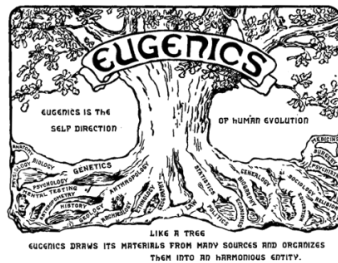


White Roots, Redwoods: Racializing German and US Conservation, 1920–1945

Nicole Rehnberg

My dissertation, “White Roots, Redwoods: Racializing German and US Conservation, 1920–1945,” traces and analyzes how environmental conservation and eugenics became entangled transnationally in Germany and the U.S. between 1920–1945 through their exploitation of “Big Trees,” coast redwoods and giant sequoias. The Big Tree featured on the eugenics tree image below became one of the most prominent public representations of eugenics as a discipline and cultural movement. This was not the only way Big Trees were wielded in support of conservation and eugenics. As disciplines, they shared methodological roots, seeking to understand how ecological and civilizational changes over time impacted flora as well as human and nonhuman fauna. As both cultural movements grew, through overlapping leadership and philanthropy, Big Trees made both legible to transnational audiences.



Logo of the Second International Congress of Eugenics, 1921. Harry H. Laughlin, *The Second International Exhibition of Eugenics held September 22 to October 22, 1921, in connection with the Second International Congress of Eugenics in the American Museum of Natural History, New York* (Baltimore: William & Wilkins Co., 1923), public domain.

Conservation groups such as the US Save the Redwoods League and the Sierra Club, and the German national socialist Blut und Boden (blood and soil) movement and Artamenen-Gesellschaft (Artaman League) collaborated on Big Tree exhibitions and displays at museums, parks, and arboretums to support the conservation of “Nordic” and “Aryan” forests and people. I argue that these groups racialized conservation during 1920 to 1945 by imposing a white human eugenic order on environmental ecosystems and equating saving trees with saving whiteness through Big Tree displays for both German and US publics. These exhibits popularized eugenics and made the movement appear natural and scientifically sound while promulgating white supremacy—a legacy that remains with these institutions today.

Historians have understood that environmental management, particularly in the Global North, served racialized imperial and colonial tendencies to conserve and preserve racial disparity by dispossessing and displacing communities to research and create public institutions and parks that serve a utilitarian “greater good” for the environment. This is not the only racialized aspect of environmental management, however. Historians have also acknowledged that certain conservationists, such as Madison Grant, participated in eugenics work but argued that these connections were individual beliefs rather than indicative of a larger movement. A large, transnational effort throughout the Global North popularized and institutionalized white supremacy in sites that teach the public natural sciences. My project deepens and expands prior histories of museums, parks, and arboretums as spaces of political meaning-making and world-building in the early to mid-twentieth century, showing that these public-facing sites focused on saving whiteness as much as saving trees.