Pre-Print (not peer reviewed)

Words are Monuments: Racism and Colonialism Conserved in Place Names

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Author Contributions: Conceptualization: B.M.M., S.B.B., G.W., K.E.I., J.B.K., N.B.B.; Methodology: B.M.M., S.B.B., G.W., K.E.I., J.B.K.; Investigation: B.M.M., S.B.B., G.W., K.E.I., J.B.K.; Data Curation: B.M.M., S.B.B., G.W., K.E.I., J.B.K.; Writing: B.M.M., S.B.B., G.W., K.E.I., J.B.K., N.B.B.; Visualization: B.M.M., S.B.B., K.E.I., J.B.K.; Project administration: B.M.M.

Competing Interest Statement: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Keywords: conservation, names, national parks, colonialism, racism

Abstract

Conservation science aims to improve human wellbeing through environmental management, but the discipline must reckon with the living legacies of its history including racism and colonialism. US national parks are symbolic of conservation and ripe for examination for their contribution to socio-spatial exclusion of Black, Indigenous and other people of color from outdoor spaces. We examined the origins of over 2,000 place names in 16 (26% of) US national parks to quantify the extent that national park narratives perpetuate colonialism and racism. Through iterative thematic analysis of place name origins we constructed a decision tree for classifying place name problem types according to their dimensions of racism and colonialism (if any), which enabled quantification and spatial analysis of problem types by park. We found that these highly visible conservation landscapes commemorate individuals and words that tacitly endorse racist and anti-Indigenous ideologies at a system scale. Changing these names is one small step towards dismantling colonialist and racist narratives and towards making public conservation landscapes more inclusive.

Significance Statement

Around the world statues and historic heroes are being critically examined and, in many cases, dismantled as society reckons with the living legacies of systemic racism and colonialism. The problems with these statues and names have been invisible to many until recent events like the murder of George Floyd and the COVID-19 pandemic have laid bare systemic inequities. The 21st century is a time for scientists to reckon with our role in systems of oppression and make our social constructs more explicit. We illustrate the systemic nature of racism and colonialism in America's "best idea"—our national parks—rooted in conservation science. Our methodology could be further built upon by federal agencies to systematically review place names on federal lands.

Main Text

Introduction

A key goal of conservation science is to manage the environment in a way that improves human wellbeing (1). Mounting evidence shows how conservation efforts yield more successful, long term results when they include diversity in peoples and knowledges and human wellbeing as a goal (2–5). However, mounting evidence also shows the racist and exclusionary origins of the United States (US) conservation movement and many of its historic figures (6–8). How can conservation science move toward greater diversity, equity, and inclusion in research and practice in a way that reckons with living legacies of its troubled history? One step is to make apparent how the design of places signals implicit and seemingly universal assumptions about who is included (the social construct of Whiteness) and excluded, termed "socio-spatial exclusion" (9, 10). US national parks are emblematic of US conservation places. In the last five years over 400 million people visited US national parks (11). Thus, the myths and symbols we choose to embed in these parks normalize certain values to a large audience. US national parks are "for the benefit and inspiration of all the people of the United States" (12), yet no one has ever quantified the extent and scale to which diversity ideals in conservation and democracy may conflict with the symbols of colonialism and racism in "America's best idea" (13).

Place names are such symbols. They are a way that we create our world, give meaning to our surroundings, and demonstrate what we value. In this sense, words are monuments (14). For many Indigenous peoples a place name embodies Indigenous knowledge and memory, reflecting generations of ancestors in relation with that specific place (15–19). Indigenous groups in the US have formally resisted the replacement of their place names with settler-colonizer place names in

national parks for over a century (e.g., Fig. 1). Settler colonizer maps and place names are mechanisms of colonialism that displace and control Indigenous knowledges and presence (20) and contribute to the *terra nullius* myth that North American landscapes were empty of humans at colonization (21, 22). Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou) argues that in terms of colonization “renaming the landscape was probably as powerful ideologically as changing the land” (23). The specific local contexts of settler-colonizer place names trace the diffusion and evolution of settler-colonialism across space. Here, we explore the extent to which place names in US National Parks are a symptom and systemic perpetuation of racism and colonialism and how different kinds of place name problems manifest across space. Our goal is to quantify the scope and scale of problematic place names in US national parks. The examination of place name origins and their consequences is an opportunity to make socio-spatial exclusion more visible and advance local and national conversations about decolonizing land and language.

Figure 1. Blackfeet leaders Bird Rattler (far left), Curly Bear (second from left) and Wolf Plume (third from left) meet with Stephen Mather, soon-to-be Park Service director (sitting), and other officials in Washington, DC in 1915 to protest the use of English-language names in Glacier National Park.

Place names in conservation landscapes are particularly ripe for re-examination given the racist and genocidal foundations of the US conservation movement (6). Notwithstanding their ecological and social benefits, national parks carry the weight of a troubling history (24–26). They were conceived in the context of romanticism, cultural nationalism, and a generalized fear of non-white overpopulation (27, 28). In the name of conservation science, parks were established to protect large game and un-peopled “wilderness” areas from certain kinds of people (6). The Native Americans who had stewarded the land were removed and charged with poaching for hunting and gathering in their ancestral homelands now called parks (24, 26). Many park features were (re-)named when the dominant culture openly celebrated “Indian killers” and eugenicists (6, 29). Today, such colonial and racist worldviews disable collective action on urgent ecological crises

like climate change (30) and make outdoor spaces unwelcoming to people of color, immigrants, the working class, and people at the intersections of these identities (31–33).

Results and Discussion

We researched and conducted thematic analysis of the origins of place names in 16 US national parks (26% of all US national parks; $n=2,193$ names) (34). The 16 were chosen to represent a variety of geographies, dates of establishment, visitation rates, and size (Table S1). To quantify problem types among parks, we iteratively designed a qualitative decision tree for categorizing and classifying place name origins consistently among five of the co-authors. Four categories with several classes each emerged (Table S3) that captured the settler-colonial and racist dimensions of place names: 1) *Indigenous*: if the name is from an Indigenous language; 2) *Derogatory*: if the name is a racial slur; 3) *Erasure*: if the name represents erasure or replacement of Indigenous names; and 4) *Dimensions of racism and colonialism*: if the name is an appropriation of Indigenous language, promotes racism, commemorates a person who supported or perpetrated physical, racial violence (often acts of anti-Indigenous genocide), or a “first” settler-colonizer who capitalized on Indigenous dispossession and colonization. Definitions for each class are provided in the Supplementary Information.

All 16 parks examined brand features with the names of people who supported racist ideologies, capitalized on Indigenous dispossession and colonization, and/or participated in acts of genocide. Less than 1% of named features reflect Indigenous languages, ten were widely acknowledged racial slurs, and 48 were named for a person who perpetrated physical, racial violence (Fig. 2A). These results demonstrate the system-wide scale at which place names reflect colonialism and racism in these 16 parks. The colonial and racist narratives embedded in these place names, especially the replacement and erasure of Indigenous culture, is further evidence that parks and “wilderness” are colonial social constructs, not ecological time capsules (26).

Figure 2. Place name problem counts per park (A) and annual visitor potential exposure (B). None of the bars are zero.

To estimate the potential exposure of park visitors to such names, we multiplied the count of each problem type per park by that park's ten-year average (2009-2019) of annual visitation rates (Table S1). We found, for example, that each year 123 million park visitors are potentially exposed to a park feature named for an individual who perpetrated racial violence (Fig. 2B).

Two patterns emerged when mapping the various ways racism and colonialism manifest across parks: no park was uniformly low across all problem categories, and the relative prevalence of each problem category varied widely among parks (Fig. 3). Thus, each park paints a unique portrait of racism and colonialism for visitors, and each faces unique challenges in de-centering these social constructs.

Figure 3. The proportion of place name problem types varied among the parks. Each park's scores are that park's proportion of each problem type, scaled by the maximum proportion observed for each problem type.

We found significantly fewer original and appropriated indigenous place names (mean = $15.8 \pm 5.5\%$ SE) relative to settler-colonizer place names (mean = $78 \pm 19.4\%$ SE) (see Supplementary Information). Additionally, our analyses of spatial trends demonstrated that, per degree of longitude moving westward, the proportion of place names per park that memorialize colonialism decreases 0.03% (95% CL = $0.01, 0.04$) while appropriated indigenous names increase 0.02% (95% CL = $-0.03, -0.01$) (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. Proportion of park names that memorialize colonialism (A) and are appropriated Indigenous languages (B) by longitude. Solid black lines represent model fit of the data and dashed lines represent 95% CI using a beta regression approach (see Materials and Methods and Supplementary Information for model details). “Gr. Smoky Mtns” stands for “Great Smoky Mountains National Park.”

The spatial patterns in naming categories connect place names to the east-to-west trajectory of settler-colonialism in North America. Colonization of the “New” World was rooted in *terra nullius*—the principle that lands ostensibly unpopulated or un-owned are available for claim (21, 22). Yet, for millennia Indigenous peoples across the Americas have stewarded these lands and waters (35). To many Indigenous peoples, the land is a crucial element of their unique cultural identities

and management of it is embedded in cultural practices (17). European colonizers did not recognize the existing management practices because the lands were not managed for overproduction, commodification, or the accumulation of wealth (33, 36). Further, the post-contact genocide of 60 million Indigenous people in the Americas (37) reinforced a perception that North American ecosystems were not reliant on human activity (38). Thus, on the east coast (early in US colonial history), place names represent fundamental claims on the lands where colonizers (re-)named natural features to create geographies that reflected their Eurocentric identities (Fig. 4A) (20–23). Today, *terra nullius* lives on in settler-colonizer place names and the conservation myth that national parks are pristine, untouched ecological time capsules (26, 39).

Conquering societies later revert to “imperial nostalgia”—the reclamation by the colonizer of colonized peoples’ names and words (“appropriation”) to re-position Indigenous peoples as symbolic ancestors, demonstrated by the westward pattern above (Fig. 4B) (40, 41). In Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park, for example, the high proportion of names appropriated from the Hawaiian language (Fig. 4B) postures the park as anti-colonial while masking the extent to which *kānaka maoli* (Hawaiian people) themselves are excluded from power (42).

As public lands, national parks are presumed to symbolize a level of political innocence and thus have typically evaded scrutiny (43). Consequently, these iconic and highly visible conservation landscapes still commemorate individuals and words that tacitly endorse colonial, racist, and anti-Indigenous ideologies. The choice to preserve these place names today normalizes systems of domination over the racialized “other” (44) and contributes to the socio-spatial exclusion of Indigenous and other peoples of color from outdoor spaces (9, 24, 31). The spatial scale and cultural visibility of national park place names means we, as a society, can choose to perpetuate racism and colonial harms by keeping current problematic place names, or we can remake the social construct of parks to embrace complex histories, promote social equity, and practice inclusive conservation. Place names do change. For example, in 2015, after decades of campaigning by Indigenous groups and supporters, the US government adopted “Denali”—the millennia-old Koyukon Athabaskan name for the tallest mountain in North America (45).

Place names are an opportunity for the National Park Service (NPS) and the US Board of Geographic Names (BGN), the body charged with assigning or changing US names, to confront the colonial and racist origins of the conservation movement and mapping, respectively, and adopt anti-colonial methodologies. However, the BGN is not procedurally designed nor does it have the capacity for, an internal review at the scale needed here (46). A review involving tribal, congressional, and other stakeholders and NPS would be necessary. This kind of effort must be sure to center Indigenous voices and not exacerbate colonialism (47). The review process might question the BGN policy in the context of national parks, which privileges local opinions and enables individual members of congress to prevent name changes—why it took decades to adopt the name Denali (45). After all, national parks are “for the benefit and inspiration of all the people of the United States” (12).

We have demonstrated how colonialism and racism are systemic and hiding, to some more than others, in plain sight in “America’s best idea” (13). This work lends support to the Indigenous idea that settler-colonizer place names are problematic. These kinds of quantitative demonstrations are important steps toward reckoning with the role of conservation science in colonialism and racism. However, as scientists and society identify and quantify problems the decolonizing and anti-racism work has only begun.

Materials and Methods

We selected 16 (26%) of the 62 US national parks that represent a wide range of geographies, dates of establishment, visitation, and size (Table S1). We used the PDF map of each park

available on each park's web page within NPS.gov (Table S1) to list all place names within the park boundaries except for roads, resulting in 2,193 place names (Data S1). We researched the origin of each place name to the extent that a curious, non-historian park visitor might—what we're calling "searchable". We relied on peer-reviewed sources, grey literature, Wikipedia, the NPS website, other websites, and for some parks we used books written about the meanings of the park's or region's place names (Table S2). For some names we were unable to find any information; in some cases we found information, such as when it was mapped and who recorded the name that nevertheless did not explain the origin or meaning of the name.

Our process for categorizing place names and developing classes within each category was highly iterative, grounded in thematic analysis methodology used in social science research (34), and involved consensus-building among five of the co-authors doing the thematic coding of the data. For each place name at least two co-authors were involved in deciding which class in each category it belonged. Iterations involved quality assurance and quality control (QAQC) testing where we would all classify the same randomly chosen subset of 100 place names and compare resulting classifications to the data and among ourselves. Early on, iterations of QAQC testing helped us refine our definitions for classes (see Supplementary Information), decide on how to treat specific origin conditions, and ensure specific conditions were treated consistently across the dataset. Later, QAQC testing helped us determine when the data classification was complete: once all co-authors reached <10% error rate compared to the data on a randomly selected subset of 200 place names.

From our thematic analysis of the origins of place names, four categories emerged that captured the settler-colonialist and racist dimensions of place names: if the word itself is Indigenous or settler-colonial in origin; if the word itself is derogatory; if the name represents erasure or replacement of Indigenous culture; and if the name commemorates a person, or is appropriation of Indigenous language. Within each of these categories are several classes (Table S3).

In order to make a repeatable method, we iteratively developed a decision tree for the classification of three of the four emergent categories listed above. The first category (word itself is Indigenous or settler-colonial in origin) did not require a decision tree. See Supplementary Information for decision tree details and see Figs. S1-S3.

Potential visitor exposure was calculated per park by multiplying the number of place names for each category by the park's ten-year average (2009-2019) annual visitation rate (Table S1). Spider plot scores were calculated by finding the park with the maximum proportion of each problem type. Then, each park's proportion for each problem type was divided by that type's maximum proportion among all parks, i.e., the park with the maximum has a score of 1.

We developed five models to test for the effect of longitude on the proportion of each of five problem categories per park by fitting beta regression models. We first tested for a correlation between year of park establishment and longitude with a Pearson's rank sum correlation tested. Next, we fit beta regression models to the data as the dependent variable (problem category) is a proportion and the independent variable (longitude) is continuous. The models are fit using maximum likelihood using parameterization with mean (depending through a link function on the covariates) and precision parameter (ϕ) (48). We used this approach as the dependent variables are clearly skewed to the right and follow a beta distribution. Furthermore, to meet the assumptions of the beta distribution, we either added or subtracted 1×10^{-6} to problem categories that made up either 0% or 100% of a park's place names, respectively. To determine if the model fit of the data rejects the null hypothesis, we conducted the likelihood ratio tests. The likelihood-ratio test is a hypothesis test that enables an observation of the "best" model between two nested models, i.e., null model vs. alternative model using the chi-square statistic (49).

We applied the beta regression modeling approach to test for the effect of longitude (continuous), Indigenous place name categorization (categorical), and the interaction between the two

independent variables on the proportion of Indigenous place names across U.S. National Parks. To evaluate model fit of the data, we used the likelihood-ratio test and a joint test. The joint tests produce an analysis-of-variance-like table based on linear functions of predictors in a model to examine the significance of each variable on the model fit (50). We used the *betareg* (function: *betareg()*) (51), *emmeans* (function: *joint_tests()*) (52), and *lmtest* (function: *lmtest()*) (53) libraries in R for model construction and evaluation (54). Furthermore, all beta regression models we constructed used the log link function and hypothesis testing was performed using a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. The data are available in Data S1, and the data and R scripts associated with this analysis and plotting are provided at: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4393269>

Acknowledgments

McGill, Borrelle, Wu, Ingeman, and Koch were supported by David H. Smith Conservation Research Fellowships. We thank Chief Arvol Looking Horse (19th generation keeper of the Sacred White Buffalo Pipe and Bundle of the Lakota, Dakota & Nakota Great Sioux Nation) and Mrs. Paula Looking Horse (*H'e Sapa winyan*, Black Hills Woman) for their early support of these ideas; Noelani Puniwai, Max Lambert, Beka Economopoulos, and Jason Jones for their feedback on earlier drafts; and Michael Shelton and the US Board of Geographic Names for their patience with our questions, time spent answering them, and their service. **Land Acknowledgement:** The authors wish to acknowledge their occupation on the traditional lands of numerous Indigenous peoples and offer this work as a small token of respect to the ancestral caretakers of those lands and their descendants who continue to sustain their land relationships and responsibilities. These acknowledgements are intended as a first step toward increased practices of decolonization, which we understand as recovery of Indigenous lands, tribal sovereignty, and re-establishment of responsibilities to the lands. The authors' residences, research, and/or writing occurred on the lands of the Kickapoo, Dakota Sioux, Ioway, Meskwaki, Seneca, Lenape, Wyandot, Shawnee, and Osage (B.M.M.); the Huron-Wendat and Mississaugas of the Credit River and Ngāti Paoa and Te Kawerau a Maki (S.B.B.); the Chumash and Barbareño (G.W.); the Kalapuya, Chinook, and Cowlitz (K.E.I.); the Kānaka 'Ōiwi; and the Ampinefu Band of Kalapuya (N.B.B.).

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