

“Does race affect feelings of belonging on the D&L Trail?”

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [Environment](#) October 31, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the environment* 

Something to think about if you are out and around exercising on this chilly day.

One afternoon last week Gadfly was on the Saucon Trail counting people of color. Between Walnut St. and Upper Saucon Park and back, he counted 51 people, 51 people on the trail of which 6 were people of color. Now you must read on to find out what that rather odd tabulating behavior was all about.

Followers will recognize that Gadfly is totally in to the national reckoning with race triggered by the death of George Floyd. He feels there is nothing more important at this cultural moment. (Well, besides who our next president is!)

He is, in fact, a bit obsessed with thinking about race. It's what makes him **irritable** with the lack of urgency regarding discussions of public safety he perceives in the City Administration and City Council, as you will also recognize.

But the local institutions — NCC, BAPL, HCLV, Touchstone, etc., etc. — feed that obsession. You've seen him several times extol the programs and resources on race and racism that have sprung into existence in the last 6-7 months.

We are blessed to have them. It says a lot about the quality of town we are.

So Gadfly is a victim of the opportunities to learn presented to him.

And he loves to learn new things.

The recent “Race and Space in the Lehigh Valley” program hosted by the [Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium](#) presented him with several such learning experiences.

Let’s think about one of them right now.

The pandemic-caused changes in our life-styles and work-styles have precipitated a surge in the use of our outdoor natural resources, like the parks and trails.

And we have a local wealth of those natural resources on which to draw as you can well see, for instance, if you trace the photographic Facebook footprints of follower Dana Grubb. Dana has worn out at least three GIS devices over the past pandemic months! And the visual record of his travels is stunning.



Think of the Monocacy Way. Think of the D&L Trail. Think of the Greenway that is being extended to Saucon Park over the next year. Think of ongoing plans for a pedestrian bridge. Think of things like that.

These are natural resources that make Bethlehem and the surrounding Lehigh Valley a wonderful place to live.

But Gadfly was surprised to learn that people of color might not feel so comfortable or welcome — “included” — in these spaces.

During the “Race and Space” program, Gadfly learned of **a study** done by Lafayette’s Prof Andrea Armstrong based on a survey of 500 users in which one of the questions she answers is “Does race affect feelings of belonging on the D&L Trail?”

And the answer is not all that good: “we . . . found that people of color feel less included among trail users than white people when controlling for things like age, gender, and types of trail use (like biking or walking).”

Gadfly thinks of the enjoyment of nature available to all. Gadfly thinks of the enjoyment of the trails available to all.

Gadfly thinks that nature is open, that everybody should feel comfortable on the trails.

Maybe not so.

In her presentation during the program, Prof Armstrong said, “There is a very stark difference between how included people of color felt on the trail and how white people felt. The people of color did not feel as welcome, did not feel as included, and did not communicate with other people as part of their community on the trail as often as white people do. And so we really saw this stark finding as a sign that this history of racism and this history of exclusion from environmentalism is alive in the Lehigh Valley.”

Audio Player not available in this archive

Now that’s jaw-dropping.

Specters of Jim Crow.

Not “Whites Only” bathrooms or seats on a bus or sections of a restaurant, but a feeling among some people of color of “Whites Only” recreational trails. Some people of color feel that in walking or riding there they are intruding on white space.

Now hold your disbelief you white people out there until you hear the next post on this subject.

Gadfly thinks more surprises are in store.

So Gadfly was out on Saucon Trail counting people of color. Not many there that day. Surprisingly low, in fact, when I took notice. Which just might be a result of the location of this particular trail relative to where people of color live. Or it might just have been a bad day. But, in any event, the point of Prof Armstrong’s study was not about the number of people of color on the trail but how welcome those using the trail felt.

to be continued . . .