What Indiana Dunes National Park and the Border Wall Have in Common

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I've been coming to the Indiana Dunes since I was born. The massive sand hills stretch for fifteen miles along the coast of Lake Michigan, butting up against the industrial corridor that runs from the Indiana Harbor into Chicago. The dunes have been the "natural escape" for people living and working in the otherwise sooty region for generations. It's where my grandparents came to breathe on Sundays after endless shifts in steel mills, and it's where they wanted to rest after the years of workplace toxins took root as cancers in their bodies.

This mixing of nature reserves with heavy industry is a familiar reality of the "post-industrial" Midwest. Former steel cities have given way to other sacrifice zone enterprises, and today, human-made mountains of salt and scrap metal, a Unilever chemical plant, BP oil refineries, manganese deposits, and toxic methane burned off by enormous open flames lie just upwind of the dunes' bird songs, foxes, and gentle lake waves. Standing with your toes in the sand of a dune, looking at a sunset broken only by occasional flares from an iron smelter on the horizon starting the night shift, you can almost trick yourself into breathing free.

In February, the longest government shutdown in American history ended with a bill that designated the Indiana Dunes a National Park. The same bill allocated $1.4 billion for fifty-five miles of wall at the southern border with Mexico and provided for massive increases to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the police arms of Homeland Security known for deportation and terrorizing communities, and an increase in the national budget for immigrant detention.

At first glance, the funding bill's allocations seem almost as mixed-up and incongruous as the Dunes' patchwork of industry and nature. But it's a combination that, nevertheless, forms a pretty clear picture of the country's priorities: Celebrating a new national park and declaring the need for further militarization of the southern border are equally permissible, even celebrated, under a white nationalist logic that seeks to defend, protect, and conserve.

The link between conservation and conservatism is easy to see. From Mussolini's linking of lost Italian "greatness" and "nature," to Nazi cries for purity in "blunt und boden" (blood and soil), along every step in the long history of racism and nationalism in the American environmental movement, the rhetoric has been there. After all, backwards-looking nostalgia for green purity is a historical fantasy cut from the same cloth as nostalgia for white purity. How else could an environmentalist movement end up, having started in the genocide of Indigenous people?

Jedediah Purdy writes about these undercurrents in Henry David Thoreau's essay *Walking*, which gave the green movement phrases such as, "in wildness is the preservation of the world." According to the bearded naturalist of Walden, the greatness of the United States is made manifest as "the farmer displaces the Indian even because he redeems the meadow, and so makes himself stronger and in some respects more natural." As Purdy continues, this is the idea—deeply embedded in the U.S., from the Puritan colonizers onward—that "working, consuming, occupying, and admiring

American nature was a way for a certain kind of white person to become symbolically native to the continent."

The natural world has long been used to shore up national boundaries the world over—and too often becomes the covert lingua franca of xenophobia. "Nature" is an empty metaphor after all, one that can be deployed to any number of ends. The "natural/unnatural" distinction can become a way to point to "traditional" territorial borders and national identities, defining who belongs and who doesn't without making explicitly racist statements. This is the same logic by which the State Department frames climate change and its refugees as a national security crisis, rather than a crisis brought on by a combination of racism and global capitalism.

Northwest Indiana, home of the Dunes, is one of the places to which Trump's vision of America is supposed to appeal. Political scientists have argued that Trump's popularity in the Rust Belt was the result of, as Josh Pacewicz wrote, "undirected populist resentment at a technocratic, corporate-friendly elite" (a corporate elite for which Trump is, of course, the posterchild). "Rust Belt voters" became a catch-all scapegoat for Trump's election, an explanation that ignores entrenched racism throughout the country across class.

But the story is not that simple. Lake County, Indiana, home of the dunes and surrounding industry, voted for Hillary Clinton by a large margin in the 2016 election. Post-industrial cities in the region are overwhelmingly Black, Brown, and immigrant. Gary, Indiana, former steel metropolis, was home to powerful movements against environmental racism led by Black working-class activists in the 1970s and 80s, who stood up to toxic corporations and their white suburban allies. And organizing among Mexican and Puerto Rican immigrants arriving to work mill jobs left deep marks on the region's labor history. Earlier social movements for communalism and migrant justice have roots here, too: settlement housing activists were the first to initiate the fight to protect the Indiana Dunes from steel giants.

Categorizing what is "natural" and what isn't is hard to do at the Indiana Dunes. Rolling sand barely covers the sight of factories gulping air and emitting smoke. Milkweed and coneflowers bloom among the remnants of the Nike missile defense site, built during the Cold War to defend Chicago's heavy industry from Soviet attacks. This hybrid landscape offers an opportunity to develop a holistic conceptualization of "the environment," one that envisions a healthy future for everyone (and every place), rather than drawing nostalgic, hazardous boundaries between natural and unnatural.

Meanwhile, in another hybrid landscape many miles away, the same underlying logic—of defining who belongs and who doesn't—is building a wall.

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