to Yosemite, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, these parks similarly suffer from some of the worst air and climate pollution in the nation.

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## Racial Disparities at Joshua Tree

By Chris Clarke

**A** study of Joshua Tree National Park's 2019 visitation numbers underscores the need to make the park and its services more accessible to a wider range of people.

Encouraging more visitors might seem counterintuitive to people who know Joshua Tree well. The park's total number of visitors has more than doubled in the past decade, an increase which has damaged the park's natural resources as well as the resources of gateway communities to the north. We've witnessed long lines at park entrances block local emergency vehicles and seen the region's housing supply, already limited, converted into high-priced, short-term rentals. Joshua Tree's 3 million annual visitors have changed the park and its neighborhood in ways that are not always for the better.

A recent demographics study, however, shows that not everyone is getting an equal chance to crowd into the park. The study, conducted by researchers from Clemson University, Kansas State University and Michigan State University, found visitor demographics do not align with California's overall demographics, as two thirds of the state's residents are people of color.

They're even less in line with the demographic make-up of the neighborhoods south of the park, where people of color represent around 75 % of the population.

According to the study, in which visitors were handed cards on exiting the park that directed them to an online survey, 60% of respondents identified as white, with another 30% identifying as biracial. Respondents who identified as Black, Latinx, or Asian American/Pacific Islander accounted for less than 1% each.

It's possible that people who identify as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous or people of color) were reluctant to participate or lacked online

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# FIELD REPORT

Summer 2021

## Pacific Regional Office Staff

350 Frank H. Ogawa Plaza • Suite 1100  
Oakland, CA 94612  
415.728.0839

**Ron Sundergill**  
SR. REGIONAL DIRECTOR

**Neal Desai**  
SENIOR DIRECTOR OF FIELD OPERATIONS

**Chris Boone**  
REGIONAL DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT

**Kati Schmidt**  
ASSOC. DIRECTOR OF MEDIA RELATIONS

**Nicole Spooner**  
SR. COORDINATOR

**Elliot Richardson**  
LEGISLATIVE ANALYST

**Julie Hogan**  
ASSOC. DIRECTOR, FOUNDATION RELATIONS

## California Desert Field Office

61325 29 Palms Highway • Suite D  
Joshua Tree, CA 92252  
760.600.0038

**Chris Clarke**  
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR

**Demi Espinoza**  
PROGRAM MANAGER

## Los Angeles Field Office

767 N. Hill Street • Suite 302  
Los Angeles, CA 90012  
213.482.0642

**Dennis Arguelles**  
SENIOR PROGRAM MANAGER

**Laura Navar**  
OUTREACH MANAGER

## Sierra Nevada Field Office

4570 Orinda Way  
Sacramento, CA 95820  
559.385.6148

**Mark Rose**  
PROGRAM MANAGER

## NPCA Membership Services Team

800.628.7275 • npca@npca.org



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npca.org

## MESSAGE FROM THE SENIOR REGIONAL DIRECTOR

By Ron Sundergill,  
Senior Regional Director



### We Want Your Feedback!

You are very important to our success at NPCA, and we want to provide content that speaks to you. At this time, we are considering aligning most, if not all, of our Field Reports around a central theme, as we have done in this issue. Alternatively, we could take a thematic approach every other edition. What are your thoughts? Please share your ideas and suggestions with me

via email at [rsundergill@npca.org](mailto:rsundergill@npca.org). If you'd prefer to chat, call me at 510.368.0115.

Above: Ron Sundergill

I hope you enjoy this JEDI-themed edition. Thank you!

## Lessons from Our Virtual Engagement Building Partnerships During the Pandemic

By Laura Navar

Like everyone else during the pandemic, NPCA had to adapt, evolve and embrace flexibility and innovation. Uplifting community perspectives is essential to our community engagement work in Los Angeles, where our focus continues to be communities of color, immigrants, and other underserved constituencies not traditionally connect to our national parks. This meant quickly moving from group outings and in-person events to virtual programs and activities. Nonetheless, the heart of our work—building community—remained unchanged.

Of course, the enthusiasm and energy of our community partners were vital to helping us navigate our new virtual reality. They worked with us to develop creative strategies to engage our supporters and leveraged their own social media platforms to broadcast our content to a wider audience. They also stepped up to play key roles in our virtual advocacy and lobbying efforts.

Josue Guerrero, for example, is a former marine and current volunteer platoon leader for The Mission Continues, an organization that engages military veterans in leadership and service opportunities in their communities. As a veteran of the Iraq War, he was uniquely positioned to supply a veteran's perspective to our policy and legislative work and has been instrumental in connecting scores of veterans to our parks. Earlier this



year, during a virtual press conference that included Representatives Adam Schiff, Judy Chu and Salud Carbajal, he spoke about the importance of protecting our public lands and their role in helping our war veterans find healing, connection and community. He has since become one of NPCA's most active advocates and continues to work with us on a variety of park protection and community engagement projects.

Josue is just one of the many volunteers that helped elevate our park protection work during the pandemic. Moving forward, we hope to build upon the lessons learned and partnerships established over the past year and emerge an even stronger voice for our parks in Los Angeles and beyond.

Above: Josue Guerrero at NPCA's 2019 Lobby Day ©Josue Guerrero

By Dennis Arguelles

**N**ational parks are more than just incredible natural landscapes and the depositories of our cultural heritage. They are public institutions that represent our nation's highest ideals and democratic values. As such, NPCA has increasingly focused on issues of justice, equity, diversity and inclusion, with one specific effort focused on ensuring our national parks tell the stories of all Americans. Nowhere is this more relevant than Southern California, home to a diversity of cultures and histories worthy of inclusion in our park system. Currently, NPCA's LA Field Office is working to ensure these stories are preserved and shared, particularly those that focus on communities of color, immigrants and other groups, including those identifying as LGBTQ, whose contributions have historically been overlooked in our national parks."

Our Rim of the Valley campaign to expand the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area would protect over 190,000 acres of native habitat, watersheds, open spaces and wildlife corridors. It would also preserve numerous cultural treasures that capture key aspects of Los Angeles' history, including El Pueblo de Los Angeles: the city's historic district which was founded by settlers of mostly African descent. It was also the location of one of LA's darkest chapters: the murder and lynching of 19 Chinese Americans in 1871. Numerous Spanish colonial-era sites, historic Native American settlements and trade routes, and other cultural resources can also be found in the Rim of the Valley. Legislation authorizing the expansion was passed by the House of Representatives in February and is currently making its way through the Senate.

The LA Field Office is also working on the creation of the César Chávez National Historical Park, which would build upon the existing César Chávez National Monument in Keene, CA. By incorporating several sites in California and Arizona, the new park will help interpret places critical to Chávez's personal development as a labor and civil rights leader, as well as other aspects of the 20th-century farmworker movement for respect, better wages, safer working conditions and collective bargaining rights. These sites include McDonnell Hall in San Jose, CA, where Chávez developed his skills as a community organizer, and the 40 Acres and Filipino Community Hall in Delano, CA,



**Above:** The Santa Susana Mountains in the proposed Rim of the Valley contain numerous archaeological treasures related to early Native American settlements and Spanish colonial history. ©Tom Gamache

**Below:** The annual Yosemite Pilgrimage includes a backpacking trip to Sing Peak, named for the chef that was critical to the success of the Mather Mountain Party. ©Jack Shu



which served as the original headquarters of the United Farm Workers union and a center for Filipino American farmworker organizing, respectively. Also included would be the Santa Rita Center in Phoenix, AZ, which was the location of Chávez's highly publicized 1972 fast that brought attention to draconian labor laws, and the 1966 march route from Delano to Sacramento, CA that brought worldwide attention to the plight of farm workers throughout the West. We expect legislation establishing the new park to be introduced during this Congress.

Other relevant LA projects include exploring the creation of a national park unit that

captures Southern California's unique migrant and immigrant histories. From the 1920s through the 1950s, LA's Central Avenue was the center of a thriving African American community and the location of a dynamic rhythm and blues and jazz musical scene. Latinx neighborhoods that served as bases for Chicano/a empowerment and anti-Vietnam War organizing in the '60s and '70s also figure prominently in the city's history, as do numerous Asian American and Pacific Islander communities representing some of the oldest and largest populations of those groups outside of their country of origin.

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Finally, NPCA works closely with the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California and the National Park Service to better document and interpret the critical role Chinese workers played in the development of Yosemite National Park and the park system in general. This includes preserving the incredible engineering feats by Chinese workers throughout the Sierra Nevada and the West, as well as the contributions of individuals such as Tie Sing, an innovative chef who was critical to the success of the Mather Mountain Party, whose participants would go on to establish the National Park



Service in 1916. Each summer, NPCA supports the annual Yosemite Pilgrimage, which celebrates these stories and accom-

plishments and includes a backpacking trip to a mountaintop named in Sing's honor.

Together, these projects demonstrate just part of NPCA's commitment to a National Park System that tells an accurate and complete history of the United States and recognizes the contributions of all communities. We look forward to following the lead of, and working with, communities of color and other partners with the most at stake in the telling of these stories, and in ensuring our parks are truly reflective of and welcoming to all Americans.

Left: The Cesar Chavez National Historical Park would expand upon the current national monument in Keene, CA. ©Dennis Arguelles

## Avi Kwa Ame (Spirit Mountain) National Monument Campaign

By Neal Desai

In southern Nevada, efforts are underway to establish Nevada's newest national monument: Avi Kwa Ame. The Mojave name for Spirit Mountain, Avi Kwa Ame (pronounced Ah-VEE kwa-ah-may) is sacred to Native American tribes in the region.

The new national monument would permanently protect some of the most visually stunning, ecologically diverse and culturally significant lands in the Mojave Desert. The proposed monument would encompass several mountain ranges, the eastern portion of the world's largest Joshua tree forest, and many important cultural and historical sites. The monument, managed by the Bureau of Land Management, also would connect protected lands in California (Mojave National Preserve and Castle Mountains and Mojave Trails

National Monuments) with Nevada's Lake Mead National Recreation Area and the Colorado River plateau.

The Avi Kwa Ame landscape is tied to the creation story of the Yuman speaking tribes, such as the Fort Mojave. Tribes have advocated for the protection of the natural and cultural resources of this region for decades, but it has continued to be targeted for industrial development. So far, those development efforts have failed.

Home to a number of natural springs that provide precious water in an otherwise arid landscape, this land supports a wide variety of animals and plants, including 28 species of native grasses, about half of which are rare. It provides high-quality tortoise and golden eagle habitat and serves as an important migratory corridor for desert bighorn sheep. The landscape also

offers exceptional recreational opportunities, such as camping, hiking and back-country road driving, and is known for its dark night skies and natural quiet.

NPCA has long believed that this important, yet vulnerable area deserves permanent protection. Establishing a national monument here would fill the gap between existing conserved lands, unifying this impressive landscape to the benefit of all. NPCA and its allies are asking Nevada federal legislators to introduce a bill to establish the monument.

To learn more and support the campaign, please visit [honorspiritmountain.org/](http://honorspiritmountain.org/)

Below | Top Left: A desert tortoise in Nevada ©Mkopka | Dreamstime Bottom Left: Bighorn Sheep in Nevada ©Orval Nelson | Dreamstime Right: Purple Sky Highland Range, Avi Kwa Ame (Spirit Mountain) ©Justin McAfee



[This land] provides high-quality tortoise and golden eagle habitat and serves as an important migratory corridor for desert bighorn sheep.

# California Desert Office Launches New Council

By Demi Espinoza



**N**PCA's California Desert program is excited to announce the spring 2021 launch of our Desert Keepers Council. The council will bring together seven to eight individuals, aged 18 to 34, from Imperial, Inyo, Riverside and San Bernardino counties. Together, we will explore effective methods of engaging traditionally underrepresented audiences in national park advocacy and protection. Council members will learn about the California desert and how to protect it via online trainings, networking activities and—until it is safe for groups to gather—self-guided field trips.

The Desert Keepers Council also will provide an avenue to address park access issues faced by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) communities, as well as under-resourced families and communities suffering disproportionately from environmental justice issues. According to 2018 research by Texas A&M, only 32% of Latinx families and 28% of Black families could name a national park they had visited in the last two years. Park visitation statistics bear out this finding. At Joshua Tree National Park, for example, Black and Latinx people comprise fewer than 1% of visitors in 2019. NPCA hopes this new council will be a first step in addressing disparities in park access and will help deepen environmental education by providing hands-on learning.

Recruitment for the council was rigorous and inclusive. We encouraged applications from women, those who identify as BIPOC or LGBTQ, gender queer and non-binary folks, as well as people with disabilities and those experiencing inequities of park access. NPCA anticipates the council will bring value to our park protection work, expand our volunteer base, and strengthen our relationship with desert communities working to address these issues. We look forward to reporting more on the Desert Keepers Council, including its membership and activities, over the next year.

**Above:** Cholla Cactus Garden ©Demi Espinoza

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To address these threats, NPCA's Sierra Nevada Field Office has intentionally sought out partnerships with a diverse coalition of groups in the San Joaquin Valley—uncovering new opportunities to reduce air and climate pollutants and achieve significant co-benefits for local communities and our national parks. Working closely with environmental justice and public health groups, we have taken on some of California's most powerful industries—from oil and gas giants like Chevron to lobbyists for big ag—through community-based advocacy, public education and targeted litigation.

By centering our work on the principles of justice, equity, diversity and inclusion NPCA has built bridges to key allies we may have otherwise overlooked. These principles have already helped us achieve key victories for the San Joaquin Valley, such as our recent coalition campaign to successfully make the San Joaquin Valley the first region in the nation to ban the open burning of agricultural waste. The key lesson we have learned through this journey is that it would be nearly impossible to win these fights for our parks without also fighting for and alongside the people suffering the most from the same sources of pollution.

## Racial Disparities at Joshua Tree

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access to complete the survey. But even if the study underestimated visitors of color by a factor of 10, that's still a significant discrepancy in rates at which people of color are visiting Joshua Tree relative to their share of the general population. And the Joshua Tree finding isn't that far out of step with national parks as a whole. A 2011 study by the George Wright Society indicated that Latinx and Asian visitors each accounted for fewer than 5% of national park visitors, while Black people made up less than 2%.

NPCA strongly believes that every American (and every visitor to America) should have access to our public lands, especially our national parks. While visitors are no longer confronted with officially segregated national park facilities, as was true until the mid-20th century, ending segregation requires more than passing laws. Much of the reason for the disparity in access is likely economic, especially in communities like Joshua Tree where short-term vacation rentals can cost upwards of \$500 a night. But

core questions remain. How welcome do potential visitors of color feel in our national parks and other public lands? Do Park Service law enforcement reassure visitors of their safety or intimidate them? Do people of color feel like our national parks are for them to enjoy, or only for others?



NPCA is proud to support the work of partner organizations, including Latino Outdoors, Outdoor Afro and the Hispanic Access Foundation, who are working to advocate for a more inclusive outdoors. We look forward to a continuing partnership with them and with the Park Service

to identify and correct barriers to full public access to our treasured places. As the Roosevelt Arch says at the entrance to our first national park, Yellowstone, our public lands are “for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.” All people.

**Above:** A girl watches the 2017 solar eclipse in Joshua Tree National Park in California. Early exposure to parks can change lives. ©NPS | Alamy



**PACIFIC REGIONAL OFFICE**

350 Frank H. Ogawa Plaza  
Suite 1100  
Oakland, CA 94612

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## Experience the National Parks with NPCA Experts

By Jared Dial

Come see the parks you help protect on one of our transformational small-group journeys. Led by NPCA experts, these exciting trips provide an in-depth glimpse into our park protection work as well as behind-the-scenes access to famed historic and cultural sites. Participants will hike with naturalists and have curated and exclusive experiences with local NPCA partners, including those fighting for the future of America's National Park System.

### The 2021 Trip Collection

- AUG 15-22** Isle Royale in Michigan
- SEPT 26-OCT 2** Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon in Colorado and New Mexico
- OCT 1-8** Civil Rights tour in Alabama and Mississippi
- NOV 8-14** Big Bend in Texas
- NOV 15-21** Joshua Tree and Death Valley in California

For more information about these exclusive NPCA trips, visit [npca.org/trips](https://npca.org/trips) or contact [travel@npca.org](mailto:travel@npca.org).

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**Left:** Lorraine Hotel, Memphis, TN ©Distant Horizons **Above:** The Rio Grande River running through Santa Elena Canyon at Big Bend National Park ©Bill Kennedy | Dreamstime **Bottom Left:** Balcony House at Mesa Verde ©Eclecticmusement | Dreamstime **Below:** Otter in Alaska ©Jared Dial

