

Is Social Justice for the Birds? Audubon Attempts an Answer
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A battle over the group namesake's ties to slavery grew into a conflict over diversity, highlighting complications that have arisen in the aftermath of George Floyd's death.

On the same day George Floyd was murdered by a police officer on a Minneapolis street — Memorial Day, 2020 — Christian Cooper was searching for songbirds in Central Park. Mr. Cooper, who is Black, would be vaulted to fame after a run-in with a white woman who called the police and falsely claimed he was threatening her when he asked her to leash her dog.

To David Yarnold, the chief executive of the National Audubon Society at the time, both events demanded a response. The powerful conservation group and pre-eminent bird enthusiasts' organization needed to weigh in, and even examine itself.

"Black lives matter," Mr. Yarnold, who is white, wrote in a letter to the society's staff after the first weekend of the George Floyd protests. "Our nation is in turmoil because our governments, our institutions (including Audubon), and private individuals haven't done nearly enough to act on that fundamental truth."

Mr. Yarnold promised to start a "long conversation" about how the Audubon Society could "become antiracist in everything we do."

Three years later, that long conversation has led the society into an all-out feud over its own handling of race within the organization. Complaints about workplace conditions and the treatment of minority employees and hobbyists are bound up in the question of whether the conservation group should drop its namesake, John James Audubon, who owned slaves.

Mr. Yarnold has left, and several board members have quit. Local chapters of the national organization have distanced themselves, employees are in an uproar, donors are skittish and members — the lifeblood of the organization — are wondering what has happened to an insular community of nature lovers who were more accustomed to debating birding etiquette than to grappling with deeply entrenched racism.

What is going on inside the Audubon Society is a microcosm of the debates that have roiled organizations across the country since 2020. Companies, governments and campuses, driven by the energy of groups like Black Lives Matter, committed themselves to ambitious plans to change policing and corporate culture. Many found themselves caught between a desire to appeal to a younger, more diverse generation and the objections of others who said the changes they were considering went too far.

Audubon's case is an example of the complications that can arise in a post-2020 world when an organization tries, or fails, to meet those expectations, especially when the expectations fall outside the organization's traditional mission: What does bird conservation have to do with social justice?

For some people, the name John James Audubon *means* birding the way the name Edison means electric light. By cataloging and painting hundreds of species in the early 1800s for his seminal four-volume work, "The Birds of America," Audubon arguably contributed more to ornithological study than any other individual in United States history. But he was also an outspoken anti-abolitionist slave owner who held repellent beliefs about African Americans. He enslaved nine people to work in his Kentucky home, bought and sold several people, and argued against emancipation, according to a biographer, Gregory Nobles.

Those in favor argued that a name change would not only break the link to a shameful history, but also help create a more welcoming atmosphere for members and employees. That, in turn, would help the organization thrive.

“Why would you not take the step of being brave and moving forward?” said Jason Hall, a 40-year-old Black man who founded the In Color Birding Club as a way to “open birding and access to outdoors to people of color.”

Mr. Hall said the Audubon Society’s position should be: “We need to consider this name change because it gives us an opportunity to reconcile the history of this person, but also keep our core mission of bringing birds to people. And by doing that we can bring more birds to more people, more, different kinds of people.” Mr. Yarnold, the society’s former head, described the summer of 2020 as a “pressure cooker at Audubon,” brought on by isolation from the Covid pandemic and the hurt and anger over Mr. Floyd’s murder.

“It was monumentally hard to comprehend the zeitgeist in the moment,” Mr. Yarnold said. “You can’t run a complex, nuanced, nonpartisan 50-state operation over Zoom.”

At the end of 2020, Politico reported on complaints from employees that the Audubon Society was a dysfunctional and hostile workplace for racial minorities and women.

An audit commissioned by the Audubon board and conducted by an outside law firm substantiated some of the complaints. The report found that “managers at all levels — including women — perpetuate an environment that diminishes the contributions of women and people of color.” In 2021, the board promised to make changes.

For Mr. Yarnold, who had hired the organization’s first vice president of equity, diversity and inclusion, the report stung. Just before the report was released, he said he would step down.

“I was not asked to leave,” Mr. Yarnold said, adding that he decided to “accelerate the transition” that was already planned.

His departure did not quell employees, who formed a union in September 2021, known as the “Bird Union” to distance itself from the Audubon name.

Some staffers said it was an uphill battle trying to change an organization that they said was just as interested in conserving its status quo as it was conserving wildlife.

“Why would you not take the step of being brave and moving forward?” said Jason Hall, a birder in Pennsylvania, adding that dropping the Audubon name would help the organization appeal to a younger, more diverse crowd.

“At some point, that mission needs to evolve,” said Andres Villalon, who identifies as non-binary and was Audubon’s senior director of equity, diversity, inclusion and belonging before resigning last December, frustrated, they said, that the organization was falling short of its values.

Mx. Villalon said there was a pervasive attitude among the board that social justice was a distraction from protecting birds.

Birding has a reputation as a hobby for affluent white people who aren’t always welcoming to Black people, according to Mr. Hall, who founded the In Color Birding Club.

When Sam DeJarnett, 33, first began working at Portland Audubon, she was into wildlife conservation but didn’t know what birding was. She went on some official Audubon birding outings, “but it was all old white folks,” she said. “And I was really made to feel like an outsider, both as a woman of color — a Black woman — and as a new birder.” (The Portland group has said it will drop the Audubon name).

In 2022, 81 percent of the society’s senior leaders and 77 percent of its full-time employees identified as white, according to an Audubon survey.

The board hired Elizabeth Gray to replace Mr. Yarnold. In an interview Dr. Gray, the first woman to head the society, said its commitment to diversity and equity was “mission critical work.”

“When we do what’s right for birds, we do what’s right for people,” she said.

While the national organization debated, the Seattle chapter announced it would drop the Audubon name, later changing it to “Birds Connect Seattle.” Several other local chapters — including those in New York City and Chicago — dropped the Audubon moniker.

“Knowing what we now know, and hearing from community members how the Audubon name is harmful to our cause, there is no other choice but to change,” the head of the Seattle group wrote last year.

An internal survey of employees, members, donors and volunteers in the fall of 2022 revealed an organization deeply divided over a fundamental question of identity.

Around 43 percent of respondents said changing the name would have a negative impact on people’s ability “to feel they are a part of the organization,” while 35 percent said it would have a positive impact.

The internal report, obtained by The New York Times, said the society faced intense pressure not to alienate “older, conservative individuals” who provide the organization with “generous funding, time and support” through dues and donations.

One donor, who was not named, was quoted in the report as saying: “If there was even the remotest thought of changing the name of National Audubon because John James Audubon, in a different time, in a different world and a different century owned, whatever it was, six slaves, I would resign from the Audubon. There’d be no further gifts from me for the Audubon.”

One student interviewed in the report as part of a focus group said, “I hate their current name and would not join” Audubon “if it keeps its current name.”

Audubon redacted names from the document to protect respondents’ privacy, and recently released the full report to employees after questions from The New York Times.

The 32-member board voted against making a change, and on March 15, the National Audubon Society announced that it was keeping its name. The group’s leaders saw the decision as a statement of neutrality, those involved in the discussions said, and as a way to avoid taking sides in the culture wars.

Later that day, when the leaders convened a virtual all-hands meeting to inform the society’s staff of the decision, comments began unfurling in the chat, as angry employees peppered them with questions. Did they understand the impact that the decision would have on morale? On reaching communities of color?

“It’s one thing for Audubon to be named after a slaveholder, but what we’re saying today is that we’re doubling down on it,” said a moderator who was reading staff questions aloud, according to an audio recording obtained by The New York Times. “It doesn’t feel like I’m valued or welcomed here, as I used to be.”

Dr. Gray wrote an open letter to members about the decision. “Dear Flock,” it began, “Regardless of the name we use, this organization must and will address the inequalities and injustices that have historically existed within the conservation movement,” the letter said in part.

Dr. Gray acknowledged that the organization has some work to do in reaching communities of color. Maxine Griffin Somerville, the organization’s chief people and culture officer, said the society was committed to having “an average of at least two people from underrepresented groups in our final candidate pool for at least 80 percent of our permanent and seasonal roles.”

Three board members resigned after the vote. The organization postponed its annual fund-raising gala after the Bird Union, with about 250 members, planned a protest outside the venue. The 2019 gala at the Plaza Hotel brought in \$2.5 million.

Fieldstone Publishing, the maker of Audubon's ubiquitous field guides, swiftly condemned the board's decision, calling on its publishing partners to remove the Audubon name from the guides. Knopf said it would remove the Audubon name and logo from future guides and reprints. Fieldstone said it would donate sales proceeds from two recently published guides to the National African American Reparation Commission.

The union said retaining the name of an "enslaver" and "white supremacist" showed that Dr. Gray and the board "have no interest in following through on their commitments to cultivate a fair and equitable workplace." The two sides have yet to agree on a labor contract.

Christian Cooper, a member of New York City chapter's board, was among those condemning the decision.

"If we fail to engage new audiences with the natural world — if concern for the welfare of our wild birds is perceived as something for 'Whites only' — then only a dwindling group of Americans will fight for the birds," Mr. Cooper wrote in *The Washington Post*.

National Audubon Society leaders pledged to raise \$25 million to support "marginalized communities," and said there had been little change in the organization's fundraising capabilities.

"The vast number of donors and staff continue to stay with us," Dr. Gray said. "Our name is just part of our identity."

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