




## DIVERSITY

# Queer Black voices in conservation

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**Article impact statement:** Conservation spaces must be safer, more inclusive, and affirming of the unique contributions of queer Black conservationists.

### Funding information

University of California, Grant/Award Number: Presidential Postdoctoral Fellowship; Wisconsin Institute for Discovery, Grant/Award Number: Kohler Science Fellowship; University of California—Berkeley, Grant/Award Number: Chancellor Fellowship; Rhodes Trust, Grant/Award Number: Schmidt Science Fellowship; University of Notre Dame, Grant/Award Numbers: CEST, Predoctoral, Research Fellowship, Schmitt Fellowship; National Science Foundation, Grant/Award Number: Graduate Research Fellowships Program; Society for Conservation Biology, Grant/Award Number: David H. Smith Conservation Research Fellowship

### KEYWORDS

Black conservationists, colonialism, community-led conservation, conservation history, environmental justice, queer ecologies

## INTRODUCTION

The foundation of Western conservation is underpinned by 2 core doctrines: the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny. Briefly, the Doctrine of Discovery was a directive by the Catholic Church in the 1450s to European explorers that lands and waters claimed by colonial states were “discovered” by them and thus could not be claimed by any non-Christian inhabi-

tants (Miller, 2011). Similarly, Manifest Destiny is the ideology that European immigrants were destined to lands in North America and were chosen for the task of settling it (Miller, 2011). Essential to these beliefs was the assertion that nature and people were distinct: nature (and those living within it) was something to be tamed and controlled, whereas “civilized” (White) people were meant to control and enjoy it. Collectively, these beliefs, along with several legal precedents, including

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the 1823 *Johnson v McIntosh* court case and the Indian Removal Act of 1830, excluded formerly enslaved Africans from access to lands promised to them and enabled the violent removal of Indigenous peoples from their land. This history facilitated the creation of several present-day conservation structures, namely national parks, wildlife management areas, and the fallacy of pristine, untouched lands (Cronon, 1996; Kantor, 2007).

As these legacies of harm are increasingly acknowledged and repudiated (e.g., the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Vatican officially renounced the Doctrine of Discovery in 2021 and 2023, respectively), there is an attendant need to recognize and uplift the diverse voices of those who have contributed to conservation but have been excluded from public recognition and discourse. Across various Western conservation narratives, historical figures frequently cited for their disproportionate influence on the movement include John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Theodore Roosevelt, William Hornaday, Gifford Pinchot, and Rachel Carson (Kantor, 2007; Millstein, 2018; Murdock, 2021; Nesheim, 2012). The ubiquity of these names in the current conservation lexicon has played a significant role in shaping perceptions of who has contributed to the field (Taylor, 2016). However, often missing from this long-repeated historical narrative is an interrogation of how modern conservation came to be and an acknowledgment of the numerous other individuals with enduring legacies whose names, faces, and narratives have been obscured by history (however, see Ban et al., 2018; Chaudhury & Colla, 2021; Duc Bo Massey et al., 2021).

In this piece, we aim to center queer Black conservation scientists, researchers, activists, land stewards, and practitioners (hereafter conservationists). Toward this end, we share personal narratives of experiences engaging in conservation, amplify the work of various individuals and organizations, and honor the many voices that could not be included in this piece. We purposefully chose to highlight queer Black perspectives (identities held by many of the authors of this piece) because queerness and Blackness have always been intrinsically linked to nature, advocacy, and community (Anderson & Samudzi, 2018; Estien, 2023). These connections and legacies of environmental stewardship uniquely position queer Black people in the conservation field and strongly inform how they engage in this work (i.e., in opposition to dominant societal structures, including capitalism and anthropocentrism). Although we recognize the impossibility of capturing the full range of contributions and perspectives here, we view this piece as the beginning of a conversation and invite others to join us in revising the narratives around how and by whom conservation is done.

## SHARED EXPERIENCES AND NARRATIVES

Queer Black communities contain multitudes of diversity, including diversity of thought, experiences, culture, and expression. At the same time, many of the contributions queer Black people have made to conservation have common ideological threads. Although colonial paradigms of conservation often

separate the world into distinct components (e.g., human vs. nature), queer and Black ecologies encourage a more holistic view rooted in ancestry and a recognition of the intertwined struggles for well-being between our communities and the natural environment (Wilkinson, 2023). Queer and Black ecologies thus provide unique opportunities to engage in natural spaces as a means to reconnect with nature and ones-self (Catalano et al., 2019; Jenkins et al., 2015; Morton, 2010). Personal narratives and anecdotes highlighted in Table 1 exemplify some of these experiences and connections.

Expectations of conformity we have often experienced in our daily lives are noticeably absent in nature (Gómez et al., 2023; McLaughlin et al., 2023; Monk et al., 2019), enabling us to embrace our full identities in spaces that are unregulated by hegemonic social or political structures. Further, nature allows us to find kinship and liberation and to develop empathetic connections to certain species or features of the natural world that are often misunderstood or persecuted by others (Estien, 2023; Wilkinson, 2023). We can also gain a deeper understanding of ourselves in our studies of nature by finding mirrors of our own character in research subjects, allowing us to further recognize our power and potential (Estien, 2023).

Despite the comfort and connection afforded by time spent in natural spaces, intersectional identities can also present challenges to joining the conservation field. Structural barriers to accessing nature have long been documented in Black communities (Finney, 2014; Rigolon & Nemeth, 2021) and can result in the notable absence of Black people from these environments. Access to green space is therefore often considered a privilege, and even when we occupy this space, we are regularly monitored and interrogated for our presence (e.g., Herreria, 2018; Levin, 2015; Margaritoff, 2022). Additionally, because the outdoors is a space many of our enslaved ancestors labored to escape, we often experience strong internal and cultural barriers that limit our exposure to nature. Even for those actively looking to participate in conservation, significant consideration goes into determining where queer Black individuals are willing to go due to personal safety concerns. Such considerations inherently limit where we can be and how we can or cannot express our identities (Demery & Pipkin, 2020).

Our experiences shape the way we are collectively able or unable to engage in conservation. However, these commonalities serve as powerful connective tissue in creating a community that can be used to uplift and empower us to persist in our justice-centered conservation work.

## QUEER BLACK CONTRIBUTIONS TO CONSERVATION

Several North America-based initiatives and organizations led by queer Black individuals have done considerable work to steward land with approaches informed by ancestral knowledge, amplify the voices of marginalized identities in conservation, and educate and empower communities. Although these contributions have been systematically underreported, we highlight recent efforts to expand the visibility of queer Black

**TABLE 1** Narratives from queer Black individuals engaging in conservation action and environmental stewardship.

Individual	Occupation or organization	Narrative
Ashia Ajani (she/they)	Environmental justice educator	“Our right to take up space and be out in nature, unabashedly, to enjoy the air and the feel of lake water against our palms, to not fear for our lives, is often dictated through the lens of white supremacy. This is one of the reasons I committed to environmental studies and reclaiming Black and brown ancestral knowledge of the land.”
Elan Alford (she/her)	Plant conservation scientist	“Plant beauty, fragility, and resilience taught me about myself. Finding myself through working with plants has happened gradually after accumulating hours, days, and years working in silence, apart from humans but with sounds of nature, the wind gusting, the birds calling, babbling brooks, buzzing flies, rattling snakes.”
Neshima Vitale-Penniman (she/they)	Soul Fire Farm	“Since I was small, I have gathered and down seeds, discovering deep belonging in intimate relationships with my non-human kin. I have grown to understand this as part of an inheritance from my Black and Indigenous ancestors who recognized land and living beings as inextricably bound with self. As a child of treetops, spring peepers, and thunderstorms, my intersectional identities as a queer multiracial Black-Taino-Jewish-Ifa-practitioner inform my commitment to justice and liberation for the Earth and her marginalized and threatened inhabitants.”
Cesar Estien (he/they)	PhD candidate	“Issues of conservation and justice, particularly those in urban areas, require recognizing and engaging with the many systems of oppression that disproportionately affect us (i.e., (queer) Black people), such as mass incarcerations and community surveillance. So, when I see the future of conservation and inevitably myself in it, I see a justice-centered field that recognizes myriad livelihoods, knowledges, and experiences such that communities that have been oppressed in the name of conservation have stakes in our collective future.”

**TABLE 2** Selection of queer Black-led organizations engaged in conservation action and environmental stewardship and their missions.

Organization	Location	Mission
POC in Wildlife Ecology <a href="https://tinyurl.com/POCinWildlifeEcology">https://tinyurl.com/POCinWildlifeEcology</a>	Online platform	Increase the visibility of People of Color in the field of wildlife ecology and facilitate conversations on how to expand representation and mentorship.
Rootsprings Coop <a href="https://www.rootspringsmn.org/">https://www.rootspringsmn.org/</a>	Annandale, Minnesota	To foster healing, learning, and connection for individuals, community, and Earth centering BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ artists, activists, and healers.
Urban Creators <a href="https://www.urbancreators.org">https://www.urbancreators.org</a>	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	To use food, art, and education as tools to nurture resilience and self-determination in our neighborhoods.
Hilltop Urban Gardens <a href="https://www.hilltopurbangardens.org">https://www.hilltopurbangardens.org</a>	Tacoma, Washington	To develop systems for food sovereignty and create racial and economic justice.

conservationists (Table 2 contains a summary of select organizations). Each of the contemporary programs described below builds on the work and sacrifices of those who came before, including Marsha P. Johnson (her role in the Stonewall Riots set the stage for decades of critical activism to follow), Audre Lorde (often cited for her influence on the feminist movement, Lorde also wrote about the intersection of environmental issues and social justice), and Bayard Rustin (a key figure in the Civil Rights Movement; his commitment to understanding the intersectionality of social issues still informs environmental movements today).

Soul Fire Farm (<https://www.soulfirefarm.org/>) is an Afro-Indigenous community farm in upstate New York committed to uprooting racism and seeding sovereignty in the food system through regenerative agriculture, education, and national organizing. Supported by Neshima Vitale-Penniman, a queer multiracial Black-Taino-Jewish Ifa practitioner, Soul Fire Farm offers food sovereignty programs, including farmer training for Black and Brown growers, reparations and land return initia-

tives for northeastern farmers, and food justice workshops for urban youth. Similarly, the Shelterwood Collective (<https://www.shelterwoodcollective.org/>), cocreated by Niko Alexandre and Layel Camargo, is a 365-ha community forest and collective led by Indigenous, Black, and queer individuals on the unceded Southern Pomo and Kashia territory in Northern California. Shelterwood engages in active forest restoration and wildfire risk reduction, community and cultural organizing, and the development of a community retreat center to heal interconnected ecosystems.

Zoboomafoolish (<https://www.zoboomafoolish.com/>), created by Jaylen Bastos and based in British Columbia, and The Mycelium Youth Network (<https://www.myceliumpyouthnetwork.org/>), founded by Lil Milagro Henriquez and based in Oakland, California, offer workshops and courses in environmental education geared toward bringing Black, Indigenous, people of color, and queer people into environmental spaces. Such programs, including those focusing on climate resilience and urban stream restoration, are vital for

increasing scientific literacy and local engagement for marginalized and underserved communities on environmental issues that directly affect them.

Across various virtual platforms, Black-led groups have organized advocacy events to highlight the specific contributions of Black scientists in multiple disciplines, with many, such as Black in Environment (<https://www.blackinenviro.org/>) and Black Mammalogists Week (<https://www.blackmammalogists.com>), holding space for intersectionality and amplifying queer Black voices (National Geographic, 2021). In addition, several new media projects showcase the experiences of queer Black people in nature and queerness in nature more broadly, including Christian Cooper's new show, "Extraordinary Birder with Christian Cooper" (Moynihan, 2022), and Christine Wilkinson's video series, "Queer is Natural" (National Geographic, 2023). These efforts affirm Black and queer belonging and excellence in the conservation field and provide powerful examples that these identities can thrive in the discipline.

By engaging communities in local conservation efforts, highlighting leaders in the field, and striving to advocate for environmental justice for queer and Black people, these programs empower those often excluded from environmental discourse and decision-making processes that directly affect them. In doing so, they provide marginalized communities with the tools required to protect their futures and emphasize the value of inclusive, justice-oriented environmental practices.

## MISSING VOICES

We outlined the experiences and perspectives of many queer Black conservationists, but it is important to acknowledge that the voices represented are limited. Queer Black people face considerably higher risks of discrimination than those who solely identify as queer (Whitfield et al., 2014), meaning the full intersectional identities of many current and aspiring queer Black conservationists may not be known because of safety concerns. There are likely many who live or work in circumstances and jurisdictions where queerness is illicit or illegal, making it unsafe or difficult to identify openly. For instance, although there are numerous conservation initiatives across Africa (where several of us work), homosexuality is outlawed in 34 African nations as of 2016 (Carroll & Mendos, 2016), and there have been very few positive changes in such laws among these nations since. Even within countries where same-sex partnerships are legal, local stigmas and discrimination prevent people from identifying openly as queer. Additionally, prior generations of queer Black conservationists may not have had opportunities to express their entire selves safely and openly. Thus, although their intersectional identities likely influenced their contributions to conservation, the ways in which intersectionality informed their approaches remain underappreciated. It is therefore crucial that the contributions of these queer Black conservationists be acknowledged, not only to credit their efforts, but also to hold space for their hidden identities. Conservation is practiced in a world that is not uniformly safe for everyone, so we take this

moment to honor those who shrink themselves to protect the world around them as well as themselves.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the colonial and White-supremacist legacies foundational to Western conservation, queer Black people have been integral to this field. Although queer Black conservationists have diverse perspectives, there are commonalities in the barriers we face in entering and maintaining a presence in the conservation field, as well as in the ways that we harness our own positionality when conducting conservation work. Intersectional viewpoints, like those of queer Black communities, challenge dominant structures, such as capitalism and anthropocentrism (Maina-Okori et al., 2017), potentially allowing for more creative and just solutions to environmental problems. Indeed, although intersectionality creates opportunity for compounded discrimination, it can also be harnessed as a connecting strength. Bringing together intersectional conservation actors can enhance innovation and build coalitions across geographies and circumstances and therefore leverage an increased capacity to address complex environmental challenges (see Di Chiro, 2020). By highlighting and cultivating spaces for those with queer Black identities in conservation, we aim to promote intersectional frameworks that encourage us to look inward at our positionalities in this field and outward at the ways in which all members of the discipline can dismantle barriers to access and engagement (Lloro-Bidart & Finewood, 2018). To meet the interconnected needs of both people and nature, conservation spaces must be made safer, more inclusive, and affirming of the unique contributions of marginalized communities. Only through these crucial disciplinary changes can we create conservation spaces that are safe enough to bring our full selves into and strong enough to meet the varied environmental challenges of today.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We extend immense gratitude to the remarkable individuals who shared their personal narratives and stories for this piece, including A. Ajani, S. Austin, and K. Toney. Further, we express our sincere appreciation to those who dedicated their time and effort to provide invaluable feedback and edits. Their keen insights and thoughtful suggestions were instrumental in refining this manuscript. Finally, this piece is dedicated to our queer Black ancestors and chosen families; our voices, courage, strength, and ability to change the world come from you.

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**How to cite this article:** Moore, A. C., Calhoun, K., Wilkinson, C. E., Alford, E., Ellington, A., Estien, C. O., Fleury, G. S., Garcia, N., Hicks, A., Mosley, C., & Vitale-Penniman, N. (2024). Queer Black voices in conservation. *Conservation Biology*, 38, e14385. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.14385>