

A More Open Outdoors

Marcela Maldonado Medina, preserve stewardship coordinator for The Nature Conservancy in New York, talks about who parks were made to serve and how access to the outdoors has only become more important in the pandemic.

*By Amanda Machado
Photograph by Michael George*

What was an experience you had that made you care about stewarding land?

The first thing that comes to mind is my grandfather's farm in Ecuador. [My grandparents] were cacao farmers and I remember growing up on the farm, running around with my cousins, going down to the river, just having a really amazing time being in nature.

Then I moved to NYC, and the relationship to nature was severed in some ways. In my childhood, I experienced both: having an intimate connection with nature where it was just part of my life, and then having no expectation of nature or land or the outdoors.

For a decade, you've worked in land stewardship, most recently building partnerships with groups like Latino Outdoors and Outdoor Afro. Then the pandemic hit and the TNC preserve you work on, Butler Sanctuary, reported nearly four times as many visitors in 2020 as it had the year before. Has the pandemic shifted how you think about stewarding land?



LAND STEWARD: Marcela Maldonado Medina works with a team across New York to increase access to the outdoors at TNC's preserves, including the Arthur W. Butler Memorial Sanctuary, where she works.

So many people have gotten the chance to reconnect with nature, or connect with nature for the first time, but the majority of those people already had access to it; they just weren't using it. It's fantastic that anyone is getting to experience nature. [But] it was kind of a bummer that the connections people are now making are following the same patterns that were established before.

What are some of those patterns?

Diverse communities have always had less access to nature than white communities. And that dynamic became magnified in the pandemic. Those who had less access before contin-

ued to have less access. And the people who had more access—either by virtue of living closer to nature or having more income to allow them to go out in nature—were the people that really got to enjoy the preserves.

The project I'm working on now focuses on changing the way we approach land management by being more intentional about that equity piece—whether it means creating more sustainable trails that are also more accessible to more people or creating more programming and partnerships. The pandemic gave us an understanding of just how big the inequities were, and it also gave us an opportunity to try

to bridge that gap. I'm leading a team of eight colleagues who are working on this and trying to figure out how this idea gets implemented.

You've written, too, that different cultures and people with different abilities use nature differently. For example, preserves often have narrow trails—built with the assumption that people are hiking solo, rather than with their extended families as many Latinx folks do. What are some examples you've seen? The thing that I'm learning more and more is that by creating access [for] those with the least access, you're actually creating more access for everyone.

One example: We have these preserves that, for the most part, have been managed for this quintessential "alone" experience. But in the pandemic, being in nature has become a social experience. It's a space where folks could meet with friends and safely gather.

If we had originally catered to groups that already did that, then the impact on the preserve's ecology and recreational resources would have been a lot less. Instead, trails were not ready for the kind of social experience people were craving during the pandemic, because we weren't managing for that.

Protecting the ecology of a place and opening it up to the public are so often pitted against each other. What are some concrete steps you think we can take to bring them into alignment? Professionals who have been advocating for accessible trails have always made it very clear that accessible trails are also sustainable trails—the Venn diagram is almost

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a circle in the ways that accessibility and sustainability overlap. Now, when you think about accessible trails—which might have a hard surface or are very wide and basically flat—having those everywhere is not possible. But you can still have trails that are built sustainably, that minimize the amount of obstacles, that are maintained to follow the landscape rather than go against it. In doing that, you're creating more sustainable trails because you're minimizing erosion, and you're providing more accessible trails because those tend to be easier to maneuver.

After a year of managing a preserve with so many more visitors than normal, what were the biggest challenges? I think about that incident in New York City with Amy Cooper, the white woman that called the cops on a Black man in the park [when he asked her to put a leash on her dog].

At the beginning of the pandemic, I stopped monitoring some preserves as often, because it became impossible to go more than a mile without telling multiple people to put their dogs on a leash, and some of them had become angered in their entitlement that I would tell them to not do something. I started to feel unsafe in the preserves that I manage. I've sat with that: the privilege that some people carry, and the entitlement

in terms of how they experience nature, and how they can make nature and the outdoors unsafe for others.

Right, who feels entitled to be outdoors to the extent that they don't consider the presence of others? And who feels the opposite? Yes, stewardship itself is a very white profession. It tends to skew white and male. And at times—not always, because I have a great team, but at times—it has felt very isolating to do this work. I am lucky that I have supervisors who are willing to listen and make space for me. But to be so visually different and advocate for change has at times felt isolating.

I'm hopeful that by creating more access to nature and experiences for more diverse people, those experiences will create more stewards of color, and create more opportunities for people who look like me to both be in nature and to take care of nature.

That makes me think of your family's cacao farm in Ecuador. It's such a tragic irony that some of the original stewards of nature have now become the people most displaced from it. When you say that stewarding is such a “white profession,” I'm also like “but wait, you come from a family of cacao farmers!” Yes! I come from a family of stewards. We have just never called them that. •