

“There’s nothing more important to me than the Buffalo Soldiers story.”



SHELTON JOHNSON

has spent over 30 years as a National Park employee, the majority of them as an Interpretive Park Ranger at Yosemite. Much of his work now focuses on community outreach aimed at getting more people of color into the parks.

The Buffalo Soldier* history is completely forgotten, so there’s nothing that fills me with a greater sense of challenge and appreciation than to take a story that was only known to essentially a handful of people and, over twenty years, to have made that story known to millions of people. The reason why the Buffalo Soldier story is the greatest thing that I’ve ever been involved with is that there are millions of African Americans who do not feel a cultural connection to the National Park because [of the] misperception that the National Parks do not culturally pertain to African Americans. When they hear that in 1899, 1903, and 1904, people who look like them were in charge of Yosemite and Sequoia National Park, that’s a profound paradigm shift within them and so they feel a connection.

America, as a nation, has become more demographically and culturally diverse. It’s extremely important that these stories that tie these communities of color to a national park have become better known. I’m trying to connect with people who never even give a thought to visiting a national park, and that’s a different kind of challenge.

*Buffalo Soldiers were among the first park rangers patrolling parts of the West. There are differing theories regarding the origin of this nickname. One is that the Plains Indians who fought the Buffalo Soldiers thought their dark, curly hair resembled the fur of the buffalo. Another is that their bravery and ferocity in battle reminded the Indians of the way buffalo fought. Whatever the reason, the soldiers considered the name high praise, as buffalo were deeply respected by the Native peoples of the Great Plains.