

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

YELLOWSTONE AT 150: CAN INDIGENOUS STEWARDSHIP SAVE OUR PARKS?

LAURA FLANDERS: In 1872, Congress established Yellowstone National Park as a quote, "public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people," close quote. 150 years on Yellowstone remains a popular vacation spot for some, the jewel of a system that now comprises some 400 national parks. But for Indigenous Americans, the history of Yellowstone and the nation's parks as a whole is bitter. Tribes who had lived on that land for thousands of years were forced to leave. Families were massacred there. The army was brought in to keep Native Americans out and well into the 20th century, the parks instituted Jim Crow, keeping much of the areas only for whites. Today, droughts, floods, fires and extinctions are threatening the parks across the country. And many people are wondering if the National Park System would be better off if Indigenous people were in charge of it. Indigenizing the national parks wouldn't just be morally and legally right but it just might be what saves the parks for future generations, for everybody. Our guests are Wes Martel of the Eastern Shoshone. Wes is Senior Wind River Conservation Associate of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition and former Eastern Shoshone Business Council. Valerie Grussing is Executive Director of the National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers, or THPOs. We'll also hear from Faith Spotted Eagle, elder activist with the Yankton Sioux and co-founder of the Brave Heart Society. All three recently participated in a historic inter-tribal gathering, hosted by the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho tribes of the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming that was convened exactly to examine this question. And so I'm going to start by asking you Wes, how that inter-tribal gathering went?

WES MARTEL: It was a success beyond our wildest dream. We just had a wide variety of excellent speakers and panels, and federal agencies, and state agencies, and elders, and community, and young people, and just exciting discussion. And it was just a very powerful, energizing activity.

VALERIE GRUSSING: For my part, it was a huge honor to be invited and to be a part of an event like that, to be included among a panel of our organization's members, Tribal Historic Preservation Officers who are the front lines of protecting native places.

LAURA FLANDERS: What do the Tribal Historic Preservation Officers do?

VALERIE GRUSSING: Tribal Historic Preservation Officers, T-H-P-Os or THPOs as we call them for short, they primarily, if they're able to do one thing, they implement the National Historic Preservation Act. They're tribally appointed government officials who respond to review requests primarily. Anytime there's a federally funded or permitted project, they are the ones who

have to review those documents for potential impacts on tribally important places and areas. They also do a lot of other things. They do repatriation work for their tribe. They frequently lead language revitalization programs, tribal museums and cultural centers. Protecting native places is our tagline and all of that work is related.

LAURA FLANDERS: Wes, coming to you specifically, Yellowstone and your experience of it. What do we need to know about that history of that place? You know, you think Yellowstone and a lot of non-indigenous Americans think of President Grant and wilderness, and hot springs and geysers, what are we missing? What's been erased and what do we need to know?

WES MARTEL: Well, the 150th anniversary marked 150 years that we've been pretty much denied access to a very special and sacred place. And just talking with our elders and reading some of the recordings of some of our older people, Yellowstone was a very important part of our being and our wellbeing. We used to take regular trips over there and for the healing, for the plants, the foods, the medicines. Yellowstone was like our grocery store, our pharmacy, our hospital, our church. It had so much meaning to a lot of tribes. The map behind me depicts the 49 tribes that are connected to Yellowstone National Park. And the Greater Yellowstone Coalition along with other NGOs are really understanding the importance of having the Indigenous voice and sovereignty included in conservation. We can't talk conservation without Indigenous voices. And tribes through our treaties and through our sovereignty, we actually can do things other governments cannot. We can have higher air quality and water quality standards than the state and federal government. We can do things we have under the National Historic Preservation Act and environmental laws. You know, we have some authorities off reservation. So, the Tribal Historic Preservation Officers, I have really come to realize are one of the most important office a tribe can have because they track all of that, you know, off reservation, on reservation and then working with community, working with elders, working with children and that history is critical in documenting our presence and our need to have more inclusion and input in managing lands. And it's under a lot of education. You know, we've already got an interpreter center being established at Yellowstone National Park as we speak to start helping the public that comes there understand the 49 tribes that did have connections. What we're about? What do we want to share? What do we want to know about it? So, that's an important part of history.

LAURA FLANDERS: You know, Valerie, that history includes some pretty grim facts including the killings, mass killings of thousands of Native Americans with the founding of Yellowstone. And we're just talking Yellowstone for this moment but there are stories similar all across the system. Not so long ago, there was a mountain at Yellowstone as I understand that was renamed, First Peoples Mountain to remove a name that was associated with the murder, I think of 200 people. Can you tell us more about that? Would you like to see more historic education going on like that?

VALERIE GRUSSING: Absolutely, place names is also an important initiative currently from the Department of the Interior. We've been grateful to see Secretary Haaland's focus on that with a couple of different orders. And then, that trickling down to the agency implementation of it. We have been grateful to partner with The Wilderness Society here at NATHPO on a guide to renaming offensive places. So, you can find that on our website as well as on their website. And that's so important because names matter, words matter, monuments matter. They represent what's important to us and to our society and the stories that we decide to tell. And these particular stories have been in the shadows for so long that it's important, it's critical to highlight them now for Native peoples to be able to tell their own stories and for the rest of us to listen, to acknowledge their truth and to engage in those processes of reconciliation and healing together. And what we call places is really an important part of that.

WES MARTEL: The two tribes here at Wind River suffered two of the worst massacres in history, the Sand Creek Massacre and the Shoshones suffered the Bear Creek Massacre. And so, we in this region, we feel that. We still feel that onslaught and that evil action that took place against us and buffalo, and public lands, and all the things that are out there that we're related to, is an important part of us regaining our health and our wellbeing, and protecting.

LAURA FLANDERS: Is there anything you would add to that, Valerie? Again, going back to this kind of myth of Virgin Territory.

VALERIE GRUSSING: It's called the 'wilderness concept' now in academic circles. It's a fraught term as is 'pre-history'. They both imply that prior to European arrival and contact on this continent, there was no history and there was no interaction with the environment. The phrase "untrammelled by man" is right in Wilderness Act and it's just simply not true, you know. And so, I think getting into issues like, recognizing the validity of traditional knowledge related to all of the the topics that Wes has been mentioning. Bringing that back into management practices, not just of national parks, but of all land management agencies is so critical. If practices that were implemented for since 'time immemorial' is the phrase with people living on the landscape, controlled burning would limit wildfires. Selective harvesting of sweet grass actually helps the sweet grass grow better and be more productive than if left alone. There is no 'untrammelled by man'. It's all native land. And there is a reciprocal, symbiotic relationship of taking care of each other. As Wes mentions, they're all relatives and connected. So, even those terms, we need to find alternates to those terms.

LAURA FLANDERS: As we're recording this, Yellowstone has been hit by a massive storm and flooding, and the very popular northern gate, the northern entrance has been closed indefinitely. What we are seeing there is not unique in terms of climate crises facing our National Park lands. And if we were to Indigenize the National Parks, how would that help? How would your people address the climate crises that these parks are facing?

WES MARTEL: The connection that we have to our surroundings is based on trust. We trust our surroundings and vice versa. And right now with the habitat destruction that is going on, with the development that is going on, with the traffic, with everything else that is going on, we're causing some major disruptions. The climate, the Earth, all the things around are trying to tell us that we need to change the way we're doing things right now. And the plants, the trees, the animals, they don't have a voice. We do. And we have to speak up now before it's too late. And just what we're seeing now is going to get even worse as climate change descends upon us. And so, that's really part of the Indigenous viewpoint and connection is that we take care of you, you take care of us. And right now we're not taking care of our surroundings like we should be. And, you know, just looking at what's happening in the southwest, in the Colorado River Basin where millions of people are now in danger of not having adequate water supplies. We're seeing things that we should be addressing and it's time for us to do something about it.

LAURA FLANDERS: Now, we go to Faith Spotted Eagle at the Wind River Inter-Tribal Gathering where she talked about the ongoing attempt by Yankton Sioux leaders to create a tribal water code to protect their water quality and advance their treaties. In tribal communities, elders can influence general councils to propose initiatives for tribal governments to put into code. Her audience at the panel on Grassroots to Governance included both tribal leaders and national park officials.

FAITH SPOTTED EAGLE: So, our overall goal to establish sovereign, inherent, spiritual, legal, traditional water rights to protect the Missouri River Basin. And we would be partners with Wind River. We have to figure out how are we going to do that. All up and down, and we hope to create a template that every single tribe that is on the Missouri river up to the headwaters will be part of this. To replicate that we can't have founder syndrome and say 'this is our thing'. It's not, it's beyond our lifetime. The secondary goal, develop a comprehensive set of water codes to establish regulatory power on treaty water and affiliated lands. So, when you hear people like Wes and other elders, and like I said, he's in my head. One of the things that he said is you got to figure out intakes of Missouri River. How are you going to use that water? We have identified 150 mile stretch along the Missouri river that we're going to co-manage. We have done three ethnobotanical studies, last summer, the last two years. This summer we're going out again in three surveys and we're going to incorporate it with the language and field camps. We're going to get that sustainability movement of people, even if they don't like you, even if their family doesn't like your family, we're going to get them out there to talk to the water and feel the presence of the water and be on these boats, these kayaks, whatever the flat boats, because then the elements, the spirits will talk to them.

LAURA FLANDERS: Coming back to you, Valerie. There is something of a record developing of how Indigenous practices are serving conservation, ecological, survival. I'm thinking of buffalo. You mentioned sweet grass. You mentioned control burn. Can you just elaborate a little bit on what models we're seeing out there that are working?

VALERIE GRUSSING: The federal term would be co-management. So, that's something that the Department of the Interior is taking a look at as well. How can that be mandated and implemented system wide across all land management agencies? And that's also kind of a loaded term, co-management. Tribes have been stewarding, tribes have been taking care of the landscape and their non-human relatives since time immemorial.

LAURA FLANDERS: Now, Wes, isn't it true that Native nations have consultation rights at the moment?

WES MARTEL: Yes, but you know, the current state of affairs, there's just a hodgepodge of actual consultation taking place. You know, people are still being harassed when they go to public lands to try to gather and hold ceremony. You know, there are still obstacles. There's actually prohibitions against Indian people, you know, trying to practice their ways on public land. So, I really believe that there's got to be massive education and communication efforts starting to take place between tribes and federal agencies. And I also, as a tribal leader, former tribal leader, accept some of the blame, you know, we've got to have policies that are clear cut and protect our values, and our tradition. We've got to have tribal laws in place. We've got to have regulations, we've got to have standard guidelines. We've got to exercise our governor. We've got to breathe life into our treaty. And that's where we have to stand up for ourselves. And if we're going to say we're sovereign, we have to act like it.

LAURA FLANDERS: So what would that look like to you, Wes?

WES MARTEL: Having strong policies and laws in place, upholding our civil regulatory authority that we hold over everybody within our exterior boundaries, reacquiring land, upholding and exerting our water rights, upholding and exerting our treaty rights, standing up for tribal governance.

LAURA FLANDERS: On November 15th, 2021, the Biden administration hosted a Tribal Nations Summit coinciding with national Native American Heritage Month. Leaders from more than 570 tribes in the U.S. joined the two-day event.

JOE BIDEN: We have to continue to stand up for the dignity and sovereignty of tribal nations. My dad used the word dignity I think more than any other word. He said, everyone is entitled to be treated with dignity. I was proud to reestablish the White House

Council on Native American Affairs and to issue a memorandum, my first week in office instructing my entire administration to engage in a regular, meaningful consultation with Tribal Nations.

DEB HAALAND: And we have prioritized a number of early actions to strengthen Indian country including historic investments in tribal communities through the American rescue plan. Our all of government approach to tribal consultation in which native people are consulted before policies are developed.

VALERIE GRUSSING: So, the main federal requirement for tribal consultation comes from an executive order that President Obama signed and that President Biden has reinforced with a renewed mandate, the second day of his administration on strengthening nation to nation relationships. So many times, however, it's done in sort of a checkbox fashion and it's not meaningful as a term that is really important here and is not defined in federal statute or regulation anywhere. What is 'meaningful' consultation? And so, the challenge is truly making 'meaningful' mean something, which is not a change that happens overnight. There's two parts of the equation, though that I'm compelled to point out, and one is not just agency staff, sending more consultation requests to tribes or even doing them better. It's related to tribal capacity and funding that they have for staff and in their THPOs offices and across tribal government, across programs, to be able to respond to the review request, to have the information that they need on hand and truly engage in a meaningful way in the consultation processes. There's a trust responsibility of the federal government to make sure that tribes have the resources they need. And that has not been upheld to this point either.

LAURA FLANDERS: Valerie, as we close, what are your priorities and what are the priorities of the THPOs that you work with for this period?

VALERIE GRUSSING: The priorities for the National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers and our members THPOs are primarily funding. Honestly, this is my main area of advocacy on Capitol Hill and everywhere. Partners are willing to listen and ally with us. Tribes need to be able to have people paid to engage in the work, to make their own decisions, to do their own documentation and characterization of places. To reforge those connections, to be able to engage in the consultations, to make them meaningful and to speak in their own voices. And that includes elevation of traditional knowledge. It includes management of natural resources. It includes documentation of their own places and landscapes, however they want to do it. Some use archeology, western archeology and some don't. Archiving, recording oral histories while there may still be language speakers and elders left. It's the methods that they want to use. They need to be empowered and capable. They need to have the capability to do that work for themselves. That's our main priority in a nutshell. And it kind of includes everything.

LAURA FLANDERS: We mentioned at the beginning that we were in the 150th anniversary of the founding of Yellowstone. Why is that anniversary important to you? What's the significance of this year? And what's your priority for change kicking off in this anniversary period?

WES MARTEL: Now that we have a bit of an Indigenous presence within the Department of Interior and a few of the other federal agencies, it's really a critical time for us to make people know how we feel about co-management, our values and practice related to public land. Were it not for the removal of Indians there would be no public lands and Congress, and the courts have systematically excluded us from having any participation on that. So, we really think it's important to not only recognize the 150 years of Yellowstone Park being there but we're still here too and we're coming back stronger and more powerful than ever to have more of a voice in what we're doing. You know, when our tribal members go out to hunt and gather, and utilize public lands and Yellowstone Park, you know, that's a relationship. You know, I just heard of a situation in a park down in the southwest, last year where one of the tribal people down there was walking along a designated trail in one of the parks. And he saw one of his medicines over there and went even over there to gather it and utilize it, and pray to that medicine, a park ranger came along and arrested him for being off the designated trail, handcuffed him and took him off. And so, you know, the Park Service sees that as a violation or disturbance. To us, that's a relationship. That's something, we got to try to maintain that. And, you know, getting to a point that Valerie made about the truth of what happened. I think that's an important part. Let's just look at the factual history. What happened to Indian people? How they treated them ever since 1492, everything they did to Indian people, to get rid of us, to the deprive us of our land, to deprive us of our rights, to deprive of our livelihood and the 150th anniversary is we're coming back 150 years stronger and we're going to be here for a long time coming.

LAURA FLANDERS: Faith Spotted Eagle, elder and Yankton Sioux activist, concluded her remarks at the Wind River Inter-Tribal Gathering with a prayer, a water song to the Big Wind and the Little Wind rivers that flow through the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming.

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