

People on the Move
By
Daniel E. White August 26, 2024

Ranger Dave led our group of 40 to the entrance of Cliff Palace at Mesa Verde National Park. He is a retired attorney who moved to Durango to escape Pittsburgh winters. Dave volunteered at the park for a while before deciding to apply to become a paid ranger, a second career which he obviously loves.

Dave asked the group to consider two questions as we toured: why did the Puebloans decide to build **in** the cliff rather than on top of it, and why did they leave? Members of the group provided thoughtful and plausible reasons, but, of course, as Dave pointed out, no one knows for sure.

It was the give-and-take around the leaving question that generated further discussion. In the conversation about why people left Cliff Palace, Ranger Dave observed that the history of humankind is a history of migration.

Among Puebloans, there was belief that they, as a people, emerged from the belly button of the earth and were instructed by Masaw, an important deity, to disperse, leave everything behind from time to time and move on, whenever Masaw declared “time to move.” They were obligated to move toward whatever their eventual destination was but were also instructed by Masaw “to leave fingerprints.”

So, the dwellings we visit are not abandoned. They are a part of the fingerprints. So are the pottery sherds often strewn about places where the Puebloans once lived, seen by them as indicators to their descendants of homelands. Some modern Puebloans believe that they have found the destination intended by Masaw.

The ancient Puebloans demonstrated a basic fact about humankind, an instinct that prods people to move along, to migrate, to leave a homeland when circumstances require it.

Ranger Dave acknowledged the religious motivation as a plausible explanation. But he pressed his question further. Logical speculation from the group followed: natural resources such as water or wood might have been depleted; the climate might have changed causing drought or unwelcomed cold temperatures in winter months. Dave asked how a community might react if its valued artisans like masons or architects left, attracted by perceived advantages for them using their talents elsewhere.

Dave suggested that all of these reasons could be lumped under one broad category: resources. Once the tribal elders saw that the depletion of resources had reached a critical point, they persuaded the people to migrate.

For some time after our tour, my travel companions and I talked about that idea: migration as a rational, natural and historical response to the depletion of resources, broadly defined.

A definition of resources based upon physical ones like fertile land, water, trees for building, transport, tools, and heat, rain for crops makes such an understanding of migration easy. What about reasons more directly tied to human action: fear for one’s life, seizure of one’s property, a social system that condemns one to a low social standing based on birth; a dearth of skills a community needs to thrive, the attraction of an opportunity to pursue a goal? Understanding these as forms of resources makes migration more complicated to understand.

Who, willingly, leaves one’s homeland unless one sees staying at home hopeless?

Just now, many countries face the challenge of large numbers of migrants wanting to come in. Millions of people—in Africa, Central America, Asia, Europe—are considering migration as a way to a better life or even survival. Ranger Dave was, in his way, asking us to consider whether or not this was just the current manifestation of the history of humankind as migrants?

The impetus to leave must be powerful given that migrants seldom have assurance that where they end up will be any better for them and their clan. There is no guarantee that migrants will be welcomed; there are nativist streaks in many nations, including the U.S., and there are those who worry that too many migrants might lead to a depletion of resources in the countries where they land.

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates
shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin
cities frame. "Keep, ancient lands,
your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired,
your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

Emma Lazarus’ poem on the Statue of Liberty is noble in intent. In reality, for much of history, the U.S. has been much like other countries, seeing migration, despite its possibly being a natural condition for humankind, as a problem to be solved.

What if we defined migration as an opportunity, one that takes into account a basic characteristic of humans? What if we challenged the complaint that “we can’t take them all” and took them all? Are there benefits to expanding the number of hands willing to help the on-going process of building and sustaining our country? Isn’t America’s story, in reality, one based on immigrants from elsewhere, even beginning with the first “indigenous” peoples arriving millenia ago?

I don’t have answers. I do accept, after being prodded by Ranger Dave, that the history of our species is a history of people on the move. Can’t we figure out ways to deal with this reality in a way that benefits all concerned?

Click here to email your comments to Dan: danwhitehi@gmail.com