

MIGRATION, ENFORCEMENT AND TRASHING THE DESERT: DISCOURSES OF
SOCIAL NATURE FROM ARIZONA BORDER ACTIVISTS

by

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis Rachel W. Alexander has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Politics-Environmental Studies.

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SECTION I: THE PROBLEM WITH NATURE

In 1996, the Sierra Club provoked outrage among members when its Board of Directors adopted a policy to “take no position on immigration levels or on policies governing immigration into the United States.”¹ After more than two decades of advocating for an end to U.S. population growth (considering factors including immigration), the Club’s reversal shocked many members, who felt domestic overpopulation was a serious issue that needed to be addressed. Ben Zuckerman, a member who was later elected to the Board of Directors in 2002 on an anti-immigrant platform, argued that immigrants pushed wages down for poor Americans, strained social services and caused further environmental degradation. While ostensibly concerned about environmental impacts, his comments on population growth blamed uneducated Latina women for these ills:

Looking at Hispanic fertility in a little more detail, one discovers that, like other peoples, the more educated Hispanic women are, the smaller are their families. If Hispanic women were better educated, then they would have fewer babies. But a positive feedback loop prevents this. So long as immigrants keep pouring in and overwhelming services and schools in the inner cities, educational levels of Hispanics will not rise (nor those of other poor Americans).²

Zuckerman led a movement of members who called for a club-wide referendum on the organization’s stance on immigration. While the majority of voters elected to remain neutral, 40 percent dissented, favoring a stance committed to reducing net immigration.

Fast forward to 2013, and the Sierra Club has a full-time staff member based in Tucson who runs the organization’s Borderlands campaign, which seeks to educate people about the negative environmental impacts of enforcement measures on the U.S.-

¹ Alice Clarke, “The Sierra Club and Immigration Policy: A Critique,” *Politics and the Life Sciences*, 20:1 (2001), 21.

² Ben Zuckerman, “The Sierra Club Immigration Debate: National Implications.” *Population and Environment*, 2:5 (1999), 409.

Mexico border. Dan Millis, the campaign's director, is a former volunteer with No More Deaths, a humanitarian aid group based in Tucson, and frequently mentions the human costs of immigration policy in his work. While the Sierra Club's official position on immigration remains neutral, the website for the Borderlands campaign explains that existing immigration enforcement isn't working and advocates for reform which addresses root causes of migration to prevent further environmental damage and human suffering in the Southwest.³

How did we get here? How did Sierra Club members go from demonizing Latina women's fertility as a cause of environmental degradation to advocating for removal of the border wall, alongside groups like No More Deaths?

When I initially looked into this question, I received fairly straightforward answers from my interviewees,⁴ as well as the websites of their respective organizations. Environmentalists were drawn to border issues because of the wall's impacts on wildlife migration, and the provisions of the 2005 Real ID Act, which gave the Secretary of Homeland Security the authority to waive all major environmental legislation in the U.S. for wall construction. Border enforcement threatened both people and environment, so an alliance between groups made sense.

Beneath this agreement on policy, though, I discovered tension about human migrants themselves and the impacts they were having in the desert. This wasn't surprising: even outright anti-immigrant sentiment in environmentalism is nothing new, as the 1996 Sierra Club debates reflected. The original preservationist movement, where U.S. environmentalism has its roots, advocated for the creation of the first U.S. National

³ Sierra Club, sierraclub.org/borderlands. Accessed April 12, 2013.

⁴ Prior to my formal research, I spent one month in Arizona (June 2012) collecting preliminary data and interviewing people who worked for environmental organizations in the Tucson area.

Parks largely in response to white anxieties about a growing tide of immigrants which were transforming the nation.⁵ Preserving America's natural heritage went hand-in-hand with the preservation of the white nation, and racial "others" were seen as a direct threat to supposedly pristine natural areas. Discourses about nature which characterized wild spaces as "pure" and "pristine" were explicitly used to exclude along racial lines, preserving wilderness for the benefit of white men.

Today, environmental organizations tend not to be explicitly anti-immigrant, and every employee of a major environmental organization I spoke to had great personal compassion for the fate of migrants, as well as an understanding that many of them are encouraged to leave their homes by forces beyond their control. Still, employees of environmental organizations, with the exception of Dan Millis, told me they didn't often work deliberately with migrant aid groups. Several environmentalists I spoke to expressed frustration that the combined impacts of migrants, border enforcement and drug smugglers were ruining the "wilderness character" of the desert. And one environmental organizer, when asked about the human costs of immigration policy, told me, "It's just as impactful to the staff and visitors at Organ Pipe [National Monument] to discover dead bodies."

In large part, uneasiness about migrants seemed tied to ideas about the pristine character of the desert: regardless of their control over the situation, migrants were making the desert less "wilderness." After conversations with environmental organization leaders, I wanted to better understand the role of discourse about the desert in framing issues of migration. The stories I heard from people with desk jobs suggested tension

⁵ Jake Kosek, *Understories: The Political Lives of Forests in Northern New Mexico*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), 151.

between compassion for migrants as individuals and concerns about retaining a desert free from human influences. How might re-conceiving of nature, outside of ideas about a “pristine” or “pure” space, change perceptions of migration in the desert? Could a more contextualized, social view of nature yield new environmental discourses which weren’t founded on racial exclusion?

To answer this question, I turned to people on the ground: people who were concerned about environmental issues and had engaged in migrant aid work.⁶ After my preliminary conversations with environmentalists, I conducted two weeks of interview-based research with individuals in the Tucson area, focusing on stories about their experiences in the desert. Based on analysis of these interviews, I argue that the stories told by environmentalists who have engaged in migrant aid work in the Arizona desert outside of Tucson are creating an emerging concept of social nature, a view which breaks down the dichotomy between nature and culture, and suggests that human influences in so-called “natural” spaces can be read as part of the place itself, not an inherently bad outside influence. I use critical race scholarship and social nature theory to demonstrate the flaws in the view of nature-as-pristine, and establish that mainstream environmentalism continues to rely on this view in present-day activism. I then discuss the characteristics of social nature discourses emerging from border activism and demonstrate how these discourses construct a vision of nature which does not derive its desirability from positioning “nature” as free from human influence. Ultimately, I argue

⁶ While my original goal was to find people who worked for large environmental organizations who had also done migrant aid work, I was not able to identify enough individuals to study, so I broadened my criteria to ordinary people. I initially sought out “environmentalists” for my study, but found that some people who were concerned about issues that would normally be called environmental (such as habitat preservation) chose not to identify as environmentalists, often because they associated that label with racially exclusionary or elitist practices.

that this vision results in a concept of nature which does not rely on racial exclusion, and suggest that there are signs that these views are beginning to have influence on established environmental organizations.

SECTION II: VISIONS OF “PRISTINE” NATURE AND RACIAL EXCLUSION

This section critically examines the concept of “pristine” nature as it has been used by the American environmental movement. I begin by outlining environmental scholarship which focuses on the historical inaccuracy of “pristine” nature and examining the way discourses of race and nature during the era of American wilderness worked to exclude along racial lines. Through critical race theory, I establish the importance of discursive practices in racializing space and denoting who belongs in particular landscapes.

After demonstrating the way discourse functions to classify certain bodies as un-ecological, I show ways in which racial exclusion operates in mainstream environmental practice. I argue that the theory of social nature, which seeks to incorporate subjectivity and social context into discussions of nature, presents a possibility to engage with these critiques of pristine nature, although environmentalists remain reluctant to abandon the “pristine” discourse which has been so central to their movement. I then apply analysis of racialized environmental discourse to the U.S.-Mexico border, a space where migrant bodies are portrayed by media, government, law enforcement and others as not-belonging, and often un-ecological. While the material aspects of racial exclusion and environmental degradation on the border are well-studied, environmentalist discourses about how migrants fit into the desert have received almost no attention. I argue that critical analysis of the way human rights volunteers on the border conceptualize nature would yield important insights into how an alternative conception of nature which doesn't exclude along racial lines might function in practice.

Racial exclusion in nature

Critical environmental historians and geographers have complicated the idea of nature untouched by humans through a number of analyses. “Pristine” nature is, in almost all cases, ecologically inaccurate and often obscures prior influences, including indigenous management practices⁷ and more modern human constructions, including mining and road-building.⁸ Cosgrove argues that white Americans retreated to nature in response to an influx of immigrants from 1890-1914, because wilderness offered the chance to preserve the remaining parts of the nation which had not been tainted by association with foreigners.⁹ By examining nature in this context, environmental historians have illuminated a shared history between the creation of American nature and larger colonization ambitions. The fact that removal of American Indians was a necessary precursor to creating sites of protected nature has been widely discussed,¹⁰ but this history has been erased from modern discussions because wilderness is supposed to be ahistorical and timeless,¹¹ a viewpoint which renders invisible those who were dispossessed and cast aside in order to create it.

⁷ James Proctor, “Whose Nature?: The Contested Moral Terrain of Ancient Forests,” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, edited by William Cronon, 269-297. (New York: W.W. Wharton & Company, 1996), 276.

⁸ Mark Harvey, “Loving the Wild in Postwar America,” in *American Wilderness: A History*, edited by Michael Lewis, 187-203, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 191; Proctor, “Whose Nature,” 285.

⁹ Cosgrove, “Habitable Earth,” 35. See also Sarah Jaquette Ray, “Endangering the Desert: Immigration, the Environment, and Security in the Arizona–Mexico Borderland,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 17:4 (2010): 709-734.

¹⁰ Cronon, “In Search of Nature,” see also Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001; Carolyn Merchant, “Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as Recovery Narrative,” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, edited by William Cronon, 132-159, New York: W.W. Wharton & Company, 1996; Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves and the Hidden History of American Conservation*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001; Benjamin Johnson, “Wilderness Parks and Their Discontents.” In *American Wilderness: A History*, edited by Michael Lewis, 113-130. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

¹¹ William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, edited by William Cronon, New York: W.W. Wharton & Company, 1996, 79.

While environmental historians have complicated the pristine vision of nature, their analysis stops short of a critical discussion of the concept of race. William Cronon's account notes that the creation of wilderness areas "followed hard on the heels of the final Indian wars, in which the prior inhabitants of these areas were rounded up and moved out."¹² This account suggests that the removal of Indians was a convenience which allowed for the establishment of wilderness, and offers no insight into the role that naturalized discourses about race played in both the decision to remove Indians *and* the decision to establish nature reserves.

Critical race theory has stepped into this gap, working to develop the intersections between race and nature and noting the ways these two concepts have influenced and shaped each other. Critical race scholarship emerged in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, and sought to critique liberal solutions to racial problems, as well as understand the origins of race as a category via the application of social sciences.¹³ In the present day, race and nature are often portrayed as separate and discrete categories which exist outside of social constructions. This disjunction ignores a long history of naturalized ideas about race and obscures the way nature functions to justify and legitimize racial exclusion. For instance, Haraway notes that the eugenics movement relied on a conception of a "natural" hierarchy between races with biologically defined characteristics and differences. The idea of race-mixing for much of American history was seen as "a venereal disease of the social body," with the category of race itself so

¹² Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 79.

¹³ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic. "Critical Race Theory: An Annotated Bibliography," *Virginia Law Review* 79:2 (1993), 461-516, 461.

naturalized that even those fighting against this discourse “accepted race as a meaningful object of scientific knowledge.”¹⁴

Jake Kosek also discusses the slaughter and land theft which accompanied the creation of America’s National Parks, but does so in a way which engages with the concept of whiteness. In a historical moment “filled with obsession over the purity of bloodlines and the nation’s body politics,” where western expansion was perceived as the “natural ‘destiny’ of whites,” it was no coincidence that the wilderness movement emerged.¹⁵ Kosek discusses the way John Muir and other early wilderness pioneers perceived nature as universal, something good for men’s souls. However, this “universal” notion of nature was built for white men, as Muir complained that he was unable to find “solemn calm” in the wilderness when Hispanos, “Chinamen” and Indians were present.¹⁶ Thus, early environmentalist claims about nature’s spiritual and soul-renewing properties can be understood as tied to a particular racial vision which excluded non-white actors as explicitly anti-environmental.

For Kosek, connecting critical race theory to environmental politics produces possibilities for better understanding both. This framework allows us to deny race as a fixed, biological category while also understanding the very real implications that different skin colors play in individuals’ lived experiences.¹⁷ Central to the examination of nature and race is the notion of racialized spaces: spaces where bodies are understood to belong or not belong based on race. Analyzing these spaces shows us “what it means

¹⁴ Donna Haraway, “Universal Donors in a Vampire Culture: It’s all in the Family: Biological Kinship Categories in Twentieth Century United States,” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, edited by William Cronon, 321-366 (New York: W.W. Wharton & Company, 1996), 339.

¹⁵ Kosek, *Understories*, 154.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

to be white in such a space, and what it means not to be white in that space.”¹⁸ Many scholars have analyzed the formation of racialized spaces through policy, describing how practices such as the racial profiling of black Americans¹⁹ or a history of exclusionary zoning codes²⁰ constructs certain spaces as belonging to whites. Racialized space, however, is also constructed discursively. The importance of discourses in shaping space should not be overlooked, because “power is diffuse—it operates unannounced in myriad social practices, including those we take as ‘merely’ discursive.”²¹ Many critical race scholars thus focus their examinations of nature and race on the discursive practices which describe who does and does not belong in “natural” spaces.

In *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico*, Jake Kosek analyzes exclusionary discourses through the figure of Smokey Bear, a mascot used by the U.S. Forest Service to promote awareness about forest fires. The U.S. government developed Smokey’s precursors during World War II, as a way of encouraging stewardship of the nation’s natural resources, perceived to be under attack from racialized “others” (in this case, caricatured images of Japanese men). With this history in mind, Kosek explains that the modern-day image of Smokey reads as a representation of U.S. colonialism to many Hispanos living in and near National Forests in Northern New Mexico. Smokey’s reminders that “only you can prevent forest fires”

¹⁸ Heidi Barajas and Amy Ronnkvist, “Racialized Space: Framing Latino and Latina Experiences in Public Schools,” *Teachers College Record* 109:6 (2007), 1517-1538.

¹⁹ Tim Bates and David Fasenfest, “Enforcement Mechanisms Discouraging Black American Presence in Suburban Detroit,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29:4 (2005), 960-971.

²⁰ See Laura Pulido, “Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 90:1 (2000), 12-40 and Rebecca Alexander, “Marking Whiteness: Geographies of Colorblind Liberalism,” *UC Berkeley: Institute for the Study of Societal Issues* (2011). Retrieved from: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8gt8w8fp>

²¹ Bruce Braun and Noel Castree, “The Construction of Nature and the Nature of Construction: Analytical and Political Tools for Building Survivable Futures,” in *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium*, edited by Bruce Braun and Noel Castree (New York: Routledge, 2005), 18.

place responsibility on protecting nature on the nation as a whole, suggesting Hispanos who have lived in the area for generations do not hold legitimate claims to the land and are bad environmental stewards, incapable of adequately “protecting” the forest.

Bruce Braun provides a further example in his analysis of a struggle to preserve a particular segment of forest in British Columbia. While the idea of “saving” forested land seems unproblematic, the campaign was led by white environmentalists, who gave themselves authority to speak “for” nature, ignoring claims by indigenous people who actually lived in the forests in question.²² Andrew Baldwin documents a similar case where dominant discourses constructed indigenous actors as being passively harmed in the face of modernization, or as active agents only in their ability to be guardians and caretakers of nature, thus fitting into a preconceived white notion of indigeneity.²³ In both cases, arguments for preservation led to portrayals of both nature and indigenous culture which were selected deliberately for political purposes. Ray notes such constructions rob indigenous groups of any ecological agency and “ignores historical and contemporary realities in favor of white environmentalist sentiments.”²⁴ These discourses contribute to the white imperial project by constructing the “ecological Indian” and reinforcing dominant social hierarchies in a way which appears natural.²⁵

²² Bruce Braun, “Saving Clayquot: Wilderness and the Politics of Indigeneity.” In *The Intemperate Rainforest: Nature, Culture and Power on Canada’s West Coast*, 66-108. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

²³ Andrew Baldwin. “Carbon Nullius and Racial Rule: Race, Nature and the Cultural Politics of Forest Carbon in Canada.” *Antipode* 41:2 (2009), 248.

²⁴ Sarah Jaquette Ray, “The Ecological Other: Indians, Invalids and Immigrants in U.S. Environmental Thought and Literature” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oregon, 2009), 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.* See also Baldwin, “Carbon Nullius,” 248.

Modern environmentalism & social nature

The mainstream environmental movement²⁶ has begun to acknowledge the problematic history associated with the creation of “nature,” as well as the problems with framing nature as pristine and free from human or social influences. In spite of this, major environmental groups continue to act in ways which exclude racial “others” from nature in favor of white environmentalist sentiments. International carbon offset programs, for instance, allow carbon emitters to buy “offsets” in the form of protected forest reserves in the Global South. These programs have been widely criticized as a form of colonialism,²⁷ in part because they often displace indigenous people from their lands so that the forest can be “preserved” in its “natural” state.²⁸ Nevertheless, major environmental organizations like Greenpeace remain involved in setting up these types of offset agreements, although they perpetuate the pristine nature ideal at the expense of indigenous people who actually live in the “natural” areas in question.

The problematic aspects of “nature” have led some scholars to call for an alternative conception of nature which eliminates the nature/culture divide in favor of “social nature.” Margaret Fitzsimmons, one of the early geographers to advocate for this approach, describes social nature as “the geographical and historical dialectic between societies and their material environments.”²⁹ Rather than being a fixed entity across space and time, nature is understood as “socially produced.” Ideas about what counts as nature

²⁶ When I speak about the environmental movement, I am referring to the group of major, well-known environmental organizations in the U.S., such as the Sierra Club, World Wildlife Fund, Greenpeace and the Wilderness Society. I have selected groups such as these because they employ similar discourses, goals and tactics in their work, and collectively, I believe they best represent the dominant American method of relating to and discussing nature. These groups also have a significant amount of political power and influence which many smaller, more radical or critical groups currently lack.

²⁷ Heidi Bachram, “Climate fraud and carbon colonialism: the new trade in greenhouse gases,” *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 15:4 (2004), 5-20.

²⁸ Journalist Mark Schapiro documents one example of this at:

<http://www.motherjones.com/environment/2009/11/gms-money-trees>

²⁹ Margaret Fitzsimmons, “The Matter of Nature,” *Antipode* 21:2 (1989), 106

and how humans should relate to it reflect the beliefs and values of culture(s) or individual(s), rather than any fixed or objective qualities of “nature” itself. Over the past two decades, a growing number of geographers and critical race theorists have embraced the idea of social nature as a way of moving beyond the pristine and racially exclusionary visions which dominate discourses about nature.

While social nature theory is diverse and draws on many fields, scholars share a common interest in examining existing conceptions of nature and challenging their naturalness. Noel Castree, who has written extensively about social nature, defines the Western conception of nature to be both external and universal.³⁰ These conceptions underlie the belief that nature is knowable and legible to humans, and can be studied objectively in order to establish truth. Social nature theorists argue that this approach is problematic, because objective “facts” can never be separated from their interpretation by particular individuals or groups who have particular points of view. “Statements about nature say as much about who is doing the talking, and what their individual group interests are, as they say about nature *tout court*.”³¹

Because “knowing” nature is inherently problematic, these theorists suggest re-conceptualizing “nature” to include and encompass the social influences which shape it. Debates about human intervention in “nature,” and indeed, the meaning of nature itself, should be understood as “a focal point for a nexus of political-economic relations, social identities, cultural orderings and political aspirations of all kinds.”³²

³⁰ Noel Castree, “Socializing the Natural,” in *Social Nature: Theory, Practice and Politics*, edited by Noel Castree and Bruce Braun, Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2001, 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 9

³² Braun and Castree, “The Construction of Nature,” 4

Social nature opens many possibilities for environmental groups, from challenging racist patterns of exclusion to allowing for a more nuanced conversation about human impacts in protected areas. However, the environmental movement has been reluctant to accept any idea which challenges something as fundamental as the idea of “nature.” David Demeritt suggests this is due to fear that deconstruction ultimately leads to a world of relativism, where no human actions in a particular place can be judged as “bad” or detrimental. As an alternative, he posits Haraway’s vision of “situated knowledge,” where we acknowledge the “historical contingency for knowledge claims and knowing subjects” while simultaneously insisting on a “no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of the real world.”³³ This idea offers a promising way to blend environmental concerns with a more accurate view of nature, but the continued environmentalist reliance on discourses and practices of pristine nature suggest that, at the very least, environmentalists are unsure how social nature theory might be incorporated into their day-to-day activism.

Having established the history of racial exclusion which the pristine nature ideal has led to, I believe the environmental movement stands to benefit greatly from incorporating a more social view of nature into its practice. I now turn my analysis to the U.S.-Mexico border, which I will argue represents a productive site for analyzing the discursive practices of environmentalists in relation to nature and racial exclusion.

³³ David Demeritt, “Being Constructive About Nature,” in *Social Nature: Theory, Practice and Politics*, edited by Noel Castree and Bruce Braun, Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2001, 36.

Racialized border space

The U.S.-Mexico border is a highly racialized space, where white bodies are read as belonging, while brown bodies are perceived as illegal, out of place and deportable. More than simply being a physical line or location, the border is increasingly performed on migrant bodies, which are surveilled and controlled in order to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of movement and migration.³⁴ The material actions of the Border Patrol and other law enforcement agencies interact with policies of border militarization and discourses about illegality and belonging, all of which reinforce the idea of brown bodies as out of place in both the borderlands and the U.S.³⁵

Environmentalists entering this racialized space interact with various facets of racialization in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Many ecologists have noted the negative impacts of border militarization on wildlife habitat and hydrology.³⁶ Employees of federal land management agencies often feel a conflict between their job to conserve federal lands, and their duty to support federal immigration enforcement efforts.³⁷ Issues such as habitat fragmentation concern many major environmental organizations, which are actively engaged in advocacy against further border militarization. In effect, these groups are challenging some of the material actions and policies which produce racialized space.

In spite of working against some aspects of racialization, environmentalists may also reinforce racialization through discourses about what nature should be. Giovanna

³⁴Meghan McDowell and Nancy Wonders, "Keeping Migrants in Their Place: Technologies of Control and Racialized Public Space in Arizona," *Social Justice* 36:2 (2009), 56.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 54

³⁶ Nathan Sayre and Richard Knight, "Potential effects of United States-Mexico border hardening on ecological and human communities in the Malpai borderlands," *Conservation Biology*, 24:1 (2009): 345–348.

³⁷ Rachel Shellabarger, Markus Nils Peterson and Erin Sills, "How conservation and humanitarian groups respond to production of border security on the Arizona–Sonora border," *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability*, 17:4 (2012): 481-493.

DiChiro notes that the image of the “border-overflowing and ecologically incorrect Third Wordler or illegal immigrant” remains pervasive, and suggests that this image constructs migrants as anti-nature.³⁸ Several geographers have explored this possibility, though it remains less well-studied than the ways in which environmentalists interact with border policy. Sarah Ray draws on geography, environment and critical race theory to examine discourses about “trash” left by migrants in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona. She identifies an environmental discourse she calls the “poetics of trash,” which frames immigration as “dirty, ecologically irresponsible, and morally impure.”³⁹ This discourse allows the observer to ignore larger causes of environmental degradation and human rights violations on the border in favor of demonizing migrants, and obscures the sociopolitical context which compels many migrants to enter the desert.

Juanita Sundberg performs a similar discursive analysis of humanitarian aid groups which organize “trash” pick-ups in the Arizona desert.⁴⁰ She questions the labeling of personal items and mementos left behind by migrants as “trash,” and suggests that both this labeling and the practice of picking up “trash” reinforce the social norm of cleanliness, a category which is coded as (white) American. While these pick-ups are intended as neutral or beneficial projects, they actually reinforce the idea that migrants don’t belong in either desert or nation.

Ray’s and Sundberg’s work stands out among scholarship on the U.S.-Mexico border for engaging with both humanitarian and environmentalist concerns, and critically

³⁸ DiChiro, “Nature as Community,” 311.

³⁹ Sarah Jaquette Ray, “Endangering the Desert: Immigration, the Environment, and Security in the Arizona–Mexico Borderland” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 17:4 (2010), 713

⁴⁰ Juanita Sundberg, “‘Trash-talk’ and the production of quotidian geopolitical boundaries in the USA–Mexico borderlands,” *Social and Cultural Geography*, 9:8 (2008): 871-890

examining racial discourses. In contrast, most scholarship examines environmental issues on the border from the more straightforward perspective of biology or ecology, primarily concentrating on material actions and policies.

Existing scholarship on race and nature at the border suggests that environmentalists acting in this space operate under the pristine nature vision, where any impacts by migrants disrupt the “naturalness” of the desert space. My research seeks to complicate this understanding by engaging with individuals who are concerned about environmental issues and also engaged in migrant aid work on the border. I ask how the stories these individuals tell about their experiences in the desert construct nature, and how these constructions frame migration, migrants and their place in the desert.

SECTION III: CREATING NEW DISCOURSES

Having established the problematic aspects of a “pristine” conception of nature, I now turn to an analysis of environmental discourse on the U.S.-Mexico border. My research involved interviews with 13 individuals engaged in migrant aid work in the desert near Tucson, Arizona, predominantly through involvement with the humanitarian aid group No More Deaths.⁴¹ I interviewed participants about their experiences with migrant aid work, their relationship with the desert and the ways they believe the desert is impacted by migration.

I argue that an emergent conception of social nature which does not exclude along racial lines is being developed on the Arizona border, as people who are concerned about environmental issues work with humanitarian aid groups to combat human rights violations. Environmentalists who have engaged in migrant aid work for extended periods of time are, to varying degrees, reconstructing their definitions of nature to incorporate human influences and break down the nature/culture divide which has been the cornerstone of the mainstream environmental movement for decades. The emergent vision of nature they are developing is one in which migrants are not viewed as inherently un-ecological, and presents the possibility for environmentalists to advocate for causes like preserving wildlife habitat *while simultaneously* viewing human migration and its associated impacts as part of the desert landscape.

Like most environmentalists, interview subjects displayed a love for the desert and a concern for its preservation, noting its value as a site of diverse habitat for plants

⁴¹ No More Deaths works to end death and suffering on the U.S.-Mexico border through “civil initiative”—citizens taking action to uphold human rights where government is the violator. The organization maintains several camps in the desert outside of Tucson which are equipped with supplies. Volunteers patrol the desert and leave water and food at designated drop points, while providing medical assistance for migrants they encounter.

and animals, its beauty, and its functionality as an ecosystem. Where my subjects differed from many environmentalists was in their ability, to varying degrees, to speak about the desert as a valuable place without constructing it as pristine or free from human influence. The stories I heard over the course of my research suggested an ability to merge the social with the “natural” and read some human influences on the desert, in past and present times, as a part of the place itself, and not an aberration or something which should be merely tolerated. Specifically, interviewees’ comments about the desert’s history as a site of migration and the ways they framed discussions about migrant “trash” suggested a new, more social vision of nature. This vision left volunteers room to fight against border militarization through discourses which focused on overarching concerns of justice, rather than ideas about “pristine” nature.

For many subjects, concern for the desert and for the migrants crossing through it was part of a shared ethic about the world, and for some, this ethic was profoundly related to their views of nature. Many subjects told stories about conflicts between their love of the desert and the migrants’ experiences of suffering and death in the same landscape. These stories are told at points of tension between contrasting visions of nature, showing that the volunteers I spoke to have learned that their experiences with nature are not universal, and that multiple readings of a single landscape are possible and valid. The subjectivity of nature is an important concept in social nature theory, and many volunteers were able to clearly describe the ways in which their experiences with nature were functions of their race, nationality and other social factors.

A note on methodology

While I initially planned to record all of my interviews and conversations, there were times during my research when this wasn't possible. Sometimes, I spoke to individuals while we were out in the field. In other cases, I decided having a recorder present would fundamentally alter the nature of the conversation, especially in more intimate or casual settings. Instead, I took detailed notes during my interviews, writing many parts of conversations down verbatim, added my own reflections and additional notes immediately post-interview, and typed these notes up shortly after the initial interview. Thus, while the extended quotes I use throughout this section are not always a word-for-word transcription of what my subjects said to me, I am confident that they accurately reflect the stories and experiences I was told.

Reading human influences

Perhaps the most important characteristic of social nature is an ability to think beyond the idea of humans and nature as separate and conflicting forces. Almost all of the people I spoke to were able to understand that the desert has had and continues to have non-negative human influences, most notably a history of migration and continued habitation by indigenous peoples which has gone on for centuries. While mainstream environmental thinking often moralizes human footprints as "bad" regardless of context, many of the people I spoke to had a more nuanced view which was context-dependent and didn't necessarily assume that humans shaping the desert was wrong or counter to the desert's wildness.

The best example of a social nature vision of human impacts in the desert came

from John Fife, the founder of No More Deaths, who has been doing migrant aid work in the Sonoran Desert for several decades. John told me that he first came to Arizona when he was in seminary and was assigned to spend time living with indigenous people in the Sonoran. His introduction to the desert was deeply tied to a human view of the place: he was taken to sacred sites, saguaro wine festivals and many other events which have deep significance for the O’odham people. On the issue of migration, he explained:

The desert has always been a place of migration. The elders I stayed with told me to always provide hospitality to people passing through ... Migration is part of what it means to be a desert, globally. What’s not normal is funneling that migration, which was taking place over 2400 miles of desert, into 260 miles.

By recognizing the historical human migration patterns through the desert, John is able to conceive of human migration as an integral part of the desert itself. Accepting this type of human presence is very different from sanctioning any and all human activity, and John is quite clear that the current situation on the border has been produced by other human influences—a particular enforcement strategy designed to control and limit migration.

John’s ultimate goal is justice for the people and communities impacted by current policy:

JF: I’d like to see legal status for all those who are here, document all workers, tourists and students, and for migrants to go with dignity through ports of entry. I hope the desert continues to be as much wilderness as possible ... I love the emptiness, feeling insignificant in the vastness.

RA: What does wilderness mean to you? Is it a legal designation?

JF: It’s the state of the land, not the legal designation. I’ve been on private rangeland that I consider pristine wilderness.

John’s story is significant because it values many of the things that environmentalism has traditionally looked for in “wild” spaces while simultaneously reading those spaces through a human lens. His view of desert references the peace and serenity many volunteers described experiencing while outside, but he doesn’t presume that human

activities are necessarily destructive. He draws distinctions between types of human activity based on historical context and a broad concern for justice, which allows him to fit migrants into his view of what a desert is without portraying them as entirely helpless victims of circumstances beyond their control or as willful actors who are disrupting the “wilderness character” of the desert.

Sarah Lanius, another longtime No More Deaths volunteer, blended a historical understanding of migration with a recognition that migration isn't always freely chosen:

My understanding from elders that I know through the movement is that the desert regions where No More Deaths works have always been kind of migratory paths. There are Yaqui shrines out near us where that was a pathway. So for me, [the desert] is not necessarily the migrant's place because every migrant has one or more homes. But it is that act of mobility, of movement ... For me, I understand migrants as enacting a longstanding practice, not always a chosen practice, or chosen totally freely, if such a thing even exists.

Focusing on the historical fact of migration allows Sarah see the desert as a space of migration. However, she doesn't fall into the trap of naturalizing human migration by portraying it as inevitable: she's cognizant that decisions about whether and how to migrate are shaped by circumstances, such as economic conditions, which can be changed. In this equation, migrants are neither a new wave of dangerous, un-environmental “others” flooding the country, nor are they victims forced into the desert who can't help destroying its “wilderness character.” By viewing migrants as people with agency whose choices are nevertheless shaped by particular enforcement patterns and economic conditions, Sarah, John and other volunteers are re-writing the desert as an environment where migration has a place, while simultaneously leaving space to advocate for policies which would reduce human migration through the desert via improving conditions for would-be migrants.

“Trash” and the border

Discarded migrant belongings and waste have been central to environmentalist debates over migration and its environmental impacts. If migrants themselves do not belong in the desert, it follows that the belongings they leave behind are unnatural, mere “trash” which should be picked up and discarded. Concerns over trash have been raised by environmental groups themselves, as well as people appropriating environmentalist rhetoric to argue against immigration.⁴²

In a setting where migrant bodies are seen as out-of-place and destructive, while border enforcement is perceived as a (legitimate) response to the problem of unauthorized migration, migrant aid volunteers’ conversations about “trash” are complicating these stark divides. While many of the volunteers I spoke to were concerned about “trash” or discarded migrant possessions, several identified other ways of thinking about the human material in the desert. Jim Marx, an older No More Deaths volunteer, told me he was out patrolling with a group of college students when they found a shirt hanging in a mesquite bush. He was going to pick it up, as is common practice, but the students he was with stopped him, saying the shirt might be a trail marker. Jim elaborated:

The students were struck by “personal artifacts,” like backpacks, versus trash, like water bottles. I’d never thought about it that way before, but it’s an important distinction and it took new eyes to help me see it.

Jim’s new vision allowed him to understand some of the objects left behind as personal artifacts which could help guide other migrants safely through the desert. Trail markers, in contrast to “trash,” are useful objects serving a specific purpose, challenging the notion that everything migrants leave behind is waste.

⁴² Ray, “Endangering the Desert.”

Dan Millis, who spent a significant amount of time volunteering with No More Deaths before becoming the director of the Sierra Club's Borderlands campaign, has organized trash pick-ups with other volunteers. While he tends to think of trash as an environmental concern, his views have become more complicated as he's encountered other ways of viewing trash.

DM: Some people I've gone out with view trash differently. Some people feel you shouldn't clean it up, because it's an anthropological relic or resource, and I would tend to agree with this view too. There's a professor at the University of Arizona who's come out with students to study belongings left in the desert as either an anthropological or archaeological window into what's happening. I think that's awesome. Some faith-based people also say not to take trash because it's a spiritual artifact, the place has a spiritual history and tradition in Southwestern folklore, and the people crossing are often from a strong spiritual or faith tradition.

RA: How do you reconcile these different views with your own feelings?

DM: I'm kind of ambivalent about it. I usually honor the wishes of the group I'm with. If they want to pick up trash, I'll pick it up with them. If they view it as an artifact, I'll leave it.

Like Jim, Dan's view of the physical things migrants leave in the desert is malleable and context-dependent. While neither man is happy about plastic water bottles left in washes, both can understand at least some of the belongings left by migrants as artifacts or markers—evidence of a journey, aggregated proof of a migration occurring. This view allows for the most visible impacts of migrants to be read not as “destructive” or “un-environmental,” but as a piece of anthropology in a place which is marked by human and non-human influences. Importantly, acknowledging these items as artifacts legitimizes the act of migration itself, deeming it an important piece of the desert's story which is worth making visible by marking it clearly in space.

In addition to re-conceiving of “trash” as artifact, other volunteers used “trash” to highlight the environmental impacts of border enforcement strategies. Steve Johnston, a

volunteer who also works with the Center for Biological Diversity, told me he used to see trash as a problem, but later came to regard it as a sign of hope, because it was tangible evidence that people were making progress toward their destinations. When I asked him to elaborate, he explained:

We used to visit some places right off the Arivaca road that were pick-up points, and it was hundreds of square yards, a quarter mile, you could walk without touching the ground. Backpacks, clothing and other stuff. We cleaned all that up. We took out 16 pick-up truckloads of stuff ... It was very quick, my realization that this is not an abomination at all, as it's considered by pristine environmentalists. It's something we forced on these folks. The Border Patrol frequently when they would come across a group of migrants would make them throw down everything, so the Border Patrol is just as responsible for it.

Steve's story reflects a degree of the migrants-are-helpless narrative, but he quickly shifts his focus back to enforcement strategies. While he personally views "trash" as an environmental non-issue, he also suggests that those concerned about its impacts should blame the Border Patrol for its presence, rather than the migrants. In this narrative, legitimate enforcers are turned into the destroyers of nature, flipping the anti-immigrant script on its head.

This shift was reflected broadly in subjects' concerns about border militarization. In each interview, I posed the question, "How is migration impacting the desert?" and everyone immediately answered by describing habitat fragmentation by the border wall or hydrological shifts as a result of new road-building by Border Patrol agents. Many volunteers talked about the arbitrary nature of the border, especially in regards to geography and habitat. In many cases, the contrast between the temporary impacts of migrants and the serious, long-term impacts of Border Patrol was made clear. Dinah Bear, a Humane Borders volunteer who is on the board of several environmental organizations, described in detail the long-term consequences of enforcement. She then

framed trash as an issue which mostly offends human sensibilities without doing much to actually alter desert habitat: “The damage [migrants] do is mostly aesthetic, trash and the like. I have a hard time imagining a jaguar looking at a water bottle and saying, ‘Oh, I’m going to leave now!’” John Fife agreed that migrant impacts were temporary, where they were negative at all. “They leave behind trash and their bodies,” he told me pointedly.

Through their discourses about “trash” and environmental impacts, migrant aid volunteers are flipping the un-ecological migrant script on its head. Migrant actions are put in a social context which re-codes “trash” as a piece of an important story, documenting a piece of the desert’s history. However, the blending of nature/culture which allows migrant “trash” to be re-coded does not extend to the impacts of border enforcement in the same landscape. Without exception, volunteers saw the enforcement of the border as both wrong *and* unnatural, imposing an artificial human construct on a fluid ecosystem which both people and animals have historically moved across. Where migrants are perceived to have negative environmental impacts, volunteers are quick to point out the power imbalances and shift blame from individual migrants to the enforcement activities which encourage their behaviors. In effect, this vision of social nature is legitimizing human migration through the desert while simultaneously challenging the presence and actions of U.S. law enforcement. The rhetoric and actions of migrant aid volunteers in this regard show that it is possible to read human impacts on a landscape as non-destructive without abandoning the ability to judge human actions against each other based on their impacts. Border enforcement becomes wrong because it is unjust to both human and non-human communities, not because it destroys the

“pristine” character of the desert through allowing humans to tarnish “natural” space.

Migrant encounters and subjective visions of nature

In much environmental literature, nature is thought of in universal terms, as a spiritual refuge, a beautiful place, or a source of inspiration. Individuals may have differing tastes or particular connections to some pieces of wild space, but overall, the entity of nature is thought to be a universal good. While everyone I talked to harbored a deep personal love of the desert (and many used terms like “spiritual refuge” to describe it), many also recognized an inherent tension between their love and the experiences of migrants crossing through. Ultimately, volunteers interpreted this tension by recognizing their own privileges and acknowledging that nationality, race and class impacted their ability to enjoy the desert.

Corinne Bancroft, like many volunteers I interviewed, said she grew up doing outdoor activities and has always loved being outside. The contrast between her own experiences and migrant experiences was made most visible after she reflected on a high school camping trip, which occurred very near the spot where the body of Josseline Quinteros,⁴³ a 15 year-old migrant from El Salvador, was found:

CB: That was very powerful for me, because I went there on a school trip and it was very fun. All the adults there were trying to make my experience positive ... I think that that was just the opposite of what it was like for her, because all the adults that wanted her to be successful were in a different place. All the adults here in the desert were trying to make her die by scaring her.

⁴³ Josseline had collapsed and died of dehydration while making the journey to the U.S, and her body was found by No More Deaths volunteers (including Dan Millis), so most of the group’s members are familiar with her story.

Other volunteers shared stories similar to Corinne’s reflections about Josseline, and many seemed to do their work with a constant tension between their own love of the desert and the reality of its impacts on others. Jim and Maureen Marx, a couple who has worked with No More Deaths for several years, described a migrant encounter they had after they’d just started volunteering:

JM: In May 2008, I went to the desert with a group ... They found a body laying in a ditch. It was a man in his 50s, he heard them approaching, got up, asked for water and then collapsed. He had gotten sick and his group left him behind. Emotionally, that was about as gut-wrenching an experience as I’d had in years. I thought: you can stay angry or you can do something.

MM: That experience was just enough to pop something in me that this is wrong. That first experience made it real for me. It made me see that the desert was good for us, not good for this man.

These stories struck me for several reasons. On a basic level, they suggest an empathy with migrants, an understanding that volunteers and migrants are both people with the capability to experience suffering and hardship in the desert—the difference between the two lies not in migrants inability to be ecological, but in the forceful imposition of border enforcement. Several volunteers explicitly told me that migrants are put in a position where their journey is guaranteed to be hell, and because many of them carry those memories, they’re not going to be able to experience the desert in the same way that the (largely white, U.S.-citizen) volunteers do.

These realizations may seem simple, but they ultimately lead to a critical understanding which seems missing from environmental rhetoric: experiences of place are not universal. Just as there is no clear, objective, unconstructed definition of “nature,” there is also no objective way to experience “natural” places independent of an individual’s positioning in the world. While deserts may be a site of beauty and spiritual

inspiration for white environmentalists, they carry very different meanings for indigenous people who lived in “nature” before being displaced, or Latin@⁴⁴ immigrants who nearly died crossing into the U.S. through the Sonoran Desert.

Reflecting on experiences like this, volunteers pointed to their own privileges as a way of explaining migrants’ different experiences.

Jim Marx: What I’m struck by is how privileged we are. We’re able to enjoy the beauty because we’re not trying to provide for kids, not leaving our home to migrate. Sometimes environmentalists forget this privileged aspect in their work ... We see the beauty of [the desert], we don’t typically see the harshness of it.

Corinne had a similar understanding of her place in the desert.

I think it’s the most wonderful place in the world and I’m really invested in it. This is where I grew up. I enjoy hiking and climbing and camping ... I think that was really what made me feel passionate about No More Deaths, because this place that I consider my paradise and my playground and my world is for other people, hell and a place where other people die and experience severe and intense pain, and they do that *only because they were born in a different place than I was* (emphasis mine). And that’s not right. It should be this pleasurable for everyone. And that’s what motivates me to do No More Deaths.

While her statements could be read as supporting a universal view of nature (by virtue of wanting others to share her positive view of the desert), it’s clear that Corinne understands her experiences as made possible because of her nationality. She extended this discussion of privilege to the work that No More Deaths does in the desert as a whole:

The work that we do, you have to be pretty privileged in order to do it, in terms of your citizenship status. And even if you are a citizen but you look brown, you’ll get more trouble than you or I would from the Border Patrol. And you have to be privileged because you have to have the resources to be able to take time off and go camp in the desert.

⁴⁴ I use the at sign here as a gender-neutral alternative to the more-common “Latino.”

These narratives demonstrate that volunteers understand both the subjectivity of their own experiences within nature, as well as their privileged position moving through the desert. Throughout our interview, Dan Millis qualified his own stories about memorable events in the desert (such as an awe-inspiring storm) with real or imagined experiences of migrants who were traveling through at the same time. Corinne told me about her high school outdoor trips fully aware of the privilege and irony separating her recreation from Josseline's death, just a few miles away. These stories are infusing white environmentalist narratives with subjectivity and context, moving away from a universal definition of "nature" to a social nature where a person's social positioning remains relevant and visible as they enter so-called "natural" space.

Inconsistencies

Because the conception of social nature on the border is emergent, it is not a single, unconflicted philosophy shared by all the volunteers and activists doing work in the area. Most of my interviews were filled with contradictions, tensions and competing visions of what nature is and should be. Virtually every individual I interviewed at times spoke about the desert in the way traditional environmentalism has often cast it, as a pristine place which is degraded by human influences. These same people also articulated an ability to think beyond the confines of a nature/culture dichotomy during various portions of the interview. While their vision of social nature is not precise or always clearly articulable, I believe its emergent character makes it a powerful tool for challenging traditional environmentalist thinking.

The inconsistencies in environmental philosophy among volunteers arise out of the fact that volunteers are forming a theory of social nature based on on-the-ground work and years of personal experience. When asked if their views of the desert had changed as a result of migrant aid work, almost everyone said no, but many subsequently told stories of encounters in the desert which made them re-think their relationship with the environment. Steve and Jim's stories about re-understanding "trash" are one example of this, and Steve explicitly told me that his views used to be much more "pristine nature," but had shifted over the course of his life and his work with No More Deaths. None of people I spoke to would call their vision of nature "social nature" at all—for them, it's simply a different way of considering the category of nature which incorporates their own experiences and the work they've done.

Even without the label “social nature,” the theory of nature emerging from migrant aid work has impacts which reach beyond the volunteers who do work on the border. A number of people said they had addressed the issue of migrant “trash” with concerned environmentalists they knew, pointing out that it was a small concern compared to militarization. While this argument stops short of the social nature viewpoint that several articulated to me—the objects migrants leave behind can be seen as artifacts or anthropological evidence, rather than “trash”—it also represents a step challenging the pristine environmentalist viewpoint that trash should be a concern. Indeed, Dan Millis said this type of education was a large part of his work as the Borderlands campaign director.

While this contradictory, emergent conception of social nature lacks the authority of a scholarly text, I believe it is better positioned to be legible to mainstream environmentalists. Sierra Club leaders are unlikely to pick up a copy of *Social Nature* and use the ideas within it to radically re-evaluate their discourses, but the theories of social nature emerging from border activism promote smaller, gradual shifts in circles that environmentalists are already engaged with. Through the informal social networks of the Tucson activist scene, ideas and stories like the ones volunteers told me are shared and repeated. The employees of environmental organizations I spoke to during my preliminary research often invoked pristine nature ideas, but they also displayed knowledge of and concern for migrant well-being and broader efforts to address root causes of migration.

These views, in imperfect and diluted forms, can also be seen on the national level. The Sierra Club’s Borderlands website, which presents information about the

environmental impacts of border policy, includes a page addressing the concerns about trash which specifically notes that its impacts are temporary and its presence is the result of militarization and enforcement practices, not the intentions of migrants. Shifts like this reflect the on-the-ground experiences of environmentalists who are re-conceiving nature to include some forms of human influence.

While the textbook theory of social nature may cause concern for environmentalists unsure how to judge human impacts in a world of social construction, emergent social nature theory coming from border activism doesn't arouse the same fear, because it is situated in the needs and practices of existing activist organizations. No More Deaths volunteers clearly reject border enforcement as an unacceptable human influence, not because the desert must remain "pristine" and separate from humans, but because enforcement practices are unjust in their destruction of both human and animal lives. The legibility of this particular social nature theory makes it significant, because it suggests a possibility for positive change within the mainstream environmental movement. Where theories of social nature have not been incorporated into major environmental movements, pieces of this emergent philosophy have begun to work their way into mainstream environmental discourses with regard to the deserts of the Southwest.

SECTION IV: MOVING NATURE FORWARD

I have argued that the vision of nature emerging from migrant aid work on the U.S.-Mexico border articulates a way to imagine nature which does not derive its desirability from the exclusion of humans or a notion of universal experience. Specifically, I have outlined three features of this vision of nature: 1) an understanding of the historical human migration through the desert as a crucial component of the desert itself, 2) a re-imagining of “trash” which legitimizes the practice of migration as something worth documenting while shifting blame for negative environmental impacts onto enforcement practices and 3) an understanding that the volunteers’ experiences of joy and satisfaction in the desert are not universal, but influenced and mitigated by race, class and other social factors.

Because this vision is emergent, it is not a clear philosophy articulated by individual volunteers. Many volunteers were conflicted in their conceptions of nature, and most expressed viewpoints in line with the idea of pristine nature, while simultaneously displaying a capacity for imaging nature in new ways. While I believe these contradictions are understandable, I am not arguing that migrant aid volunteers should be regarded as an authority on how to talk about nature without excluding racial others. Even among No More Deaths volunteers, discourses of nature are often problematic. The idea of pristine nature is rooted deeply in the environmental movement, and colonialism, racism and environmental activism are more closely linked than many environmental activists would like to admit or remember. No activist with roots in Western environmental thinking is likely to shed these beliefs entirely, even after years of engaging with alternative conceptions.

In spite of these flaws, I believe the environmental movement would do well to listen to activists on the border and incorporate their experiences into discourses about what nature is and should be. These volunteers have demonstrated an ability to shift environmental thinking in small but important ways, challenging environmental groups to understand the root causes of migration and re-imagine the place of migrants in the desert. Through these changes in discourse, border activists create possibilities for a vision of nature which doesn't derive its desirability from positioning nature as the opposite of "human" or "social," which allows them to advocate for policies that do not require excluding particular humans along racial lines. If the mainstream environmental movement seeks to hold the attention of a younger, more conscious generation of activists, they would do well to follow suit.

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Appendix I: Names and affiliations of interview subjects

June 2012

Danielle Alvarado

No More Deaths volunteer

Jeff Banister

Professor of Geography, University of Arizona

Kevin Dahl

Arizona Program Manager, National Parks Conservation Association

Sarah Lanius

No More Deaths volunteer

Dan Millis

Sierra Club, Director, Borderland campaign

Longtime No More Deaths volunteer, prior to accepting job at Sierra Club

Mike Quigly

Arizona Wildlands Campaign Coordinator, Wilderness Society

January 2013

Dinah Bear

Humane Borders board member

Border Action Network board member

Sky Island Alliance board member

Defenders of Wildlife board member

Corinne Bancroft

No More Deaths volunteer

John Fife

No More Deaths co-founder

Helped found Samaritans, Humane Borders and Borderlinks.

Works with Sierra Club on Borderlands project, also volunteers at the Sonoran Desert Museum with raptors

Steev Hise

Freelance filmmaker, has worked for Sierra Club, No More Deaths, Humane Borders, Sky Island Alliance and others.

Some desert aid experience.

Shot Wild vs. Wall film for Sierra Club.

Steve Johnston

No More Deaths volunteer
Sonoran Desert Museum volunteer
Founding member, Center for Biological Diversity

Sarah Lanius

No More Deaths volunteer

Gene Lefebvre

No More Deaths co-founder
Has done work in coordination with other migrant aid groups
Sierra Club member

Jim Marx

No More Deaths volunteer
Concerned about environmental issues and will get involved in specific campaigns, but doesn't work or volunteer with any large organizations regularly.

Maureen Marx

No More Deaths volunteer
Concerned about environmental issues and will get involved in specific campaigns, but doesn't work or volunteer with any large organizations regularly.

Oscar Medina

Community organizer with Tierra y Libertad Organization, which does environmental justice work with people of color in Tucson
Has worked with No More Deaths, though not a regular volunteer

Dan Millis

Sierra Club, Director, Borderland campaign
Longtime No More Deaths volunteer, prior to accepting job at Sierra Club

Emrys Staton

No More Deaths volunteer
Has previously worked with EarthFirst!
Also involved in Angelos del Desierto (search and rescue) and Samaritans