



Nina S. Roberts (1960-Present)

Professor of Recreation, Parks, & Tourism
San Francisco State University

To me, our real challenge lies in not trying to “bring people of color into the woods” to teach them, but more importantly, to create opportunities for them to learn on their own. We must focus on connections. Connecting people to parks and other outdoor areas through education and recreation provides an open door that is all too often closed. Dr. Nina Roberts, 2014

Overview

Dr. Nina Roberts is a professor of Recreation, Parks, & Tourism at San Francisco State University. Her research focuses on race/ethnicity, culture and natural resources. She is nationally known for her work with urban youth, women, and girls in the outdoors. In addition to teaching and research, Dr. Roberts supports the National Park Service in community engagement and outreach. She is also on the Advisory Council of the NPCA Center for Park Management and GirlVentures Inc. She has been featured on *CNN.com*, *Boston Globe*, *L.A Times*, and *The New York Times* regarding diversity and national parks and the use of public lands. Nina has published numerous journal articles and book chapters about social and environmental justice, women/girls outdoors, and youth leadership. She has received numerous honors and recognition for her work and dedication to the field of parks, recreation, conservation, with experiential learning at the core of her actions and convictions. Some of her publications include:

- Warren, K., Roberts, N.S., Bruenig, M. & Alvarez, T. (2014). Social justice in outdoor experiential education: Past, present and future. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 37(1), 89-103.
- Roberts, N.S. & Chitewere, T. (2011). Speaking of Justice: Exploring Ethnic Minority Perspectives of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. *Environmental Practice*, 13(4), 354-369.
- Roberts, N.S. & Suren, A. (2010). Through the eyes of youth: A qualitative evaluation of outdoor leadership programs. *Journal of Parks and Recreation Administration*, 28(4), 59-80.
- Roberts, N.S. (2009). Crossing the color line with a different perspective on whiteness and (anti)racism: A response to Mary McDonald. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 41(4), 493-507.
- Roberts, N.S. (2009). Impacts of the National Green Corps Eco-club program on students in India and their participation

This interview was conducted in 2015.

Early Life

Nina Roberts was born on December 10, 1960 in New York City to James and Colette Roberts, a retired businessman and freelance artist, respectively. Roberts, along with her parents, two sisters and brother, moved frequently throughout the Northeast and lived in places like New York City, Boston, and the suburbs of Philly, and Washington D.C. While she loves city life, a childhood spent in such densely populated areas resulted in Roberts' lifelong quest to find a sanctuary. For Roberts, this sanctuary is the outdoors. She regularly attended camp as a child and eventually became a camp counselor. This position sparked her interest in recreation, natural resource management, and environmental education. As a result, she embraced the value of being able to develop a career and make a living in parks and the outdoors.

Roberts earned a bachelor's degree in physical education and recreation from Bridgewater State College, a master's degree in outdoor recreation and resource management from the University of Maryland, College Park, and, in 2003, she earned a doctorate from Colorado State University in outdoor recreation and natural resources management.

Career

Roberts began her work in the environmental field as the assistant director of a recreation community center; a position affiliated with the Boston Area YMCA. Her responsibilities focused on the provision of recreational and environmental activities for youth whose families resided in low-income neighborhoods. This job solidified her interest in the field of outdoor recreation as she left the Center to later work with a 1,200 acre outdoor education center. She has since worked with various agencies including the Prince William County Park Authority (northern VA), the Student Conservation Association, National Park Service, and a variety of non-governmental organizations. She is currently a professor at San Francisco State University in the department of recreation, parks, & tourism. Here she focuses on teaching and research relating to youth development, park management, outdoor recreation, leadership, and urban programming. These courses, among others, always include social and environmental justice content for student learning and awareness. Service to community is also a big part of her job.

Roberts' career is full of many great accomplishments including being a Fulbright Scholar in India with the Indo-American Environmental Leadership Program. However, she is most proud of her work as the national coordinator of the "Take Back the Trails" initiative in 1997. The initiative goals included involving 30,000 people across the country to hike, backpack, or go camping over Memorial Day weekend to demonstrate their commitment and belief in outdoor recreation with emphasis on support and encouragement for women and girls. Roberts led a small national committee that coordinated the event and made it a huge success. This event, along with others, has given Roberts significant visibility in the environmental field. Consequently, as a woman of color doing this work, she has also been in a position to connect with, and mentor, young minorities across the country.

Connecting with those she works with has not always been an easy task. Roberts cites the difficulty she had in communicating with her director at a small non-profit organization as one of the lowest points in

her career. The actions of the former director uncovered numerous biases and prejudices, making it a struggle for Roberts to relate to and communicate with him, broadly. However, striving to reach her personal and professional goals, combined with her respect for the outdoors, has kept Roberts in the environmental field.

Roberts respects the environment as her teacher. She finds that she discovers more about herself and the world through spending time outdoors than any other venue. Further, maintaining a career in the environmental field allows her to both work towards educating people about environmental protection and have a voice in political decision-making. These aspects of the environmental field have kept her in grounded during challenging times.

Importance of Mentoring to Career

The advice and examples set by Roberts' mentors have also played a role in her successes and perseverance. When asked to identify her mentors, Roberts listed five individuals: Jan Harris, Flip Hagood, Liz Titus, Audrey Peterman, and Bill Gwaltney. Jan Harris was her undergraduate academic advisor and was influential in shaping Roberts's career decisions. Flip Hagood was her supervisor during her time with the Student Conservation Association (SCA). He provided her with advice and demonstrated tremendous faith and trust in Roberts and the decisions she made. Liz Titus is the founder of the SCA. She opened the doors to women in natural resources in many ways and provided opportunities for girls and young women to learn and grow in the field. Audrey Peterman is a consultant, author, and parks advocate. Peterman and Roberts possess a similar energy that allows them to work well together. Collectively, they have brainstormed ways to create change and continue making progress through innovation and vital initiatives. Finally, Bill Gwaltney supervised both her research fellowship at Rocky Mountain National Park and eventually hired her through the Student Career Experience Program while a doctoral student in Colorado. Gwaltney opened many doors for Roberts with the National Park Service and has been her champion as she has pursued her career even as she moved on into the world of higher education keeping her connected with the NPS.

Mentoring Others

Just as others have served as important mentors for Roberts, she has served as a mentor for others through her work with the SCA, NPS, and other state and federal land management agencies, as well as a variety of universities coast-to-coast. Roberts' work as an adjunct faculty member at the University of Maryland, George Mason University and Colorado State University allowed her to spend time with students, including minorities, interested in the environmental field. Additionally, Roberts says that her heritage of East Indian, British and West Indian descent affords her the opportunity to mentor others in very unique ways. Through her work with the SCA and the NPS she maintains constant contact with young women and minorities. She shares with them the value of natural resources and the benefits of an environmental career.

Advice to Young Professionals

Roberts' advice to young women and minorities is to learn to effectively cross cultural boundaries and to communicate to others one's goals and love of nature. She also suggests that individuals put themselves in leadership positions as often as possible, especially those that will provide multiple perspectives to typical traditional settings. Finally, Roberts advises that individuals find ways to understand themselves better. That is, "Determine and understand your own values and judgments and how they may shape your attitudes and beliefs about the natural world and other peoples' connection to it."

For More Information

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