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Farm Workers in Salem:

The importance of considering their children's experiences in Outdoor Programs

Abstract

A big part of the Latinx population in Salem have been or are currently farm workers or work in the agricultural industry. Thus, many Latinx children in the Salem Keizer school district are children of agricultural workers. Given the large Latinx farmworker population in Salem, I explore the importance of considering the experiences of children of farm workers to better improve the participation of Latinx students in outdoor programs. The current initiative from the Straub Environmental Center called, Naturaleza Ahora, is working to, “identify the needs and priorities of Latino students and their families, develop outdoor programs that are responsive to those needs, and find innovative ways of reaching out to Hispanic/Latino members of our community” With this goal in mind, I thought about the experiences that Latinx families have in relation to nature that would affect the way children interact with the outdoors. How do Latinx parents' work environments affect how much they value outdoor activity for their children? I thought about these questions based on my own experiences with my family and other Latinx immigrant families like mine. In this essay, I recount the history of migration from Mexico to

Oregon through the Bracero program and forward. I examine how Mexican immigrants experience working in agriculture translates to their children's experiences with the outdoors. I argue that it is important to look at Latinx farm workers in order to increase the number of Latinx students involved in outdoor experiential learning programs.

Keywords:

Environmental justice, critical discourse, environmental privilege, movement organizing, environmental communication.

The Naturaleza Ahora! Initiative from the Straub environmental center is currently conducting research on how to better engage the Latinx community in Salem. According to the Naturaleza Ahora website, “the Naturaleza Ahora is a new initiative designed to help Latino students access the outdoors and learn about natural science. This multi-year and multi-phase project will identify the needs and priorities of Latino students and their families, develop outdoor programs that are responsive to those needs, and find innovative ways of reaching out to Hispanic/Latino members of our community. Our goal is to double the number of Latino students who participate in outdoor education over the next three years and help them develop social, academic and workforce readiness skills through natural science education . . . in nature”. This initiative, though it has several successful programs, is currently in its development stages, which is why I wanted to conduct research that would benefit the designing of Naturaleza Ahora. With this effort in mind, I thought about some questions that pertain to the Latinx community in the Salem-Keizer area. For example, what are the experiences that Latinx families have in relation to

nature that would affect the way they interact with the outdoors? How do Latinx parents' work environments affect how much they value outdoor activity for their children? I thought about these questions based on my own experiences with my family and other Latinx immigrant families like mine. Given the large Latinx farmworker population in Salem, I explore the importance of considering the experiences of children of farm workers to better improve the participation of Latinx students in outdoor programs.

From my experiences with families in which both parents worked as farm workers, many of their children also had to work as farm workers throughout summers, making it difficult for them to attend any summer outdoor programs. Talking with my mother about this she said, "Taking my kids to work berry picking in the summers was a necessity and a form of teaching my kids to value their education. I wanted them to see the harsh realities of jobs you have to work when you don't have an education." The outdoors for my parents was composed of harsh conditions. Their bodies had to endure scorching heat, uneven rocks, and thorns from berry bushes. These experiences facing the "ugly" side of nature made it so that my parents did not want me to have a job working outside. Their hope was for me to have a job working indoors in an office. I have also spoken to my peers who have expressed similar experiences. Their parents wanted them to focus on their education; thus, their parents would not pressure them to spend time in the outdoors. Instead, their parents wanted them to spend time studying or helping with household work.

A big part of the Latinx population in Salem have been or are currently farm workers or work in the agricultural industry. Thus, many Latinx children in the Salem Keizer school district are children of agricultural workers. I investigated what role agricultural jobs play in informing

the way parents teach their children about nature or what relationship parents expect of their children to have with the outdoors. I think it is important to look at the Latinx farmworker population in Salem because it is key to accomplishing **environmental justice**: having more opportunities for people of color and of a lower socio-economic status to engage with the outdoors that they would normally would not have as easy access to (Pezzullo and Cox 2018). I also think that my topic could add to the **critical discourse**, conversations that challenge people to think about different ideas or communities, surrounding the experiences of farmworkers (Pezzullo and Cox 2018). I think my research could help agricultural laborer communities gain access to green spaces and environmental science education, which only those with **environmental privilege** have access to (Pezzullo and Cox 2018).

Salem has had a long history of bringing migrant farm workers from Mexico. This is primarily due to the Bracero program. According to “Of Forests and Fields Mexican Labor in the Pacific Northwest” by Mario Jimenez Sifuentez, “On August 4, 1942, the United States and Mexico entered a bilateral agreement to bring temporary guest workers from Mexico to the United States.”. The Bracero program was the beginning of a strong latinx presence in the Northwest, specifically in Oregon. The introduction of the Bracero program in Oregon created a pipeline for migration from Mexico to Oregon. It began the legacy of many Latinos working in agriculture as farmworkers. Marcela Mendoza documents the number of braceros that arrived in Oregon in her writing, *Latinos in Oregon*, “The Bracero program existed in the state of Oregon from 1942-1947. Approximately 15,000 braceros were contracted as farm laborers.”. Oregon has a very large agricultural industry. According to the Oregon Department of Agriculture, Oregon is the largest grower of christmas trees, blackberries, and hazelnuts, among other crops. With the

high amounts of production in Oregon's agriculture industry, there is a high demand for workers to tend the fields. These jobs are primarily filled by immigrants from Mexico and Latin America.

Thus, there is a strong presence of Latinos in the Willamette Valley. Over time Marcela Mendoza states, "From the late 1980s to the mid-1990 the Mexican migrant population changed significantly in two ways in Oregon. First, many of the men who had become legal permanent residents sent for their wives and children. Second, once the families of these men arrived, they settled more permanently and in communities such as Salem, Woodburn, East Portland, Gresham, and Medford.". Salem has seen and continues to grow a strong latinx community. This can be seen through the many Mexican bakeries, restaurants, and local shops throughout Salem. Marcela Mendoza documents the history of the Latinx community in Oregon in her writing, "150 Years of Latino Contributions in Oregon". She states, "Latinos have made and will continue to make significant contributions to the state. They are starting new businesses, are joining the Hispanic Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, are getting law degrees, becoming state employees, entering local politics as elected officials (a number of County and City Commissioners are Latino), and are getting appointed to the judicial system". It can be clearly seen that Latinos have established their homes and cultures in Salem. It is also important to note that Oregon has not always been a welcoming place for Latinos nor have work environments made it easy for Latinos to continue working. Farm workers in Oregon have had a history of fighting oppressive work environments. Some of the resistance and workers rights movement in Oregon and Salem can be seen through the documentary *The Oregon Story; Agricultural workers* aired by the Oregon Broadcasting Network. Latinos have worked to create organizations that advocate for farm workers like PCUN (Pinos y Campesinos del Noroeste) and Causa, Oregon's

immigrants rights organization. These groups demonstrate how strong and present the Latinx farmworker community is in Oregon in **movement organizing**, and consequently in Salem.

For my research I found many articles written on the history of farmworkers in Oregon, as I have referenced. I also found articles on the relationship between Latinos and the environment. I think this quote by Adrianna Quintero, the Senior Lawyer for the National Resources Defense Council, sums what I found pretty well: “ I think a lot of people assume that we, as Latinos, don’t really care much about the environment, but I find the opposite is true . . . It’s a cultural value we carry with us.”. In general there has been low participation from Latinos in outdoor experiential programs. According to Karen Warren et al, in *Social Justice in Outdoor Experiential Education: A State of Knowledge*, “Nature and the meanings ascribed to the natural environment are rooted in history, gender, race, and culture (Ewert, Chavez, & Magill, 1993). Similarly, constructs of the concept of adventure are based on positions of privilege and oppression.” Thus, “ Latinos have reported feeling unwelcome or discriminated against despite many outdoor areas in the United States “reminding them of their homelands”. That is why it is important for the Naturaleza ahora initiative to tailor their programming to fit the needs and experiences of Latinx children in Salem.

For the Naturaleza Ahora! initiative to enhance its ongoing outreach to the Latinx population in Salem, my research finds there needs to be programming to address farm worker experiences. This need requires a shift in messaging, given the importance of **environmental communication**, which is, “the naming, shaping, orienting, and negotiating-- of our ecological relationships to the world,” according to Pezzullo and Cox (2018). I think programs need to be more aware of who their programs are accessible to. If programs understand the challenges of the

Latinx community, the latinx community will be more likely to participate. Messaging about programs will be more culturally competent and relatable. Currently, Naturaleza Ahora! is committed to interviewing parents about what they think would benefit their children in terms of outdoor experiential learning. Continued and greater work in this area will help advance the goals of this important initiative.

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