

Welcoming Spaces: A discussion of diverse green spaces with Refuge Manager, Lamar Gore

Intro

Hello and welcome. This is Welcoming Spaces, an audio story focused on the role of the Fish and Wildlife Service in fostering inclusive and inviting natural spaces that appeal to a diverse public. Today we are speaking with Lamar Gore and discussing how he feels this is an integral aspect of his day-to-day work with the Service. I'm Ansley Nash. Let's dive in.

Ansley: Lamar, hi. Thank you so much for joining me today. To get started, can you introduce yourself, tell us about your role with the service and a little bit about your day to day?

Lamar: So, I'm Lamar Gore. I work at John Hines National Wildlife Refuge at Tencum. And I'm the refuge manager here. And for those who don't know that John Hines is the first urban refuge created by the Fish, Fish and Wildlife Service. And interestingly enough, it's right in an environmental justice community. A part of the refuge is in that community. It's the community of Eastwick and a part of the refuges in Delaware County. It's a place that the community has seen a lot of trials over the years for a variety of reasons. This community used to be 6000 acres of freshwater, tidal marsh and. For many years, that tidal marsh has been cut up into pieces. And a large section of that was converted to the Philadelphia International Airport. Some of that has been converted to oil refinery and some of it into various other industries. And the remaining pieces within the Eastwood community have been converted to homes. And the problem is, when you put homes in places where it used to be tidal marsh, that water is going to find somewhere to go. And where it's going to go is right into people's homes. The community had finally gotten tired of being stepped on all those years when a landfill, two landfills were put in the community, and the interstate highway was direct to go through the community. And they were very upset when the landfill happened. But then when the highway was going to be built, that's what really caused them to take some serious action and enough action that they were taking people on canoeing tours to go down to see the marsh. And they reached out to their congressmen, their senators, and they got Senator Hines' attention, and he helped to get the refuge established. So, it's a refuge that was truly established with community action and really established for environmental education, introducing people to the outdoors, to outdoor recreational experiences, and to protect and preserve their income. Title Mark.

Ansley: How are you and your team at John Hines interacting with diversity, equity and inclusion on a day-to-day basis?

Lamar: So, John Hines we do a lot of things that touch those areas. One of the biggest challenges that I would say we face, and I'm going to say the conservation world at large, which is we don't have a lot of intention around reaching black and brown communities. We have very limited intentionality behind that. Our work is, and this was how I was trained our work is simply we protect green spaces, we protect habitat for wildlife, we protect waterways. Mean, that's what we do in our mission. We talk about for the benefit of the American, but we don't really put many resources into that last part, that benefit of people at Hines, we kind of turn that on his ear a little bit. And in fact,

the work we do, we try to do with community, with the community's ear, with the community's thoughts at heart.

Ansley: What is one way that you all are taking things a step further in connecting with these communities?

Lamar: One of them is our environmental education program. So our environmental education program is one. Our community engagement program is another. And what we call connecting is the third. And connecting is broken down into transportation barriers trying to tear those down, and language barriers, if we run up on any language barriers. So, it's what are those barriers that are there? I would also wrap up into the connecting for my team here at Hines as I'm seeing our own stuff. So, what are we walking into the room with? What biases that we walk into the room? And what are those biases that keep us from seeing community members? Visitors or prospective employees as equals, as being a part of the conversation. That's a really important piece to trying to tear down barriers between black and brown communities and green spaces like here at Heinz and others, but also tearing down barriers between anyone who they might be individual disabilities. We have a lot of barriers there as well and the only way we can tear those down is through building relationship that we're trying to serve. And that takes a lot of intention and really putting yourself on a chopping block as the Fish and Wildlife Service to really take a lot of heat from the public and listen and understand empathize with the public so that we can build back together. I know that's like a phrase that people use a lot, but that's true. You build relationships with and then you can move forward in a more sustainable way into the future.

Ansley: That's great. In that concept of building back, what are some aspects that you consider when creating green spaces that these communities find welcoming and inviting?

Lamar: That's a good one. The first step that I think we often take here is by going into the community so that we can understand a bit more about who they are, their joys, fears, and ways that they like to celebrate in the outdoors. And then we fix our green space. And that starts with communication. So if you roll into Hines or walk into Hines, you'll notice as you're coming in the signage right away. We started focusing on that a while ago, but we probably just finished the last touches of it. So when people come to this refuge, they will see themselves in our signage. You'll see on our signage people interacting with wildlife. And that's pretty important for us. So that they don't think that wildlife refuges are just for wildlife. They're also for people. So that's the first point. And that's just a small thing. Where we probably slip up the most is in our online presentations of the wildlife refuge. And that's on our social media pages, on our websites. Who do we represent in our photography and our videography? Who are we representing there? If we're not representing the people that we know we need to serve better? It's not the most welcoming environment. And the other places where we fall in that is even in our internal documents. So, if we're not talking the language of being welcoming about to everyone in our internal documents, why are we going to do it when we face outside? So it's like training ourselves on the inside so we could do better on the outside. So that's the communication piece. That's the first step in making that happen. And it's kind of easy to do, but it's so ingrained in everything that we do. You could pick up brochures of old and you could see all over those brochures. No one that looks like me. Um, that's changing slowly. But I think we're having a hard go of it. And we're having a hard go of it because it's hard to look internal and see where we fall. It's hard to do that because it means admitting that we've made some mistakes. And that's okay, you're going to make mistakes. We just got to start taking steps. So, you've got the communication piece. And then the next part for us is when we are delivering building programs, delivering programs, building those programs according to what the public is ready for. And that's working with our team to listen, to hear what the community is saying and then

build programs that they're receptive to. And we start that delivery in community and then we bring those similar programs here to the refuge. That's another big part of it. And. The another really important phase is who do we have working at the refuge? And that means being very intentional in our hiring practices and working with your team to understand what we value when we go into hiring. And actually, I'll set first when we go into recruiting and then when we go into hiring. So what do we value? Where are we directing our job searches? What relationships are we building so that the people that we want to bring in to help represent the community, we have an opportunity to actually hire them. And so that means intentional recruitment. And for me and my deputy refuge manager, holding our staff accountable to building a diverse team, so we represent everybody that we serve, and we pay a lot of time to that. That one's really important. We talk about that a lot, and it's hard on the staff to continually talk about that because we have a lot of high functioning people working at this refuge and. They want to just run. So oftentimes, you put the job out. You want to hire someone quick, somebody who hit the ground running. And when you do that, you're not paying attention to intentional recruitment, where you're building a diverse team.

Ansley: How crucial is it that the service focus on building these diverse teams that reflect the people that we serve?

Lamar: Yeah, that's really important for a lot of people that I know that look like me. It was never something that would have stopped me, but it would stop both my brothers, my sister, my father, my mother, most of my cousins. It would stop them. And that's the thing. Everybody's a little different, but I could say the lions share black and brown folks that I know. If they don't see anyone there that like them, they ain't going there. And they don't tell you that ^{4s} they don't see anything on the signage and advertisement outreach materials, forget about it. That's just icing on the cake. But that's the easiest thing to fix are materials. But there's kind of a little stumbling block there. You don't want to change your materials, and then there's no one that's working there or visits the place that looks like that. So some people, they do put the crust outside that's like the outer layer, so they'll fix the signage, but there's no one there, so they're not doing that extra background work. That's the harder work, which is being intentional about recruitment, intentional about working with organizations that represent those communities. I think we have a direct responsibility to deal with it, and it falls on every supervisor in the agency. Every supervisor needs to be having these conversations with their teams, from our leadership all the way down to a supervisor of one or two or somebody that supervises interns. They all have a responsibility to help their teams see themselves, see their barriers, see their privilege, and understand how to listen more when they're engaging with the public, engaging with their target audience, on or off. As you know yourself, you get better at reaching any of those groups on a level where you're listening and for the public, you're empowering through your relationship building. Every supervisor has a responsibility to do that, I think. That a lot of folks will say, I don't have the time to, and I would stop them right there. This is not like an extra duty. This is something that should be folded into all of our works. When we're thinking about hiring, you're automatically layering into that this broader vision of how you engage and knowing yourself. When you're thinking about delivering programs, you're layering it. It's not an extra thing. It's changing your way of thinking. It's changing the culture of how we think, how we behave, how we move forward. A lot of folks think that it's extra money to do this, to train you and your team. Maybe. Yes. You can also do it through experience and going in and engaging and working with communities.

Ansley: How might the public went beyond the service be stewards of welcoming natural spaces.

Lamar: That question that you asked, interestingly, is exactly what the public can do. But a lot of that work for the public. It's personal work. It's the public understanding. Their biases, the public

understanding their place of privilege, because by understanding those things and understand how you're received so this personal awareness, how you're received by others, can help you understand how you can help in creating more inclusive spaces. And that it. When you see your place of privilege and you're engaged with someone, or you see someone that is someone else may be saying something pretty negative about they may be treating someone, really, it helps you to understand how you can step in, how you can interrupt that situation in a fruitful way. A lot of people just turn away from those conversations where someone may be they may walk up to me. Maybe you're the one that's at the other public person. Somebody walks up to me and they're asking me some pretty ridiculous questions like, what are you doing out here? That's a little OD. When somebody asks you a question like that, well, how did you learn about this? You want to say, say what you learned about it. And I don't say that because I actually want to use it as a teaching moment. But when you see that, when someone sees that, how can you interrupt that in a positive way to help educate the person that is perpetrating this kind of activity? I think people can be better witnesses and learn how to interrupt. In those situations, but also if you're heading out with your friends, who else do you know that you can engage with that can help you and your friends understand another culture, another ethnicity, who you can engage with more often to help you understand the dynamics and privilege between white culture and black and own communities? It's very different. And how people can enjoy the outdoors in a place that's mostly white is very different than you if you're white and someone that looks like me. And learning those dynamics is going to help you learn how to engage with others and make outdoor spaces more well. Of me.

Outro

A special thank you to Refuge manager Lamar Gore for joining me today. I hope you all found this conversation inspiring. The interview was conducted by me, Ansley Nash-Schreiner and editing and production was done by myself and Mason Wheatley. Thanks for listening.