Renaming Place Name Initiative

Uplifting Identities in Southern Appalachia




"Renaming a place from an Indigenous name to a colonizer name shows the leading ideology for a place at that time"
-Kent Minault, Earth Rise, partner of TWS
Photo by Kevin McNeal

Acknowledgements

We recognize Native American and Indigenous Peoples as the longest-serving stewards of the land. We acknowledge and affirm their inherent sovereignty and self-determination and respect treaty rights, including reserved rights that exist outside of reservations.

We acknowledge the historic and ongoing injustices perpetrated against Indigenous Peoples and commit to being more conscientious and inclusive and working with Indigenous Peoples to advance the establishment of trust and respect in our relationships.

We seek the guidance of Native Americans and Indigenous Peoples to effectively advocate for protecting culturally significant lands and preserving language and culture.

We respect and support the priorities, traditional knowledge, interests and concerns of Native American and Indigenous Peoples to ensure a more just and equitable future.

Contents

1



TWS History on Renaming Efforts

Successes, failures, and current state of the work

2



Partnership Engagement

Current and identified community partners

3



National Assessment

Federal Advisory Committee efforts & National Coalition goals

4



Landscape Assessment

Southern Appalachian Landscape Research & Need

5



Impact

Expected impact on national and local communities

6



Next Steps

Project direction and timeline

Note: This guide uses racist and otherwise offensive terms on an illustrative basis and discusses racism, sexism, violence and other sensitive or potentially disturbing topics

TWS HISTORY

For most of its history, TWS has inadvertently advanced the use of racist and offensive names

1980

In 1980, TWS helped pass the Colorado Wilderness Act, which established the Mt. Evans Wilderness, named for the former territorial governor who facilitated the Sand Creek Massacre

1990

In 1990, TWS supported the Arizona Desert Wilderness Act, which established the Woolsey Peak Wilderness, named for King Woolsey who perpetrated heinous acts against Native Americans

2018

In 2018, TWS drafted and support the Reconciliation in Place Names Act

In recent years, TWS has engaged in a successful effort to address racist and offensive place names

2020

In 2020, TWS supported an official petition to rename Mt. Evans, in Colorado's Front Range, as Mt. Blue Sky

2023 & 2023

In 2022 & 2023, TWS attended the Federal Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names public sessions, providing written & oral comments urging the inclusion of commemorative place names in the committee's scope of work



Mt. Evans Wilderness
Photo Credit: Mason Cummings, TWS

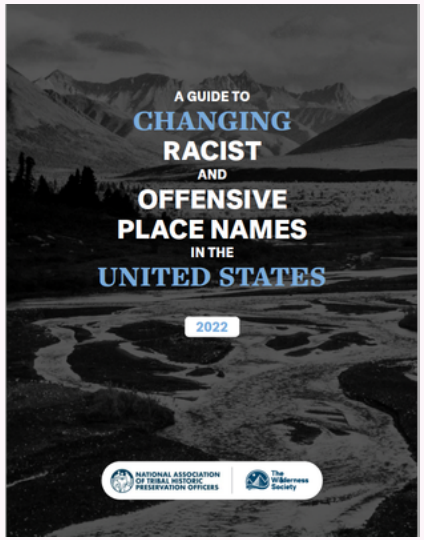


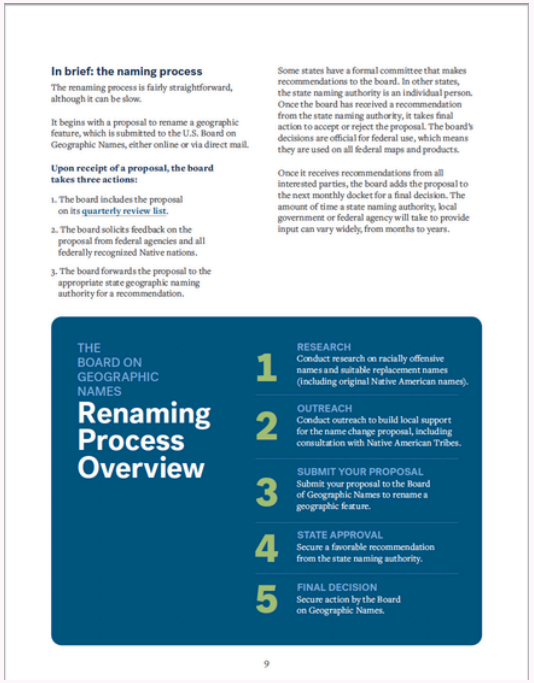
Mt. Blue Sky Event
Photo Credit: Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes



Arizona Desert
Photo Credit: Miles Morgan, TWS

A GUIDE TO CHANGING RACIST AND OFFENSIVE PLACE NAMES





In brief: the naming process

The renaming process is fairly straightforward, although it can be slow.

It begins with a proposal to rename a geographic feature, which is submitted to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, either online or via direct mail.

Upon receipt of a proposal, the board takes three actions:

1. The board includes the proposal on its quarterly review list.
2. The board solicits feedback on the proposal from federal agencies and all federally recognized Native nations.
3. The board forwards the proposal to the appropriate state geographic naming authority for a recommendation.

Some states have a formal committee that makes recommendations to the board. In other states, the state naming authority is an individual person. Once the board has received a recommendation from the state naming authority, it takes final action to accept or reject the proposal. The board's decisions are official for federal use, which means they are used on all federal maps and products.

Once it receives recommendations from all interested parties, the board adds the proposal to the next monthly docket for a final decision. The amount of time a state naming authority, local government or federal agency will take to provide input can vary widely, from months to years.

THE BOARD ON GEOGRAPHIC NAMES

Renaming Process Overview

1. RESEARCH — Conduct research on racially offensive names and suitable replacement names (including original Native American names).
2. OUTREACH — Conduct outreach to build local support for the name change proposal, including consultation with Native American Tribes.
3. SUBMIT YOUR PROPOSAL — Submit your proposal to the Board of Geographic Names to rename a geographic feature.
4. STATE APPROVAL — Secure a favorable recommendation from the state naming authority.
5. FINAL DECISION — Secure action by the Board on Geographic Names.

9

What Can be Renamed:

Mountains
Rivers
Streams
Creeks
Buttes
Other Geographic Features

What Cannot be Renamed:

Wilderness areas, national parks, forests, monuments, or other land units
Features on Indian reservations
Unnamed features in designated wilderness
Administrative buildings
Cities and counties
Streets and highways
Structures on private property

In 2022, TWS partnered with The National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (NATHPO) to develop a guide that "aims to make it easier for First Nations, grassroots organizations, local leaders and the general public to change offensive and derogatory places names on public lands"

This guide provides information on the Board of Geographic Names (BGN), specific state renaming boards, and the process for renaming features

THE GUIDE

MORE INFO

About the initiative

The Wilderness Society

Founded in 1935, The Wilderness Society is the leading conservation organization working to unite people to protect America's wild places.

The Public Land Renaming Fellowship

In partnership with Duke University, TWS created a multi-summer fellowship opportunity for students to assist TWS's Changing Racist and Offensive Place Names advocacy and implementation of recently created federal Secretary Orders

During the Fellowship...

TWS spent ***100+ hours*** working with and listening to partners

7,000 miles were traveled to attend meetings and visit sites

TWS contacted ***125*** organizations for Federal Committee engagement

4 public comments were written and ***3*** oral comments were given to the Federal Advisory Committee

"This has been one of the *most impactful* projects I've ever worked on!"



2023 Summer Fellow
Delaney Eisen



2024 Summer Fellow
Erika Peitrzak



2025 Summer Fellow
Ky Mundy

RENAMING PARTNERS

Attended Cultural Exchange workshop discussing Identity in land with four Tribal Nations, Presented Renaming initiative to 10+ EBCI citizens, supporting the establishment of EBCI Renaming Coalition

Campaigned for **6,700 +** written comments to the June Federal Advisory Committee on the Reconciliation of Place Names meeting with help from TWS

Presented Renaming initiative to co-founder, partnering in public comments for Asheville, NC's renaming/redesign project for Latino identity. Partnering to outreach to Latino communities for first Latino place naming effort

Expanding relationship to include support for local renaming efforts and renaming educational campaigns

Collaborated to provide community partners full guidance to renaming efforts, including legal obstacles and opportunities. Creating collective research for renaming efforts across five states

Presenting renaming initiative to annual youth caucus conference while anticipating assisting youth with providing public comment **100 +**

Budding relationship, with collaboration on creating place names maps

Join the movement at: https://www.outdoorrenaming.org/get-involved



1

ESTABLISH TWS NATIONAL COMMITTEE

Creating internal policy and committee around renaming efforts

Uplifting local TWS renaming efforts to the national scale

Providing resources to partners working in line with TWS mission

Creation

In 2021, Secretary Deb Haaland commissioned an Advisory Committee on the Reconciliation of Place Names

Composition

"Up to 17 members appointed by the Secretary representing Indigenous people, the general public, or have expertise in fields including civil rights, history, geography, and anthropology"

TWS support

From there, TWS is working on three different fronts to combat derogatory names on a National scale

NATIONAL EFFORTS

2

PROVIDE ADVOCACY FOR RPNA

Support lobbying efforts for the reintroduction of the Reconciliation for Place Names Act

Provide Educational Awareness for Community Advocacy

Provide legislative support for campaign

3

CREATE COALITION AROUND NATIONAL EFFORTS

Contacting over 140 partners to share information about efforts

Helping interested partners draft advocacy comments

Establishing coalition around national efforts by creating space for advocates to work together



Photo Credit: Micheli Oliver

METHODS FOR INVESTIGATION

ESTABLISHED LANDSCAPE PLACE NAMES DATABASE

Collected place names in the landscape from the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) developed from the Board of Geographic Names

CROSS-CHECK PLACE NAMES FROM THE BGN ACTION LIST

The Action List shows the status of all active proposals and all decisions made by the Domestic Names Committee in the previous 12 months

CROSS-CHECK PLACE NAMES AGAINST MULTIPLE SOURCES

Cross-checked list with Racial Slur database, researched place name to determine history of site naming and expanded data filter points.

CATEGORIZE COMMEMORATIVE NAMES FOR MORE FULL PICTURE

Tagged each commemorative name as commemorative to a man/woman (no indication of other genders commemoration), occupation, race, and other factors

CONSULTED LANDSCAPE PARTNERS FOR REVIEW AND EXPANSION

Met with partners and discussed offensive terms from first-hand perspective to get a broader understanding of offensive names

UNITED STATES BOARD ON GEOGRAPHIC NAMES

The Racial Slur Database

USGS science for a changing world

Photo Credit: Micheli Oliver

Southern Appalachia Identity


Photo Credit: Micheli Oliver

Three Priority Areas

BACOATE BRANCH

This Branch in Buncombe, NC is the site of a successful renaming campaign by local partners We want to uplift this as one example of a successful, community-lead renaming effort

KUWO'HI -> CLINGMAN'S DOME -> KUWO'HI

Settled between two states, Kuwohi was renamed after a racist enslavement supporter, but there was a successful multistate campaign to restore its Ancestral Cherokee name.

AMHERST COUNTY

This county and many other place names are named after Sir Jeffrey Amherst. Known for Indigenous genocide attempts, he deliberately gave Native people blankets obtained from a Small Pox hospital

GEOGRAPHY

Known to have the oldest mountains in the world, having seen over 1 billion birthdays

BIOLOGY

A top biodiverse temperate region in the world, handily beating out the Western U.S. in number of endemic species

SOCIOLOGY

Witnessed the first US Nation to Indigenous Nation treaty signing (Cowee Town aka Franklin, NC)

Research Findings

Evolution of Place Names in the Southern Appalachian Region

With Known Histories*





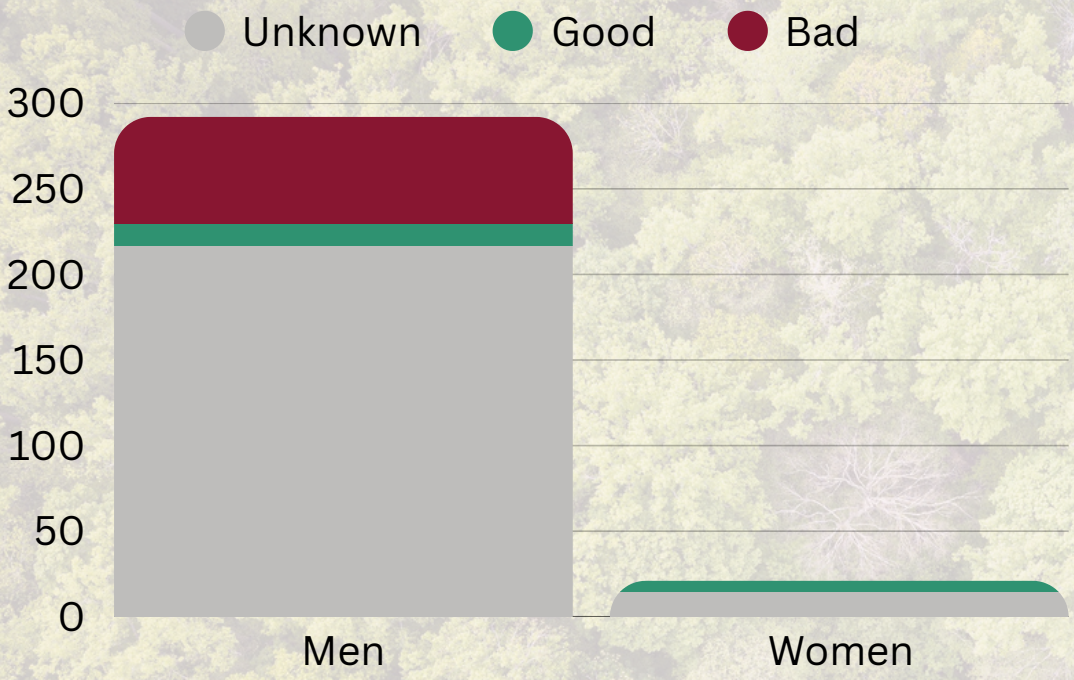


Time Immemorial-1776 (13000+ years)	**1776-2022** (246 years)	**2023** (present day)
66,000+ Indigenous place names	**65,900+ Indigenous place names removed**	56 Indigenous place names remain

These names may still be incorrect uses of the language, as the data does not provide context or assurance of correctness

Photo Credit: Zach Bright

Commemorative Names



Of the 1,071 names with known histories* in the Southern Appalachian Region...

62 Commemorate "Bad" People like Slave Owners and Anti-Native Soldiers

Only 23 are Commemorative of "Good" people, like activists, teachers, and upstanding community members

For Example...

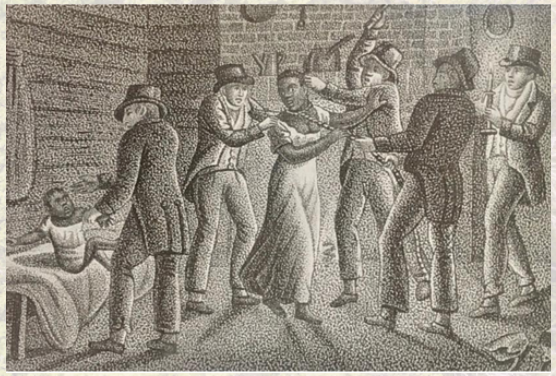


Photo Credit: ZSR Library Special Collections

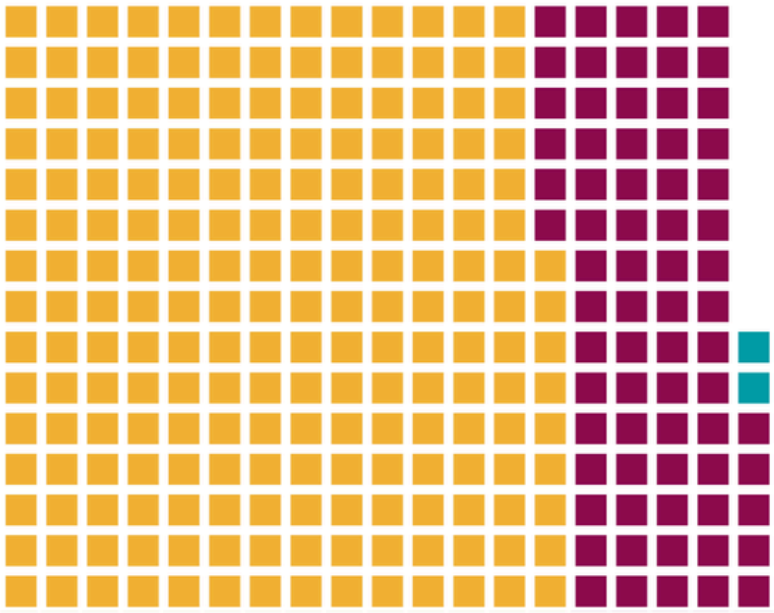
Kitty Payne (1816?-1850?) was a former enslaved woman who lived nearby the creek, was captured and returned to Virginia and then won back her freedom

Only **1.7%** of Commemorative place names acknowledge BIPOC people

*Known histories refers to the GNIS written history of place names, as this is an official history of a place name. This project, given time restraints, did not conduct research on all 66,000 names to find all place name histories within the landscape

Of the **66,000+** Place Names in the Southern Appalachian Region, **196** of them are Derogatory Names

Groups harmed by Current Derogatory Slur names



Derogatory Name Changing History

1962 DOI Secretary Udall identified the N-word as derogatory, and ordered its to be eliminated

1974 The BGN identified a pejorative term for "Japanese" as derogatory and eliminated its use

47 years later

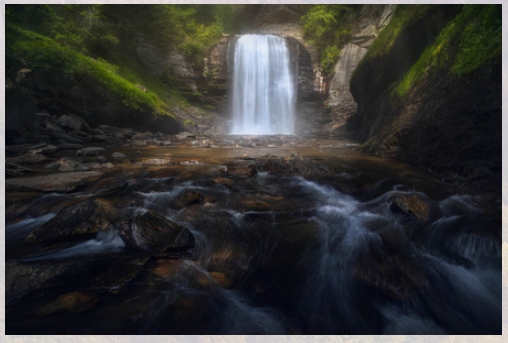
2021 DOI Secretary Haaland eliminated the S-word slur



Pisgah National Forest
Photo Credit: Kevin McNeil, TWS



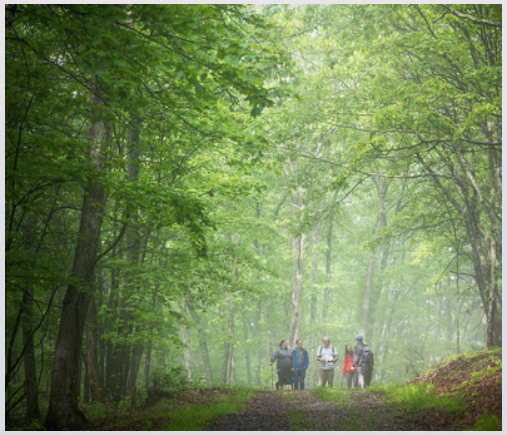
Photo Credit: Mason Cummings



Pisgah National Forest
Photo Credit: Zach Bright

Photo Credit: Valerie

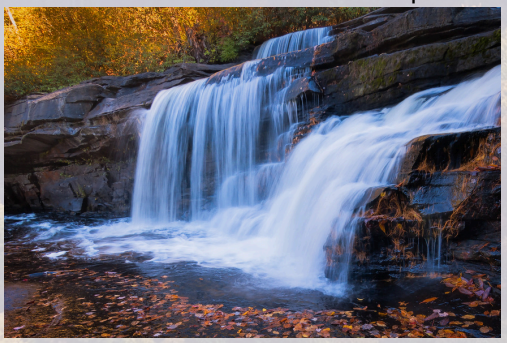
Derogatory Names Found in Southern Appalachian Landscape



Jefferson National Forest
Photo Credit: Mason Cummings, TWS



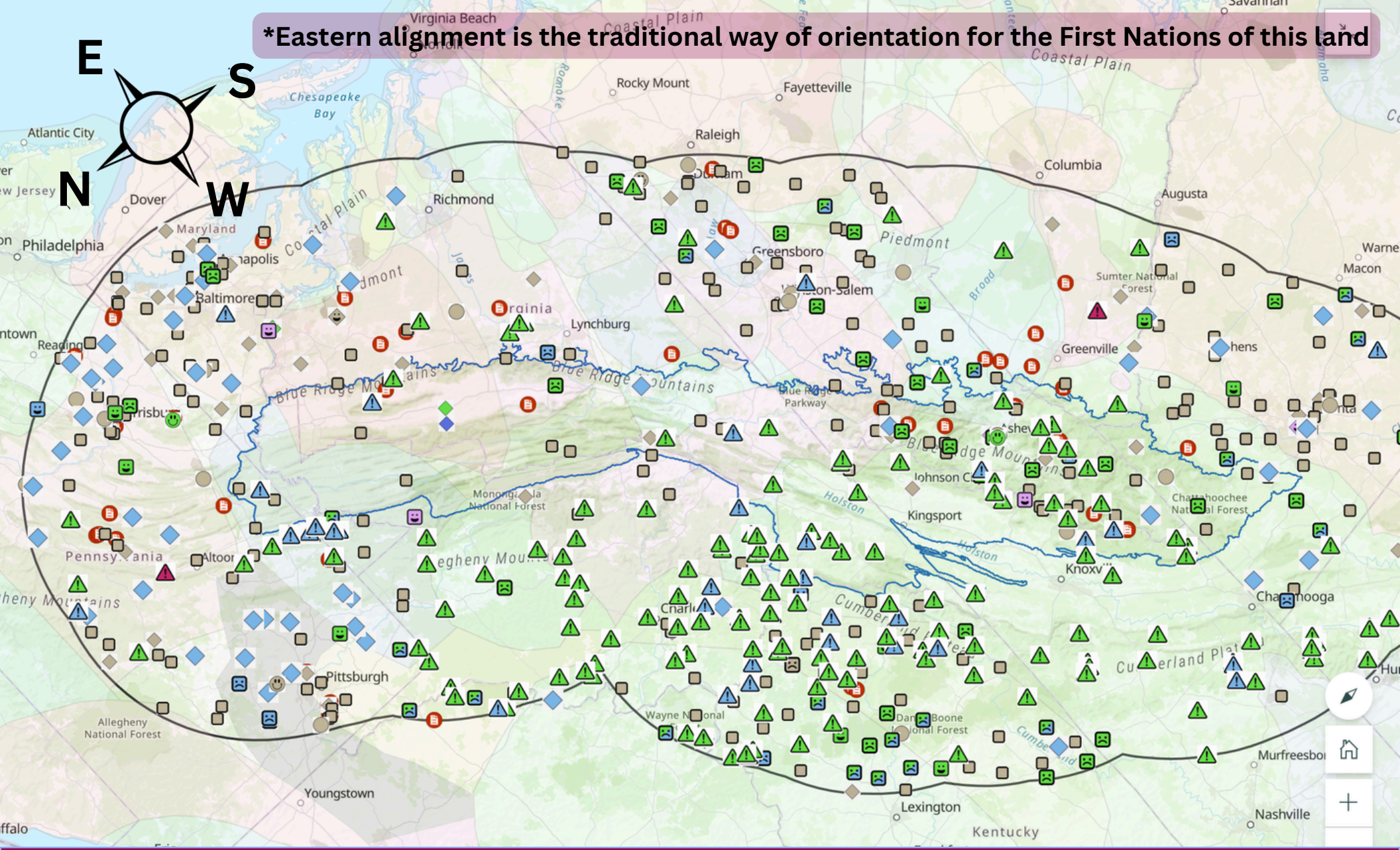
Great Smoky Mountains National Park
Photo Credit: Abreen Tariq



Pisgah National Forest
Photo Credit: Mason Cummings, TWS



*Note: Size of the word represents frequency the phrase is used in the landscape



Group Impacted

- Indigenous People
- Romani People
- Land
- Black People
- Other

Shapes Indicate Type of Name

- Commemorative for a Woman
- Commemorative for a Man
- Commemorative, Gender Unknown
- Already on the BGN Action List
- Derogatory

Faces Indicate Good or Bad

- Good
- Bad

Impacts

1

Lessens Undue Harm to Marginalized Communities

Renaming efforts seek to lessen harm done to marginalized communities from living, exploring, and recreating in places with derogatory names

2

Provides Space to Uplift All Communities

Advocating for the changing of place names provides an opportunity to those with little representation in the landscape to have their identity reflected and encourages them to live, explore, and recreate in these places

3

Promotes Generational Knowledge-Sharing

Renaming land names uplifts communities' identities and promotes shared histories. This is an opportunity to restore ancestral names and create a more true, just, and full history of the land

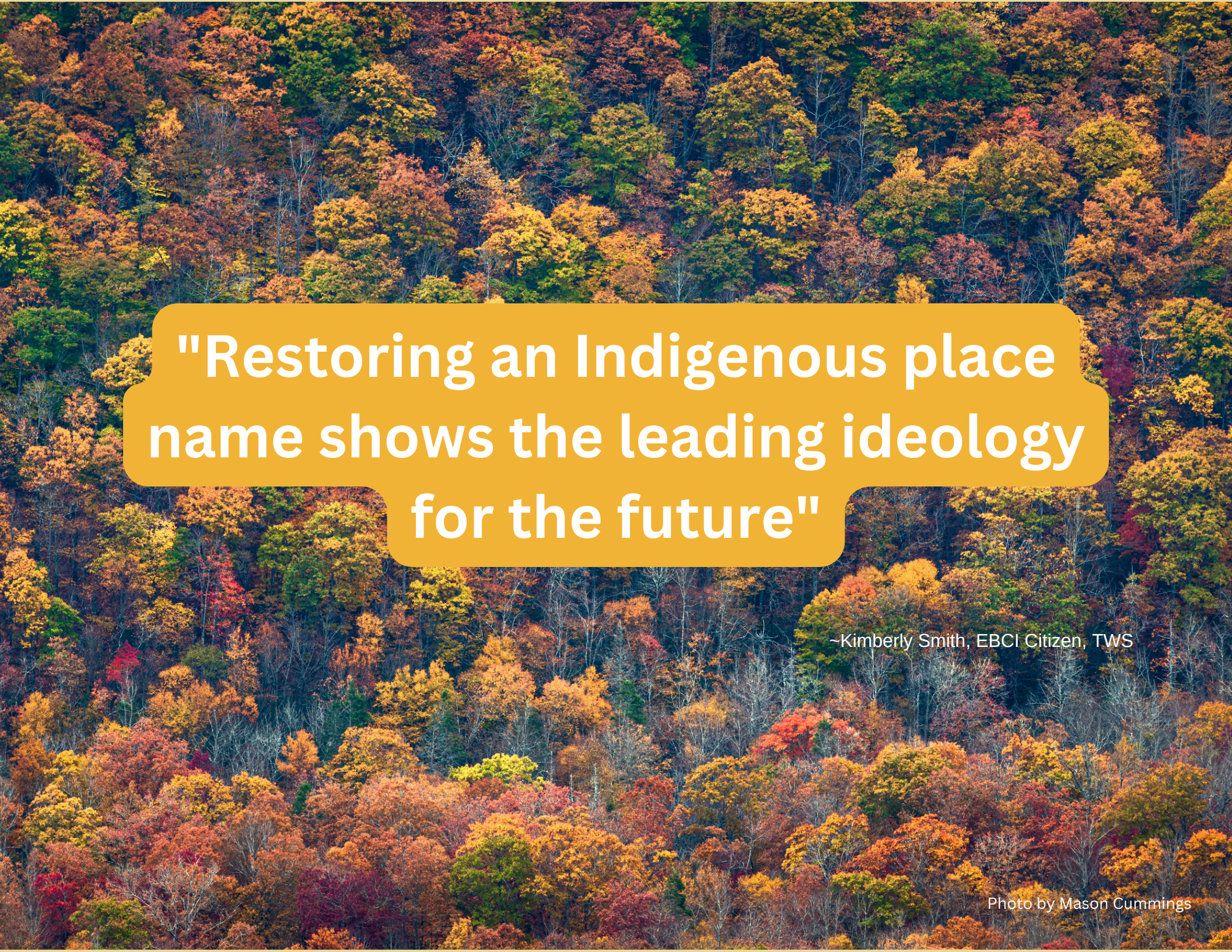

Photo Credit: Micheli Oliver


Photo Credit: Micheli Oliver


Photo Credit: Joe Whittle


Photo Credit: Mason Cummings


Photo Credit: Kamilah Martin


"Restoring an Indigenous place name shows the leading ideology for the future"
~Kimberly Smith, EBCI Citizen, TWS
Photo by Mason Cummings



/TheWildernessSociety

@wildernesssociety

The Wilderness Society

Support TWS here: