Vanishing America: Species Extinction, Racial Peril, And The Origins Of Conservation

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Review

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Powell, Miles A *Vanishing America: Species Extinction, Racial Peril, and the Origins of Conservation*. Harvard University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9780674972561

To Preserve Nature and Protect Whiteness: Environmentalism after the Civil War

In July 2015, *The New York Times* ran an op-ed that focused on a well-known problem: our national parks and the environmental movement that spawned them are overwhelmingly white. Minorities comprised 22 percent of visitors to national park in 2011, the last date for which data is available, despite making up 37 percent of the U.S. population. And as of 2014, people of color made up only 12 percent of all environmental NGO staff. For scholars seeking the historical roots of this problem, Miles A. Powell's *Vanishing America: Species Extinction, Racial Peril, and the Origins of Conservation* is an excellent place to start. He argues that, in effect, the environmental movement remains white because the very idea of preserving the wilderness, an idea at the root of the environmental movement, emerged from an effort to preserve notions of whiteness. The "enduring association between wilderness and whiteness," Powell writes, "helps explain why many of the nation's non-white citizens continue to feel uncomfortable in parks and other sites of outdoor recreation today."

Vanishing America traces the ties between white racial anxiety and the environmental movement, covering the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Powell homes in on the published and private writings of some of the most well-known environmentalists—George Perkins Marsh, John Muir, Aldo Leopold—as well as lesser known figures who were equally influential. Faced with the closing of the western frontier, rapid industrialization and the unprecedented influx of eastern and southern European immigrants, the movement's white male elite began to fear their own race's

survival. They established parks and saved its wildlife in order to create spaces for leisure, sport, and white racial invigoration. Equally important, and perhaps most ground-breaking, Powell argues that the environmentalist movement had a profound influence on early twentieth century racial policies. Many of the environmentalists who helped save the buffalo and bald eagle, for instance, became outspoken proponents of eugenics, sterilization and exclusionary immigration policies. Thinking about how to save endangered animals, in other words, provided a model for how to think about saving the white race.

Powell, an assistant professor of environmental history at Nanyang Technological University, in Singapore, builds on a small but growing literature connecting the history of environmentalism to histories of race. While other historians have explored how the idea of “wilderness”—itself an artificial construction—became entangled with notions of whiteness, to my knowledge no one has established the connection so convincingly. Before the Civil War, Powell argues, the wilderness was not yet perceived as something in need of saving. Most white elites measured civilizational progress by their ability to domesticate and control nature, rather than preserve it. Both Native Americans and people of African descent were seen as being either unable or unwilling to domesticate nature; this in turn helped justify “horrific acts of cruelty” against each group. “Domesticating” African Americans as slaves could be framed as an effort to preserve their race from extinction; similarly, removing Native Americans to reservations was often premised on the notion that they “would otherwise vanish like untamable animals.”

But in the decades following the Civil War, white attitudes toward nature changed dramatically. Rather than something to be tamed, nature became something in need of preserving. This transformation, Powell argues, was intimately tied to fears of white racial decline. The post-Civil War seizure of indigenous lands in the West, coupled with massive immigration and urbanization in the East, triggered fears that old-stock white Americans would face a similar fate to what many believed was already happening to Native Americans, and what had recently happened to America’s once ubiquitous passenger pigeon—they were becoming extinct. In this context, white male elites banded together in the 1870s and 1880s to preserve allegedly pristine, people-less parks “for the invigorating excursions of white adventurers”—and the environmental movement was born.

In addition to the racial roots of these first conservation efforts, Powell expertly teases out the movement's gendered and class dimensions. In 1887, Theodore Roosevelt, a Harvard graduate, teamed up George Bird Grinnell—a fellow blue-blood New Yorker, Yale graduate, and founder of the Audubon Society—to establish the Boone and Crockett Club. Both men saw maintaining the wilderness and its wildlife as central to maintaining their own privileged, white, masculine identity. They knew that razing forests and keeping hunting grounds unregulated would destroy their sport, and in their advocacy for wildlife conservation and national parks, they made a point to contrast their own genteel hobby with what they derided as the uncivilized, environmentally hazardous hunting practices of Native Americans, African Americans and lower-class whites. Though environmentalist groups like the Sierra Club are better-known, Powell reminds us that it was in fact these genteel, exclusively male hunting groups that first defined the environmentalist agenda.

By the turn of the twentieth century, conservationists had considerable success: they helped create the Yosemite and Yellowstone national parks and helped save the buffalo from extinction. Powell is most illuminating when he shows how these successes in turn helped shape racial policies in the early twentieth century. Many members of the Boone and Crockett Club, for instance, became leading eugenicists. “Perceiving a direct link between the decline of American wildlife and the degeneration of the white American race,” Powell writes, “prominent nature advocates often pushed as hard for the passage of immigration restriction and eugenics legislation as they did for wildlife preservation.” Well-known conservationists like William Temple Hornaday and Theodore Roosevelt are as much a part of this story as less-studied figures like Madison Grant. Grant founded the American Bison Society in 1905, which helped save the animal from extinction, and soon began applying conservationist thinking to his advocacy for preserving America's white “Nordic” race. In 1916, he published the best-selling *Passing of the Great Race*, which argued that the Nordic race's survival in America “required a continental area isolated and protected for long ages from the intrusion of other races”—a direct echo of his conservationist writing. Meanwhile, Hornaday likened Italian immigrants to invasive species—“give him the power to act,” he wrote in *Our Vanishing Wild Life* (1913), comparing Italians to mongoose—“and he will quickly exterminate every wild thing that wears feathers or hair.”

One might think that the Nazi's extermination campaigns would have led environmentalists to distance themselves from racial policies. But Powell makes

a powerful case that mid-century environmentalists continued to advocate for the preservation of white people even after the Holocaust, in the form of policies aimed at non-white population control. Powell uncovers a robust correspondence between Aldo Leopold, a revered environmentalist and professor of game management at the University of Wisconsin, and William Vogt, a leading postwar proponent of global population control. Vogt befriended Leopold during their campaign to save the bald eagle from extinction in 1940. Shortly after the Second World War, Vogt drew directly from Leopold's ecological theories, ones based on the land's natural carrying capacity, to argue against physicians' attempts to cure diseases in the developing world. Even if physicians succeeded, Vogt argued, there would not be enough arable land to feed the excess population. Better let them die from disease than starvation, his thinking went. Powell contends that, whether they were aware of it or not, the concerns that Leopold and Vogt expressed regarding unfettered population growth, almost exclusively in non-white regions, "dovetailed with longstanding Anglo-American fears of ... threats to whiteness."

Though focused on environmentalism's white male elite, *Vanishing America* is sensitive to the ways women and non-whites, particularly Native Americans, contributed to and challenged the dominant environmentalist agenda. Yet for a book aimed at making the environmentalist movement more inclusive, and one that highlights urbanization's influence, *Vanishing America* could have benefited from grappling more with the effects of the Great Migration on the movement's leaders. By the Second World War, millions of African Americans had fled to northern cities, and though we do not read about them, their arrival might well have influenced the kind of white flight to the wilderness that Powell observes occurring in the wake of the influx of eastern and southern Europeans to these same cities.

Moreover, the long history of environmental neglect endured by urban Americans, particularly African Americans, begs for some kind of analysis. The pollution of urban environments and the erection of urban parks in black neighborhoods entailed a similar kind of racial othering and physical displacement that Powell shows happening to Native Americans along the western frontier. The failure of the early environmentalists to take up these urban, often black, environmental issues helped spawn a distinct "environmental justice" movement, led predominantly by people of color, in the 1970s. We will not fully understand why the environmental movement remains so white until we study how and why it refused, early on, to champion these black environmental

issues. In any event, he has written a book that ought to be required reading for anyone interested in understanding this enduring problem.

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