

National parks try to attract more diverse visitors

By Kirk Johnson, New York Times

LA PUSH, Wash. – Thrusting out into the Pacific Ocean, Olympic National Park can feel like a lost world, with its verdant forests, violent surf and cloud-shrouded peaks.

But to the four women who hiked down to the sand one recent afternoon, there was an added element of strangeness: race.

“We’ve been here for two days, walking around, and I can’t think of any brown person that I’ve seen,” said Carol Cain, 42, a New Jersey resident of Dominican and Puerto Rican roots, who was zipped up tight in her hooded, dripping rain jacket.

The National Park Service knows all too well what Cain is talking about. In a soul-searching, head-scratching journey of its own, the agency that manages some of the most awe-inspiring public places is scrambling to rethink and redefine itself to the growing number of Americans who do not use the parks in the way previous – mostly white – generations did.

Only about 1 in 5 visitors to a national park site is nonwhite, according to a 2011 University of Wyoming report commissioned by the Park Service, and only about 1 in 10 is Hispanic – a particularly lackluster embrace by the nation’s fastest-growing demographic group.

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