



## Letter Issued to WCS Staff in the US and Globally on June 19, 2020

Dear Colleagues,

Today is Juneteenth, an historic day that commemorates the end of slavery in the United States in 1865, when more than 250,000 enslaved Black people in Texas finally learned they had gained their freedom more than two years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. It marks an important step toward ending a disgraceful period in U.S. history, but it reminds us that we still have a long way to go toward achieving social and racial justice in the United States and around the world.

WCS will join New York State and City and other organizations by making Juneteenth an official WCS holiday starting next year. As the United States confronts its legacy of racism and the brutal killings that have led to mass protests around the world, this, too, is an important moment in history to reflect on WCS's own history, and the persistence of racism in our institution and in human society. The United States is discovering its moral center and so must WCS.

### **A Look at Our Past**

Looking to the past, we must acknowledge and condemn certain dishonorable chapters in the history of our organization and identify the steps we must take to ensure they never happen again. Two stains from our history, in particular, demand attention. In the name of equity, transparency, and accountability, we must confront these episodes as we advance our mission to save wildlife and wild places and foster a workplace without discrimination of any kind based on race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, national origin, marital status, and similar categories.

First, we condemn the treatment of a young man from Central Africa's Mbuti people named Ota Benga, who lived at the Bronx Zoo for a month and was displayed in the Monkey House for several days during the week of September 8, 1906. Crowds of hundreds gaped at this shameful spectacle until public outcry led to Ota Benga being removed from exhibit. This particular degradation began in 1904 when he was brought to the United States forcibly from present-day Democratic Republic of Congo by a disreputable businessman to be exploited at the St. Louis World's Fair. He left the zoo after a local Black minister, Reverend James Gordon, arranged for him to stay at the orphanage he directed in Weeksville, Brooklyn. Unable to return home to Africa due to travel restrictions caused by the outbreak of World War I, Ota Benga would tragically take his own life in 1916 in Virginia, a victim of the racism that robbed him of his humanity.

We further condemn bigoted actions and attitudes in the early 1900s toward non-whites—especially African Americans and recent immigrants—that characterized the leadership in the United States at many notable institutions, including our own. Specifically, we condemn and denounce the writings and philosophies advanced by Madison Grant, a founder of the New York Zoological Society (NYZS). To the lasting shame of this institution, Madison Grant authored a book called “The Passing of the Great Race,” a eugenics-based work of pseudoscientific racism. This book, praised by

another NYZS founder, Henry Fairfield Osborn, was cited by Nazis on trial at Nuremburg to justify their actions.

Today, we apologize for our organization's role in these injustices. We deeply regret that many people and generations have been hurt and betrayed by these actions. We recognize that overt and systemic anti-Black racism persists, and our institution must play a greater role in recognizing this fact and doing more to overcome these challenges.

It is also important to remember that these stories do not represent our values or who we are today. In our zoos and aquarium in New York and in our field programs across the world—from the United States, to Papua New Guinea, to the Republic of Congo, to Bolivia—we work to ensure that social, racial, and environmental justice are deep-rooted in our conservation mission. Taken as whole, WCS is an extremely diverse institution, working across many cultures and languages. We are stronger for it, but we have to do more.

### **Who We Are Now**

We are especially proud of the fact that the Bronx Zoo is the largest employer of youth in the Bronx, one of the poorest and most diverse counties in the United States. All of our zoos and the aquarium have an active mentorship program where we invest in young, talented individuals and provide them with a pathway to a career in the zoo and aquarium field and advancement to different positions throughout our five parks and beyond.

In New York, our zoos and aquarium are addressing the racial inequities of science education and environmental justice through a strategic approach designed to listen to and elevate the voices of our diverse communities. We do this through partnerships with schools and social service organizations, actively investing resources in our career pathways program—the WCS STEM Career Lattice. We are committed to disrupting the notions of who scientists and conservationists are, what they do, and who can be one.

Over the last four decades, WCS has purposefully and respectfully supported Indigenous Peoples and local communities across the globe to formally secure and exercise their legitimate rights to manage and use natural resources within their traditional territories. In the Brazilian Amazon, for example, WCS helped establish the first sustainable development reserves in Mamirauá and Amanã to protect the rights of traditional fishers and hunters and ensure that they had the formally recognized authority to decide who could access and use their natural resources. In Fiji, we have likewise supported the advancement and inclusion of women in fisheries management. And in Bolivia, WCS has worked with the Tacana, Lecos, and T'simane peoples living in and around the Madidi National Park and the Pilon Lajas Biosphere Reserve and on indigenous land to secure their land rights, strengthen their institutions, secure sustainable livelihoods, strengthen their cultures, and reduce deforestation. Today, WCS supports the efforts of 205 communities of Indigenous Peoples in 39 countries to promote conservation and to secure and exercise their legitimate territorial rights.

We helped launch the Conservation and Human Rights Initiative in 2009 and adhere to a set of [Human Rights in Conservation Principles](#) that ensure that our conservation efforts support the rights and needs of Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

Our global conservation program employs more than 3,000 staff in close to 60 countries, and nearly all of our field programs are led by nationals of those countries. Established in 1996, the WCS Graduate Scholarship Program is building leadership capacity for conservation and has provided fellowships to students from 39 countries to study in the best universities in the world.

We included diversity and inclusion as one of the core values in our WCS 2020 strategy; we created a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Council and DEI working groups with more than 100 colleagues participating; and we adopted a DEI plan for our New York facilities that was endorsed by our Board of Trustees last year.

Despite the progress we have made, we recognize that we still have much work to do. The recent events and public outcry in the United States and other countries have shaken us to our core, requiring us to take long and hard looks at areas where we can and will do better, and have added greater urgency and a redoubling of our efforts. We have heard from you and we pledge to take concrete action to address systemic racism and promote greater diversity, equity, and inclusion in our organization that reflects WCS's core values.

## **Going Forward**

To that end, and building on the goals of our diversity, equity, and inclusion plan:

We will publicly acknowledge the mistakes of our past and be vocal about them with our staff and others. We will take all of the records that we've identified related to Ota Benga and make them available online, and we will develop additional projects to make our history accessible and transparent, especially to outside writers and researchers. We will review the images and art in and around our buildings in New York to take actions, ensuring they represent our core values and our diverse workforce.

We will expand our training for all staff to cultivate an inclusive workforce and reinforce our policies against discrimination based on race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, national origin, marital status, and similar categories.

We will continue to take meaningful measures to ensure diverse pools of candidates for recruitment, promotion, and succession planning, particularly with regard to our board and senior leadership. We will include this in the performance goals of all managers, and report periodically on our progress through the OurWCS internal communications channel.

We will hire a Diversity Officer to work directly with me and with our Chief Operating Officer Robb Menzi to help us implement actions in our diversity, equity, and inclusion plan.

As the first Latino President and CEO of WCS, and a person born and raised outside the United States, all these issues are important and personal to me. I am convinced that our diversity is one of our greatest strengths, as defined in our core values and our WCS 2020 strategy. I invite you to help me identify ways we can create a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive organization for our staff and for the communities where we work.

I am proud to work at WCS, as I hope you are. Let us challenge ourselves to do better and to never look away whenever and wherever injustice occurs.

Sincerely,

Cristián Samper  
WCS President and CEO