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America Es Su Casa, Enjoy It!

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Javier Sierra Media consultant and Sierra Club columnist

The devotion Melissa Guevara professes for the outdoors is a splendid example of Latinos' love for the land, of our profound respect for God's creation and our commitment to preserve it for future generations.

"The first time I knew that I wanted to make nature part of my life was at a state park," remembers Melissa, a senior majoring in environmental and urban studies at Bard College in New York. "I sat on a boulder looking at the view. It was breathtaking. I sat there and I felt like I was home."

The last two summers, working for the US Fish and Wildlife Service as an intern, Melissa shared her passion for nature with kids from Latino barrios by leading tours at a nearby national refuge.

"When kids don't know the outdoors, often all they see is wilderness and darkness and they get scared because they are not used to it," she says. "But once they know it, many, like me, decide to dedicate their lives to preserve it."

This year, the greatest exponent of our country's natural wonders is celebrating its first centennial. On August 25, 1916, Congress established the National Park Service (NPS), which for many represents "[the best idea](#)" this country has ever had. Currently, the service includes 450 natural, historic, recreational and cultural areas.

Out of those, [172 possess a special meaning](#) for us Latinos. From [Camino de Tierra Adentro](#) in New Mexico, to the [Cabildo](#) in Louisiana, to the [César Chávez National Monument](#) in California, they all reflect the Latino culture's profound impact on US history.

However, when it comes to visiting the jewels of this crown — the service's 59 national parks — our attendance is dismal. According to a NPS [study](#), only one in ten visitors is Latino. If we consider that California, a state with some the highest number of national parks in the country, is 40 percent Latino, we realize the severity of this attendance deficit.

And the numbers underline this apparent contradiction. [Poll](#) after [poll](#) tells us that up to 90 percent of Latino voters support the protection and preservation of natural areas for future generations. Similar percentages declare that outdoor activities —such as picnics, camping and fishing— are important for them.

Moreover, a recent [study](#) found that Latinos are the national population segment that expends the most on outdoors gear —almost \$600 per person a year, as compared to \$465 for the average consumer.

The reasons for this deficit are varied.

"I have worked at national parks, but my parents have never been to a national park because it's so far away," says Melissa, who lives in Yonkers, New York. "Latino families often don't have the means of transportation to get there."

"We need to integrate Latinos into the staff functions of the national parks. That has to be priority number one," Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ), a passionate defender of the outdoors, told me in a recent interview. "We need to begin to provide resources to the Park Service so that they can partner with schools, community groups, and civic organizations in Latino communities so you begin to encourage the use of our national parks."

Grijalva also advocates for national parks and other special places to be culturally relevant and linguistically appropriate for our community to feel just like Melissa did when she visited her first park, "at home."

"It's been amazing," she says. "The things I get to see are just magnificent. It makes you want to go back to these places. That's why I want to dedicate my life to this work."

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