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Beyond the Trees: Indigenous Management of Bears Ears National Monument (Episode 15)

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Beyond the Trees: Indigenous Management of Bears Ears National Monument

Produced by: Palia Vang and Sunny Milligan

Transcript:

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This is an episode of The OtterPod from CSU Monterey Bay.

Palia: The establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 became a model for conservation domestically and globally. Central to that project, though, and to many conservation efforts to this day was indigenous removal and erasure.

Sunny: Our story, though, flips that model on its head. Bears Ears National Monument in Utah was established through Indigenous initiative and is managed by Indigenous tribes in partnership with the Federal Government. This will be the focus of our podcast today. We want to take a deeper look at national parks and monuments.

Palia: A glimpse beyond the tree, so to say.

Sunny: Exactly! Today's episode explores indigenous removal through the creation of Yellowstone National Park and compares it to Bears Ears using the insight of tribal member Ruben Pacheco. Through this exploration, we find stewardship, grounded normativity, and resurgence.

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Sunny: Hi, I'm Sunny.

Palia: Hi, I'm Palia and this is our podcast, Beyond the Trees: Indigenous Management of Bears Ears National Monument. We were both just actually talking about how much we love National Parks. We both really enjoy going outside. We both like rock climbing and camping. And of course, national parks and monuments are such cool places to do those things. But, you know, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but national parks and monuments can actually really suck.

Sunny: Wait, really? Why?

Palia: See, this all really sucks because of settler colonialism and something that the late anthropologist Patrick Wolfe calls the logic of elimination (2001).

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Palia: What makes settler colonialism distinct is that the colonizers, who come, want to stay and establish their own national homeland. So if there's already people living on the land, that's really problematic for them. This leads to a desire to get rid of the indigenous people living here so that settlers feel like they have the right to live there themselves.

Palia: It's all about getting rid of native peoples rights to their own land, which is a way of erasure and displacement. (Wolfe, 2001) What do they use in order to get what they wanted? They use what Wolfe (2001) calls the logic of elimination because settlers needed and wanted the land they were occupying. They needed to find a way to get rid of indigenous people from the land.

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Palia: Some examples of this are assimilation, violence and death, private land-owning reservations, signing treaties, and much, much more. These ways of elimination have been used by settlers, even in the making of these national parks and monuments.

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Palia: For example, Yellowstone National Park. This is the first national park ever established in the United States, officially in 1872. Mark David Spence (1999), who's a public historian and a professor, explains that Yellowstone's establishment was not meant for preserving the scenic land, but to ensure that the scenic land does not fall into the hands of others. See settlers, they want the land for themselves.

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Palia: So like I said earlier, they did everything they could to eliminate indigenous people from Yellowstone. They painted an image of native people by calling them savages and making them known for attacks. They built headquarters dedicated to, quote-unquote, Indian troubles. They created tricky treaties to keep indigenous people out of the park. They complained about how native people were treating the land poorly, destroying the land, and ruining the hunting game. The people saying this, literal sports hunters and settlers who many of them hunt for fun and not for food. They brought in the military to enforce and ensure that Native people stay in containment in their reservations and not in the park. They did all of this to preserve the scenic landscapes, the precious animals, land that is supposedly theirs (Spence, 1999).

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Palia: So while Yellowstone stands by being the first national park established known for conservation, they are also known as the first national park established based on indigenous removal and displacement.

Sunny: Okay, yeah, that makes a lot of sense. But what about Bears Ears?

Palia: Wait what's that?

Sunny: It is a national monument in Utah, but it was created in a completely different way. I actually did some research on it before coming to our podcast today. What makes Bears Ears so unique? Bears Ears is unique because it was created by and is still in part managed by Indigenous people. It breaks this trend of erasure that you were talking about.

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Sunny: In December of 2016, President Obama officially recognized the Bears Ears National Monument and signified successful advocacy by tribal members (Bears Ears Coalition, 2021). I actually got the chance to interview a Bears Ears coalition member, their Communications and Partnerships Director, Ruben Pacheco. We talked about what made Bears Ears different than other national monuments.

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Mr. Pacheco: Bears Ears was established on the behalf of tribal nations, but it also was the first monument that carved out some management authority for the five tribes. (R. Pacheco, Interview, December 7, 2022)

Sunny: In addition to the five tribes that he stated, 30 other tribes are in support of Bears Ears (Bears Ears Coalition, 2021). Another unique thing about Bears Ears was something that I connected to Grounded Normativity.

Mr. Pacheco: The five tribes have very strong and long-lasting ties to the Bears Ears region. For some of them, it's their ancestral homeland. They have their origin stories in the monument area. (R. Pacheco, Interview, December 7, 2022)

Sunny: Grounded normativity is the knowledge system indigenous people get from their long-standing relationship with the land. It is also created with their relationships with each other. (Simpson, 2017)

Mr. Pacheco: We brought youth from each of the five tribes as well as elders, and traditional knowledge was born to the five tribes, and they went on a five day camping trip in the Bear Ears region. So they had time to connect with each other and to learn from each other. But they also met with federal agencies out on the field, and they helped deconstruct this really unattractive fence that they had up around a cultural site. (R. Pacheco, Interview, December 7, 2022)

Sunny: Through their grounded normativity. Indigenous people have learned stewardship.

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Sunny: Stewardship is an alternative to conservation, usually seen in national parks. It emphasized relationships of care. It is an idea that centers reciprocity. If you care for the land, it will care for you. And because you're having this relationship with the land, you then see all these intricacies and interconnectedness. Stewardship values things beyond their use to humans. It also utilizes ceremonies to connect with the land. (Kimmerer, 2013) I connected stewardship to what Mr. Pacheco said about Indigenous land management.

Mr. Pacheco: And so for the five tribes, we don't really see it in terms of resources because for example, like something like, like water or like springs our tribes recognize as being like holy places and so and like just holy entities in general. And so for us, we don't really view these particular elements as being separated from each other. And like the five tribes view, the entire landscape is interconnected. And so the water resources are just as important as like the ancestral structures that are still there, which is just as important as the rock art or the petroglyphs or the pictographs. But it's also related to those things that are of equal importance are: having a quiet soundscape which isn't polluted by really loud ATV's or chainsaws or even a lot of overhead flights, which is also equally as important as something like a dark night sky. So all these elements are interconnected with each other. (R. Pacheco, Interview, December 7, 2022)

Mr. Pacheco: And so the federal agencies kind of view their monument plans as being separated by protecting these certain elements. But from the tribe's point of view, it's really all interconnected. And it also continues to be like a cultural landscape because they have ties to it that they still use. And it's also a living landscape because tribal members still use the area for ceremony and they still go there. They still find that holy. It's a sacred place that is still in use. (R. Pacheco, Interview, December 7, 2022)

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Sunny: As you can see, all these practices fall under what you would call stewardship. In fact, Mr. Pacheco mentioned stewardship within Bears Ears.

Mr. Pacheco: Tribes and Indigenous people have been stewarding these lands for thousands of years. It's not a new concept for the tribes to be stewards of these lands. In many instances, they're the ones with the most localized knowledge about them, and they're the ones that are best suited to make decisions about them. (R. Pacheco, Interview, December 7, 2022)

Mr. Pacheco: A really cool example that I always give is that in areas within Bears Ears where there's high concentrations of ancestral structures where we know that the ancestors lived. You can find overwhelmingly high concentrations of medicinal plants, of foods. We also know that the tribes that are around today, especially the ones that are involved with our coalition, have stories about how these areas were stewarded. (R. Pacheco, Interview, December 7, 2022)

Sunny: This management is a difference between Bears Ears and Yellowstone. I think this is a really great example of stewardship and I hope Bears Ears can become an alternative to the Yellowstone model of conservation.

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Palia: Wow. Thank you so much for telling me about that. You know what? I feel kind of bad for being so bitter about national parks and monuments. It truly is so nice and refreshing to hear about this because for so long, national parks and monuments have been created purely out of satisfaction for settlers and governments with underlying motives.

Sunny: Yeah, you're welcome. I think stories like this are really important because people tend to think of indigenous folks as people of the past. Bears Ears showcases a current and positive example of indigenous agency. It is a prime example of resurgence. It shows indigenous people reconnecting with the land and re-engaging with traditional practices from their individual spiritual journeys to their collective decision-making they're embodying resurgence and actively defying colonialism. (Simpson, 2017)

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