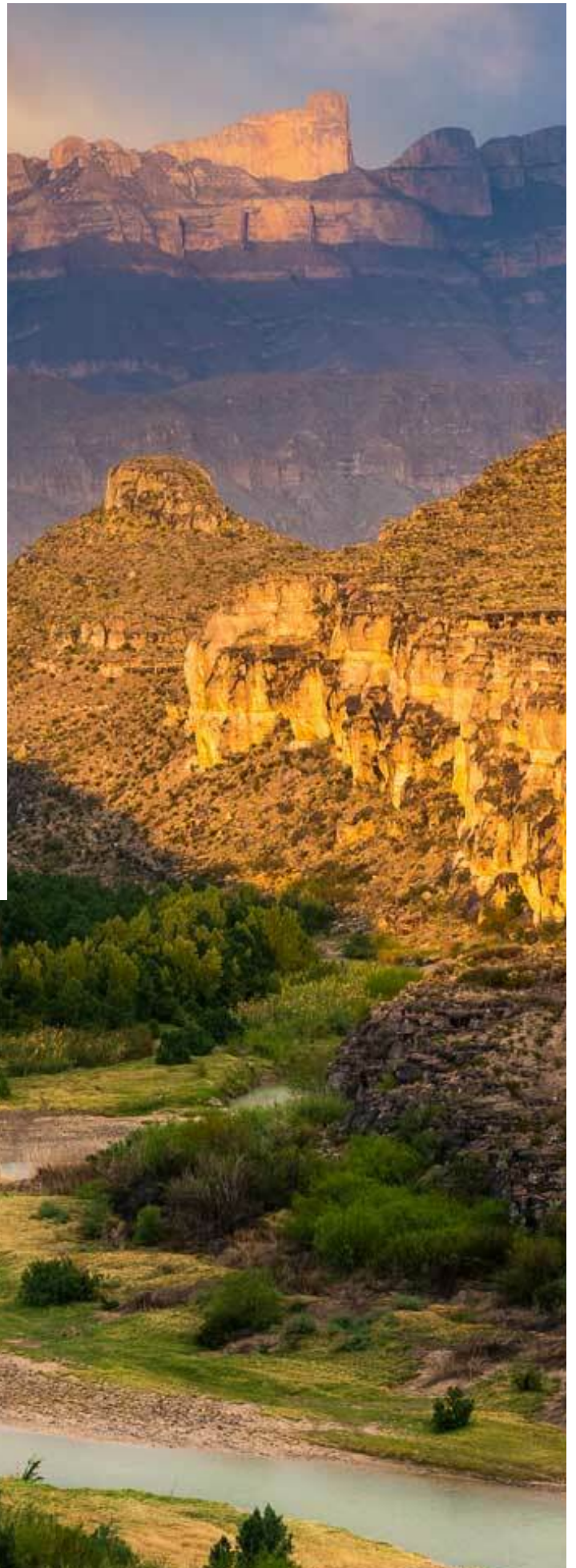


# **CHANGING THE LANDSCAPE: Honoring Hispanic Heritage on Public Lands**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

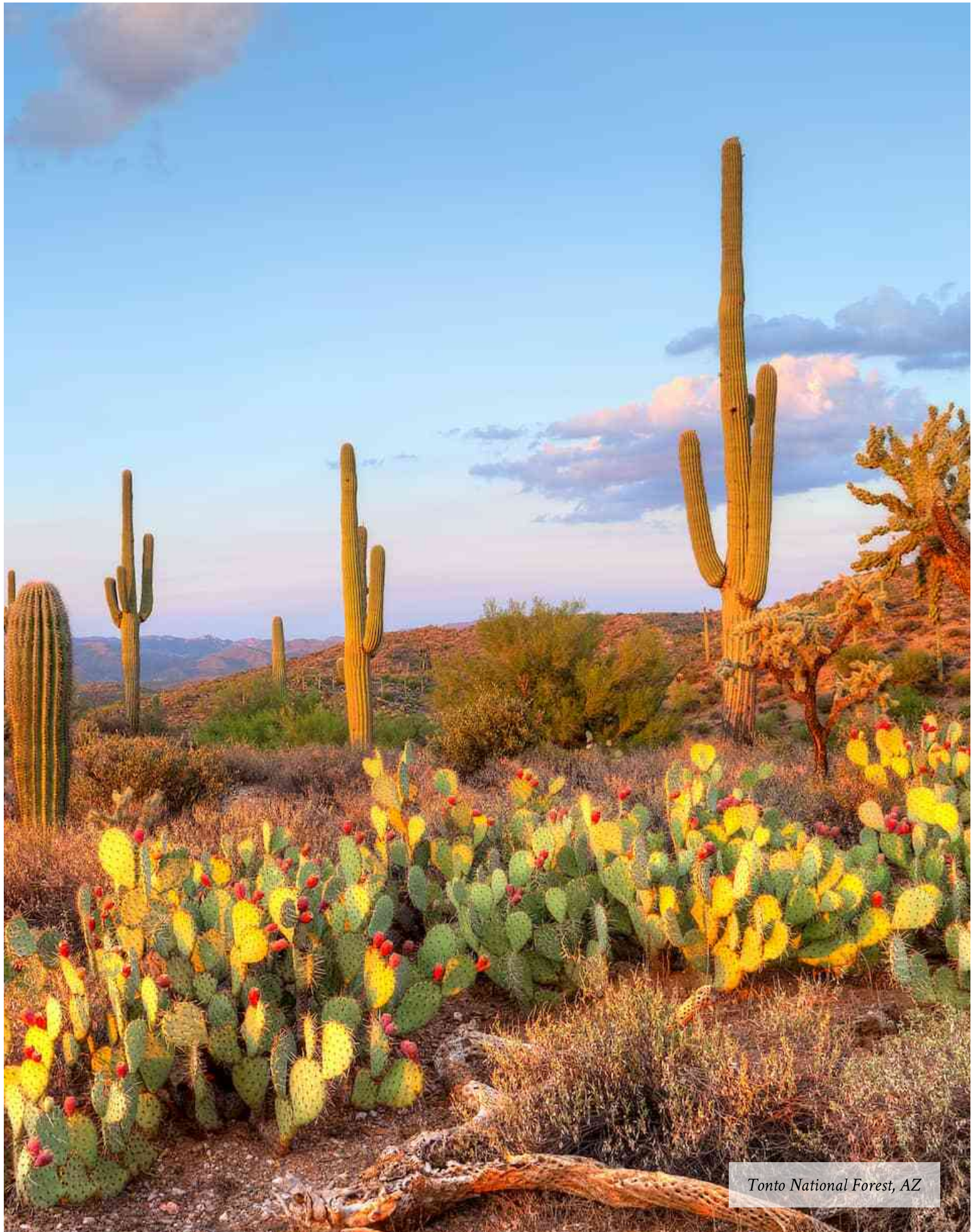
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The conservation goals of the America the Beautiful initiative (30x30), which seeks to preserve and protect 30 percent of United States land and waters by 2030, demands an equity lens. To achieve equity in the conservation of our lands, we must transform the traditional federal conservation designation and maintenance process for lands and waters. This is necessary to not only increase equitable access to lands and waters but to also ensure that land conservation is reflective of the full American story. Lands and waters identified as contributing to 30x30 must reflect, include and prioritize communities who have been historically marginalized and excluded from or not heard at the conservation decision-making table. Towards this goal, a diverse coalition of Hispanic and religious-led organizations conducted robust deliberations with Hispanic conservation and religious leaders to help discern, from Hispanic communities' perspective, priorities regarding public land and water protections and designations.

This report, which outlines Hispanic conservation and religious leader views of public lands, aims to enhance, not supplant, the ongoing equity and inclusion work by centering Hispanic leaders' voices in the conversation. Through in-depth analysis of one-on-one interviews with 25 leaders in Hispanic communities, this report provides insights into Hispanic Americans perspectives around public lands. The reporting focuses on community access to public lands and highlights the stories and history that have been disregarded in public lands. This is but one step in broader deliberations and collaboration needed with Hispanic communities across the country as the American the Beautiful initiative is implemented.

**Religious Leaders as Bridges and Advocates.** In many Hispanic communities, the church is a central space of safety, meaning, and gathering, where culture and heritage can be freely expressed and preserved. Hispanic religious leaders are well versed in the communities' needs and perspectives. Throughout the process, the goal was to tap into the wisdom of church leaders and uncover the concerns of Hispanic/chicano/Latinx/indio-Americans as it relates to public lands and historical landmarks. These religious leader's voices were combined with Hispanic conversation leader voices to provide a fuller narrative and perspective.

**Value of Public Lands.** The deliberation process revealed a strong connection to outdoor spaces and public lands that have long been a part of the cultural heritage of many Hispanic communities. Public lands and waters are valued as spaces for community gathering, for finding peace and engaging one's spirituality, and connecting to both past and future generations. This value is held even in the face of limited access to and representation in public lands. It was clear through the interviews that respondents believe that the story of Hispanic Americans is woefully missing and overlooked in the nation's parks, monuments, historic landmarks, and outdoor spaces. They argued that public lands



*Tonto National Forest, AZ*

can and should be used to tell the full story of American history, which includes the people who lived on the land before it was stolen by both Spanish and American colonizers.

**Stories that Honor and Preserve.** The interviews revealed the profound notion that public lands - aside from their clear health and recreation benefits - could serve as a necessary step towards reconciling with the ways in which the stories of Hispanic communities have been historically ignored, marginalized, and erased. By telling their stories through and on the land, the religious and community leaders interviewed argued that their history - America's history - needs to be more fully and honestly told on the land.

**Latino / Hispanic Perspectives.** The dialogues with Hispanic leaders revealed a deep connection to and valuing of public lands within their communities; reiterated the need for investment in public lands that honor the full story and heritage of those who have lived on them; emphasized a need for significantly more inclusion in and access to the

decision-making and planning process; and reinforced the need for greater access, which includes transforming existing public lands to be more welcoming and inclusive.

**Recommendations.** The interviews delivered substantive feedback and insights, informing the following recommendations for policymakers and conservationists:

- Make existing public lands more welcoming and accessible, including: have signage available in Spanish, change uniforms and cars of park rangers to not resemble law enforcement, allow for cash entrance fees, conduct racial bias trainings for staff, provide training for staff to learn and recognize the Hispanic and Native American histories and impact on the existing public lands, and have an increase in representation of communities of color in park staff.

- Identify and preserve lands and waters through both the Antiquities Act and other conservation mechanisms that showcase Hispanic history and leaders, with a particular priority for preserving

public lands that tell stories of community erasure, colonialism and land rights, indigenous lands and heritage, resilient communities, border identities and sacred sites.

- Increase the visibility of existing and future national monuments, public lands, and historic sites that tell the story of Hispanic Americans and ensure adequate funding for these protections.

- The importance of conducting public lands planning and identifications with robust and inclusive dialogue with Hispanic communities cannot be emphasized enough. Only by placing these communities and their lived experience at the center of the decision making process can public lands truly reflect American reality.

### Priority Stories and Concerns.

When asked which parts of Hispanic history were missing from public lands and what were the dominant concerns around public lands within their communities, the Hispanic leaders interviewed most often named (in priority order):

- Public Land Access
- Documenting Stories of Community Erasure
- Telling the Full Story of Colonialism and Land Rights
- Highlighting Indigenous Lands and Heritage
- Presenting Stories of Resilient Communities and Leaders
- Lifting Up Stories of Border Lands
- Preserving Sacred Sites



# THE FULL AMERICAN STORY

## ***Defining Public Lands: Conservation, Community, Access and Heritage***

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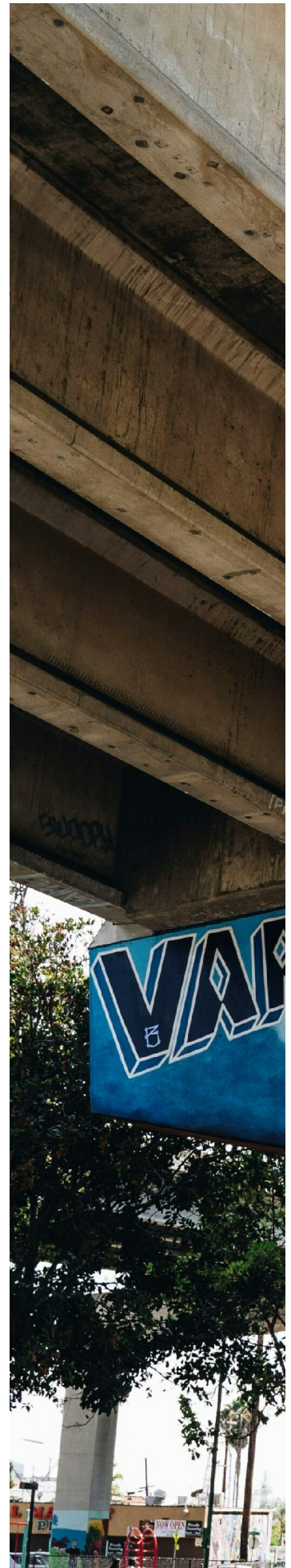
Across the country, the collective stories of Americans with Spanish, Latin American, Caribbean, and Indigenous heritage are told in and through the land. These lands tell painful stories of colonialism, violence, and civil rights struggles, but also stories of community resilience, faith, and a deep commitment to stewardship of the land in honor of past and future generations.

Natural and cultural sites—from national, state and local parks to federal forests, national marine sanctuaries and wildlife refuges—are revered for their ability to connect people to the natural world. These sites, which hold deep cultural, ecological, historical and spiritual meaning, propel us to protect these lands and waters for current and future generations.

**"The lands, the waters, they're defining factors of who we are."**

- Jerry Otero, Legislative and Policy Director, Grand Canyon Trust

According to the National Park Service and the Department of the Interior, of the more than 98,000 U.S. National Historical Landmarks, less than 1 percent reflect Hispanic heritage. Currently, through the America the Beautiful Initiative, the Biden administration is working on protecting public lands. When designating and protecting public lands, it is critical to involve the communities whose stories are historically untold and overlooked and who have been excluded from the benefits of public land conservation.





Chicano Park, San Diego, CA

## Access and Inclusion

The value of public lands for enhancing public health and wellbeing is well known. Parks and green spaces are common gathering places and are used for both family and community events. However, people of color and low-income communities are more likely to be deprived of the benefits of public lands. Even with an abundance of recreational and gathering opportunities on public lands, the majority of those that utilize these spaces still tend to be predominately White. Recent studies by the U.S. Forest Service, for instance, found that high-income White-majority counties have higher quality park systems and access than those with larger concentrations of low-income minority populations. Further, cities with a higher percentage of Hispanic residents were found to have significantly higher socioeconomic inequalities within neighborhoods in regard to walking access to parks than cities with lower percentages of Hispanic residents.

It is important to note that access to parks is not only limited by physical infrastructure and proximity to public lands, but also by how welcome and safe one feels in a space. Over the course of the 25 conversations with Hispanic leaders, public lands not feeling accepting, welcoming, or safe for Hispanic peoples was a frequent comment. Contributing factors included: fear of being targeted by park police and asked to present documentation, lack of resources like park maps and signs in Spanish, and experiences of being judged by others and being the only person of color in a space. We must continuously ask of our public lands: Whose public are these being preserved for? Which public is benefiting from these spaces?



*Estes Park, CO  
Credit: Latino Outdoors*



**"Place is a powerful thing... there's so much that could have happened in a community, a region, that can really help weave that tapestry that helps make this nation. And it will be much more beautiful and relevant for kids if it's complete"**

*- Dr. Maite Arce, President & CEO of Hispanic Access Foundation*

### **Connecting to Culture and History**

Public lands have the ability to showcase history in ways that are experiential and transformative, yet the current narrative is predominately White and colonial. From the heroes and protagonists highlighted to the historical events chronicled, crucial chapters and perspectives have been excluded. According to a 2014 report by the Center for American Progress, only 4% of all national parks are dedicated to Latina/o/x/Hispanic communities. Despite recent efforts, like the 2023 designation of the Castner Range National Monument won by Hispanic activists, more must be done. To tell the full story of a land is to help preserve and honor the culture and history of its people. Our public lands must tell the story of all of those who have lived on and cared for them, not just those who have won them in battle or claimed to discover them.





# DELIBERATIONS

## *Lifting Hispanic Voices*

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The Continental Divide Trail Coalition, Hispanic Enjoying Camping, Hunting and the Outdoors (HECHO), Hispanic Access Foundation, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, Nuestra Tierra, and Onoo Po Strategies joined together to launch a deliberation process with Hispanic leaders to reveal perspectives and priorities regarding public lands. Twenty-five one-on-one interviews with Hispanic conservation and religious leaders were conducted in a process that sought answers regarding access, the level of inclusion in decision making processes, their perceived importance of public lands and the identification of stories, history and sites in need of preservation. The interview process sought to not only gather information but to advance a model of how community-centered, inclusive deliberations can be conducted. The following details the responses of the 25 interviewees who identify themselves as Hispanic/Latino in response to a questionnaire investigating natural sites that hold a significance within Hispanic communities around the U.S. as a way to enhance 30x30 conservation goals.

The interviewees represented 9 different states and Puerto Rico. Of the leaders identified, 11 represented religious organizations. Interviewees used Hispanic, Latino/a, or their country of origin (e.g., Guatemala, Argentina, Colombia), Chicano, or Puerto Rican to identify themselves. We are choosing to use Latino/a and Hispanic in reporting the themes of the interviews.

As Hispanic religious and community leaders sat down to discuss their perspectives and views of public lands, they revealed not only a passion for land conservation and outdoor recreation but also emphasized the importance of public lands for Hispanic heritage and identity.

They articulated that showcasing Hispanic history on public lands would not only serve as a salve for trauma but would help counter the organized erasure of their communities' heritage and identity.





Lifting up their stories on the land, they argued, was not just a mere exercise in filling in history gaps, but a methodology for countering the hold that colonial values and mindsets continue to have on our nation.

### **Identities on the Land**

Defining Hispanic, Latino/a/x is fraught with controversy, criticized for oversimplifying complex differences. Participants shared varied perspectives on identity, emphasizing the intricate relationship between heritage and land.

Ricardo Simmonds, originally from Brazil, saw identity as a metaphor for the United States: "Our categories don't fit the reality of so many people with our histories and origins. Designating lands and finding these identities is part of our own discovery, for discovering who we are as a nation and how we all fit in together."

Many of the conversations also discussed the impact of Spanish colonization, a focal point in the complexity of Hispanic identity. Laura Flores, a Special Education teacher, advocated for acknowledging pre-colonial history: "We have inhabited this land prior to Spain coming over. Where's that history? Where's that rich

culture? How did they farm? How did they live?"


The connection to land extends beyond historical references. Respondents shared personal memories, emphasizing the intergenerational ties of Native American and Hispanic communities to nature. As Pastor Mike Gomes stated, "We come from *campo*. We come from the outdoors."

A nuanced narrative emerges in exploring identity tied to land and heritage, offering a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between culture, history, and the natural world.

### **Land Access as Social Justice**

From naming conventions to the history of land grants, social justice was a significant theme in the interviews as respondents discussed taking measures to protect spaces that encompassed the historical legacy of Hispanic communities. Those interviewed emphasized the importance of safeguarding spaces through a lens of social justice, suggesting a focus on renaming places to their Indigenous names and acknowledging complete histories.

Concerns about the under-representation of Hispanic individuals in the naming of



public spaces were raised, as multiple leaders pointed out the importance for Hispanic communities to see people like them being recognized and honored in public lands.

Geographical disparities in representing various community stories were evident. A majority of sites documenting Hispanic heritage are located in the Southwest and are focused on battles and settlements. Interviewees called attention to a need to amplify Hispanic and Indigenous voices throughout the entire country, especially in the East Coast, and broadening the focus to include arts, culture, music, food, and social justice movements.

Speakers in the discussion raised various concerns regarding outdoor equity and access to natural spaces. They pointed out socio-economic considerations, emphasizing the historical importance of privatized natural areas for the survival of poorer communities. Reclaiming land owned by organizations for community access was highlighted as a crucial need. In the Southwest, tensions between public and protected lands were emphasized, with speakers highlighting the historical connection of Hispanic communities to the land and the challenges posed by dispossession, illegal takeovers, and forced relocations. There was mention of resistance to public lands in Hispanic communities due to a sense of loss, resentment towards the forest service for the unlawful appropriation of lands, and the obscured history of some national parks and public lands originating from land grants.

Additionally, the participants overwhelmingly stressed that land access involves more than physical entry and representation; it extends to feeling welcome, accepted, and safe in these spaces, touching on the broader notion of outdoor equity and social justice. Multiple interviewees mentioned that undocumented individuals avoided public lands

out of fear of deportation, while others simply felt that the spaces, that often once belonged to their people, were spaces in which they were no longer welcome.

### **Making Room at the Table: Working with Public Officials**

In describing the level of consultation that policymakers and conservation professionals at the local, state, and national level had with their communities regarding public lands, there was a mix of positive and negative experiences shared.

Several interviewees described various challenges in working with public officials to protect and maintain natural sites of significance to Hispanic communities. Lack of understanding around political processes, limited political clout, and minimal access to funds were cited as barriers for Hispanic communities trying to affect change. Multiple interviewees shared experiences of tokenism in which they felt their communities' suffering was manipulated to serve a different political agenda. Participants also pointed to a lack of investment in Hispanic-led community and nonprofit organizations as compared to predominantly White-led, national organizations.

It is worth noting that some interviewees described positive collaborations with public officials in protecting specific sites. When members of the community felt that they could approach decision makers, build relationships with local officials, and take advantage of opportunities to share their stories, they felt empowered to affect change. The importance and benefits of having Hispanic Americans in positions of power and holding public office was also highlighted throughout the interviews.



## ***Stewardship: Living Out a Deep Connection to the Sacred***

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Another salient topic that emerged throughout the interviews was a feeling of collective responsibility to act as stewards of the land. Discussions of stewardship were often connected with faith and the need to care for God's Creation entrusted to humans. Caring for the land, they stressed, was not just a practical necessity, but a spiritual calling. Bishop Jorge Rodriguez of Colorado discussed Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si*, which states that "the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor," words that guide his spirituality and ministry. Extending stewardship to sites of religious significance in natural areas was also discussed in the interviews.

Stewarding the land was offered as a salve to the waste, consumerism and spiritual illness of our times by inviting a deep connection to the sacred, the land, and to one's community. The interviewees underscored the role of historical and traditional ecological knowledge in stewardship, stressing the importance of applying traditional ecological knowledge in protecting the land, the significance of intergenerational transfer of knowledge, and the historical influence of Indigenous peoples.

# PLACES TO PRESERVE

## *Stories and Histories Intertwined on the Land*

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Many places that are ripe with stories of Hispanic heritage and culture are awaiting adequate protection or better educational interpretation. These places lift up Hispanic leaders and resilient communities, they recall journeys across borders and remember the lands as they were before borders were established, they mark places stolen and communities erased, and they house sacred sites. The Hispanic leaders interviewed were posed the question: what Hispanic stories are missing from our public lands? The answers, which identified a multitude of stories, places, and challenges can be captured by seven categories: **Public land access, presenting stories of resilient communities and leaders, documenting stories of community erasure, telling the full story of colonialism and land rights, preserving sacred sites, highlighting indigenous lands and heritage, & lifting up stories of border lands.**

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### **Public Land Access**

By far the most prominent concern mentioned by all of the Hispanic leaders interviewed was Hispanic communities' lack of access to public lands.

Access is about more than just opening a gate, it's about creating a welcoming environment. Many participants underscored the financial barriers to access; parks that charge entry fees and only accept credit cards were mentioned as problematic, along with the reality that long, labor-intensive work hours make it difficult to find the time and energy to travel to public lands. The underrepresentation of Hispanic communities in parks was addressed, linking the discomfort many feel in public lands to a lack of representation and bias towards Hispanic Americans. Language barriers were also emphasized, with a suggestion for Spanish signage to enhance inclusivity in public and natural spaces.

Interviewees linked immigration status to Hispanic communities' limited exposure to national parks, highlighting a general, valid fear of immigration policing.

Additionally, nearly every participant cited a local park, riverwalk, or nature trail that was important to them and their community. These are spaces to gather, to celebrate, to listen to music and enjoy one another's company over food and games that are central to their families heritage and culture. When we consider access and the kinds of places that are important to preserve, steward, and cultivate into welcoming environments, we must think beyond sprawling national parks and forests, and be mindful not to forget the significance of the neighborhood parks or urban greenspaces.

### **Community Erasure**

Another significant collective concern that came to light throughout the deliberations was the concern of Hispanic communities that their culture, communities and heritage were being erased, the second most common theme mentioned by the leaders interviewed. Physical places of historical and cultural significance, such as the site of the Bath riots in El Paso, have been eliminated. Gentrification and

the development of natural areas into parking lots and office spaces have erased places of cultural and spiritual significance. By denying history from being represented and interpreted on public lands, we risk critical Hispanic stories becoming permanently lost.

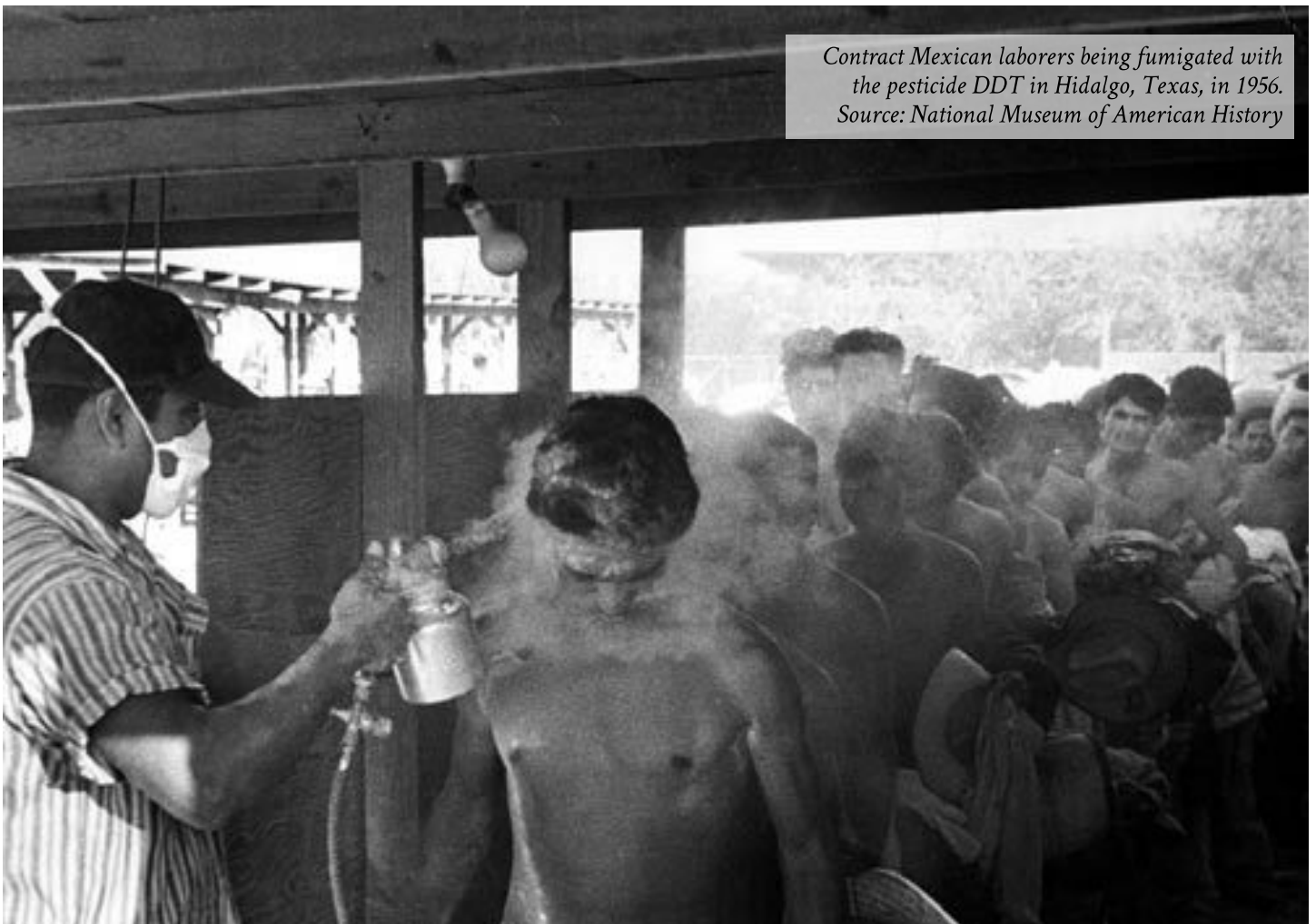
The discussion highlighted the reality of Hispanic heritage being overlooked in existing public lands. There was an emphasis on recognizing the rich history within current national parks, landmarks, and local parks. The absence of Latino stories in these spaces was noted, with a call to acknowledge the contributions of Latinos, particularly in initiatives like the Conservation Corps, and questioning if due credit for their talents and work ethic has been given. The consensus was that while the creation of new parks is essential, it's equally crucial to address the historical omissions within the already existing public lands.

Participants also reported that a lack of educational programs addressing the connections between

Hispanic communities and natural sites is a major challenge for both the general public and within Hispanic communities. Various interviewees pointed out the need to document the histories of Hispanic communities in natural spaces by conducting oral history projects with elders.

**“When people see park ranger vehicles and uniforms, they think immigration and run - policing of immigration- we need to acknowledge the mistreatment of the community by police.”**

*- Masavi Perea, Coalitions and Training Director, Chispa Arizona*



*Contract Mexican laborers being fumigated with the pesticide DDT in Hidalgo, Texas, in 1956. Source: National Museum of American History*

## Colonialism and Land Rights

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, highlighted by numerous interviewees, stands as a profoundly significant yet often misrepresented historical event with lasting implications for Hispanic communities' land rights. Signed in 1848 at the conclusion of the Mexican-American War, the treaty stipulated that existing land grants made under Mexican rule would be honored by the United States. However, interviewees emphasized that many of these grants were not respected, falling victim to legal manipulation, fraud, or force. This disregard for the agreements has resulted in enduring economic and socio-political losses for Mexican-American landowners. There was a call to address these historical injustices through reparations and public acknowledgment of the stolen lands and the harms inflicted, which continue to be felt today.

There is no denying that the impacts of colonialism are still heavily felt by Hispanic communities. Even setting aside the socio-cultural, economic, and ecological devastation wrought by colonial powers taking over lands and forcing assimilation, the impact that colonial history has had on Hispanic communities' connection and access to public lands is profound.

Particularly in the Southwest, stories of lands being stolen and the legal rights to private lands by Hispanic Americans being ignored and silenced in the legal system, came up numerous times.

Within conversations of colonialism, the complexities of navigating the conversation around Hispanic communities' relationship to the land and Spanish colonization came up several times. Respondents had varying attitudes towards and identification with Spanish colonizers, but all pointed to the undeniable impact that they had on Hispanic culture and engagement with the land. The acequias, or community ditches, in the Southwest and the sense of identity, community, and connection to one another and the land that they foster, for example, came from the Spanish. The complexity of the history of colonialism is yet another reason to center the perspectives of Hispanic communities - the true owners of this history - as we tell the story of American lands.



*Acequia  
Corrales, New Mexico*



## ***Finding Our Stories: Why We Must Prevail***

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Numerous reasons were presented for designating sites as Historic Hispanic Heritage sites, rooted in the substantial historical and cultural contributions of the Hispanic community to the United States. Recognizing these sites would enable greater understanding and appreciation of the Hispanic community's unique influence, heritage, and traditions. It is crucial to acknowledge the significance of these sites to preserve and showcase the rich history and heritage of the Hispanic community for future generations. From local parks to national forests, respondents emphasized the importance of these spaces in fostering Hispanic identity, advocating for social justice, and highlighting the historical environmental stewardship carried out by Hispanic and Native American communities.

Throughout the interviews, various challenges surfaced regarding the documentation, education, and dissemination of histories related to Hispanic communities and their access to specific sites. These challenges were characterized by the displacement of Hispanic communities due to gentrification and industrialization, a lack of education and documentation around the histories of Hispanic communities in relation to specific sites, and lack of access to particular sites due to financial constraints.

### **Resilient Communities and Leaders**

When asked what stories are missing from public lands, interviewees offered stories of resilient communities and leaders who paved the way for future generations. Some of these stories were already well known within the Hispanic community and need to be lifted up: artists, social justice activists, environmentalists, labor organizers, faith leaders, and entire communities that came together to stand up against gentrification and development, land rights abuses, and more. Multiple interviewees mentioned the often overlooked role of Hispanic workers in the building of industries, communities, and entire regions. Specifically, histories of the logging, ranching, and mining industries in the Southwest and their dependence on the labor of Hispanic communities, often immigrants, are commonly taken for granted. While these stories might be well known within a local Hispanic community, they have not been told publicly or given their rightful place within American history.


Other stories were cited as being less well known even within Hispanic communities, like that of the

1917 Bath Riots in El Paso, TX, begun by 17-year-old Carmelita Torres as she stood up against the human rights abuses happening at the borders. These heroic leaders and communities deserve to be remembered; present and future generations deserve to be inspired by their stories.

### **Border Lands**

Throughout the interviews, multiple interviewees brought up stories of borderlands and reflected on the impact that borders have on community and individual identity. There was a clear need to tell the stories of border lands which represent the mixed identities and heritage of Hispanic American communities. Honoring and preserving these lands can also help heal the relationship between communities and the land - a relationship that has been harmed for some by the generational traumas from dangerous border crossings, lands being stolen, or being pushed off the land by gentrification and development.

Friendship Park was one such site mentioned in need of preservation and protection. Situated west of the San Ysidro Port of Entry, Friendship Park



**“This is ours, this is nuestra tierra, this is our culture, this is our history, and we’ve got to fight for it”**

*- Moses Borja, Pastor, Living Covenant Church*

*Friendship Park, San Diego CA  
Credit: Los Angeles Daily News*

serves as a binational park overlooking the Pacific where the U.S.-Mexico border wall meets. Since 1849, it has been a historic gathering place. In 2006, the U.S. government erected walls, altering its accessibility. Despite challenges, it remains a crucial place for families divided by the border, facilitating reunions and farewells. While accessible in Mexico, the U.S. side faces increasing restrictions, culminating in a complete closure in February 2020 and raising concerns about its future accessibility.

Interviewees also brought up concern for not only the communities and families that are separated by arbitrary borders, but also the native animals, plants, and ecosystems. Protecting and preserving borderlands, which includes taking measures to mitigate the environmental harms of any fencing or walls, is important to honor, preserve, and care for both the human and nonhuman communities that call these lands home.

### **Indigenous Lands and Heritage**

Hispanic leaders brought up the importance of designating indigenous lands and honoring their

ancestral heritage. Identifying himself as Indio-Hispano, Ángel Peña conveyed that “we never crossed the border, the border crossed us.” Other participants offered similar understandings of their connection to the lands that their ancestors have lived on for centuries. The deep connection and ties between Hispanic communities and indigenous ancestry was mentioned multiple times, especially in regards to preserving the knowledge of the land and ecological practices that have been passed down from generation to generation.

Tonto National Forest in central Arizona was brought up as one of many sites that, while it may have already received national protection and recognition, does not honor the true history of the land and the ancestors of the indigenous peoples who lived on it. The name itself comes from a derogatory term that the Spanish used to refer to the Apache people who lived on the land, as Masavi Perea reminded us in his interview. Tonto Forest reminds us that just because a place is protected, doesn’t mean the work is complete.

## Sacred Sites

From Catholic shrines and missions to historic places of worship and sacred spaces within indigenous spirituality, many of the Hispanic leaders spoke about the importance of protecting and honoring sites that hold religious and spiritual significance within Hispanic communities. Stories of development and land disputes threatening community access to these sites were common throughout the interviews. Many stories represented a historical disregard for the religious and spiritual practices of entire communities. For instance, Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church in Flagstaff, Arizona, built in 1926 by the members of the Hispanic community after they had been pushed out of the only other Catholic church in the city, remains but is in need of protection and preservation.

It was clear through the interviews that sacred sites extended beyond the walls of churches or buildings used for worship - they included rivers, forests, stretches of desert or mountains. The spiritual significance of water as a gift from the divine and a source of life came up multiple times. For example, the Rio Grande was mentioned as a threatened site of not only ecological and agricultural importance but deep spiritual and cultural value, especially to native pueblo communities.

# CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

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The goal of this report is to help inform both policymakers and conservation groups of Hispanic American priorities and perspectives regarding public lands in order to guide and transform decision-making. Through interviews, we identified the dominant needs and concerns: Public land access, documenting stories of community erasure, telling the full story of colonialism and land rights, highlighting indigenous lands and heritage, presenting stories of resilient communities and leaders, lifting up stories of border lands, and preserving sacred sites.

Our deliberations with Hispanic leaders uncovered their belief that public lands, especially local parks and green spaces, are important for their communities; reiterated the need for investment in public lands, particularly in communities of color; emphasized a need for significantly more inclusion in the decision-making and planning process for public lands; and reinforced the need for greater access, which includes transforming public lands to be more welcoming and inclusive. Specifically, interviewees highlighted how telling Hispanic history and lifting up Hispanic culture and heritage through public lands could counter historic efforts to suppress, deny, and erase the unique contributions, identities, and histories of Hispanic communities in America.

Recommendations from the interviews include:

- Make existing public lands more welcoming and accessible, including: have signage available in Spanish, change uniforms and cars of park rangers to not resemble law enforcement, allow for cash entrance fees, conduct racial bias trainings for staff, provide training for staff to learn and recognize the Hispanic and Native American histories and impact on the existing public lands, and have an increase in representation of communities of color for park staff.
- Identify and preserve lands and waters through both the Antiquities Act and other conservation mechanisms that showcase Hispanic history and leaders, with a particular priority for preserving public lands that tell stories of community erasure, colonialism and land rights, indigenous lands and heritage, resilient communities, border lands and sacred sites.
- Increase the visibility of existing and future national monuments, public lands, and historic sites that tell the story of Hispanic Americans and ensure adequate funding for these protections.

In moving forward, it is crucial to recognize that public lands planning, designation and preservation must be conducted through robust and inclusive dialogues with Hispanic communities. The success of the America the Beautiful 30x30 initiative relies on centering these communities in decision-making processes and ensuring that public lands authentically mirror the diverse tapestry of American reality.

As we strive to meet conservation goals, the integration of equity and inclusion principles is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for the sustainable and meaningful preservation of America's natural and cultural heritage.

Local, state, and national policy making entities must work with Hispanic communities, specifically through Hispanic faith leaders and conservation professionals, to identify specific locations in need of designation and protection. In addition, they must also work to ensure that - of the public lands already protected - any connection to Hispanic history, heritage, and culture is being told honestly, fully and publicly. Our interviews revealed an overwhelming collective concern for the stories not being told on existing historical and natural sites. A thorough review, in partnership with Hispanic leaders, needs to be conducted of currently protected public lands to not only expand only whose story sites are telling, but how those stories are being told. This process must be completed alongside, not instead of, efforts to identify and protect new public lands which tell the diverse experiences and history of Hispanic Americans. A shift in public land preservation processes can change how history is told through public lands, and thus help shape a more conscientious, just, and unified future.



*La Villita  
Chicago, IL*

# INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

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Francisco Colop, *Pastor*, El Buen Pastor Assemblies of God Church (Austin, TX)

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## *The Lands that Hold Our Stories*

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The following sites were listed in the interviews as holding significant meaning, value, and historical importance for both the individuals interviewed and their communities:

Barrio Logan, *Santa Ana, CA*  
Caguana Ceremonial Indigenous Heritage Center, *Puerto Rico*  
Castner Range National Monument, *El Paso, TX*  
Chepa's Park, *Santa Ana, CA*  
Chicano Park, *San Diego, CA*  
Colorado Plateau Province  
Continental Divide National Scenic Trail  
Duranguito, *El Paso, TX*  
Echo Park, *Los Angeles, CA*  
El Sereno Park, *Los Angeles, CA*  
El Yunque National Forest, *Puerto Rico*  
Elephant Hill, *Los Angeles, CA*  
Ernest E. Debs Park, *Los Angeles, CA*  
Frasier Park, *Kern County, CA*  
Friendship Park, *San Diego, CA*  
Gila River and Great Bend, *AZ/NM*  
Grand Canyon,  
Gulf of Mexico  
Hillsborough River, *Tampa, FL*  
Hueco Tanks State Park, *El Paso, TX*  
Kings Canyon National Park, *CA*  
La Vega Communal Pasture, *CO*  
La Villita, *Chicago, IL*  
Los Padres National Forest, *CA*  
MacArthur Park, *Los Angeles, CA*  
Mother Cabrini Shrine, *Golden, CO*  
Mount Taylor, *NM*  
New Mexico Bootheel, *NM*  
Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument, *NM*  
Paseo del Bosque Trail, *Albuquerque, NM*  
Pecos River, *NM-TX*  
Piedras Marcadas Canyon, *Albuquerque, NM*  
Rincón Beach, *Puerto Rico*  
Rio Grande  
Rocky Mountain National Park, *CO*  
Salt River, *Phoenix-Tempe, AZ*  
San Diego–Coronado Bridge, *CA*  
San Gabriel Mountains, *San Bernardino County, CA*  
Sangre de Cristo Mountains, *CO/NM*  
Santa Fe Street Bridge, *El Paso, TX*  
San Francisco Morada, *CO*  
Sequoia National Park, *CA*  
Sierra Nevada, *CA*  
Tampa Bay, *FL*  
Tonto National Forest (Oak Flat), *Payson, AZ*

*Sangre de Cristo Mountains  
Colorado*

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