

# Breaking the Binary: Incorporating Diversity and Inclusion in Natural Resources

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Dr. Dianna Fisher (left) and Dr. Brenda McComb (right)

The life of trans people is a continual series of attacks in the news media and it weighs heavily, continually, said Dr. Brenda McComb during a recent seminar in the Quinney College of Natural Resources on incorporating diversity and inclusion in natural resources.

McComb, a professor emerita, and Dr. Dianna Fisher, an education coordinator at Tallwood Design Institute, from Oregon State University discussed advancing representation in natural resources and visibility in academics. They also explored several social justice issues relating to the LGBTQ+ community and other marginalized demographic groups. The seminar was sponsored by the [Quinney College of Natural Resources](#) and the [Center for Intersectional Gender Studies and Research](#).

McComb started off the seminar with a reading of an excerpt from [Women in Wildlife Science: Building Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#), which she and other professionals helped author—a vignette about ‘Kelly J.’, a wildlife biologist and a longtime member of the wildlife society. Kelly, she said, has a PhD in wildlife ecology from a prominent university, has authored many publications in top-tiered journals, has given many presentations at professional society meetings, and serves as a regional biologist at a state-wide agency in the western US.

“You know Kelly,” McComb said. “You have worked with Kelly. You have attended professional meetings with Kelly. And you’ve cited Kelly’s papers as the basis for decisions that you make about your own work. But there are some

things that you don’t know and will not know. Kelly is transgender.”

McComb goes on to describe how Kelly hides their identity from their coworkers, how Kelly and their same-sex partner, Kim, live two cities away from where either of them works so they wouldn’t run into coworkers when they’re out together.

Kelly, and more than 750 other people like Kelly who work in the wildlife profession in the United States, hide these details about their personal lives, she said. Their identities will remain hidden from their coworkers and colleagues until they reach a point in their career where they trust that their LGBTQ+ status will not impact their ability to advance in their professions. Then and only then, may Kelly choose to come out, McComb said. Or they may not. Many people will never come out to their colleagues.

“You may never know who they are,” McComb said. “They will not let you.”

This vignette, written by McComb and four others who helped authored that chapter, was intended to get the audience thinking about the life of someone in the LGBTQ+ world who works in the field of natural resources.

People have different identities that affect their privilege and credibility as professionals, she said. The majority of the people in natural resources who have the most credibility and privilege tend to be white, cisgendered, heterosexual men.

“People like that don’t actually go out seeking privilege, necessarily,” McComb said. “Society grants them privilege based upon those identities. That’s just who they are, and they have advantages that certain other people don’t.”

People who don’t fall into those privileged categories tend to face more obstacles throughout their career, she said

Fisher discussed how privilege is assigned based on other people’s assumptions, and shared her experiences as a disabled veteran with identifying plates on her car. She has had strangers assume she wasn’t disabled, or that her car was too nice for her or belongs to her husband, who doesn’t exist.

McComb transitioned about 20 years ago, and occasionally receives emails asking her to forward information on to her imaginary husband—that are actually meant for her, addressed to the name she used before she transitioned.

A lot of assumptions, especially those about gender, are binary, McComb said. But everyone falls along a spectrum. There is a wide array of identities—from gender identity to sexual orientation, gender expression, and even sex assigned at birth. And where people fall on those spectrums can even change throughout a lifetime, or even through the week.

Looking at the results of several surveys, some from the Oregon Department of Forestry, some from Utah State University, McComb notes that across the board, most people who are LGBTQ+ or people of color don't feel as welcome or as safe within the field of natural resources, even on campus.

Some of the surveys may have biases or ambiguity in their questions, Fisher said, which would influence how someone answers.

"You have to word the surveys a certain way," she said. "You have to make sure that there's no ambiguity in the questions that you're asking."

Otherwise, the surveyor may not be getting an accurate representation. However, it is a good thing that universities and organizations are attempting to collect that kind of data, because it can be used to identify gaps in resources that can be addressed.

In order to shift the culture and bring more diversity into the field, McComb said, colleges can begin with how they recruit students to the program. If they are trying to recruit more LGBTQ+ students, recruiters can ask if there are courses in the curriculum that they might identify with, like queer ecology. They can determine if recruiting material are inclusive and represent diverse skin colors and gender expression. They can ask themselves—do students who are admitted to the program find a mentor they can connect with?

"When I served as a department head and then dean of grad school," McComb said, "I had at least one person a month come in to see me who was LGBTQ+, many of whom weren't out yet, looking for anybody that they could sit down and talk with, somebody that can help them navigate this complex, complicated, confusing, academic world that they're supposed to be navigating."

Fisher shared an experience she had working with the Siletz Tribe. Leaders from the tribe had noticed every single one of their students who attended a certain nearby high school were not graduating. They had made the decision to pull all their kids from that school and build a new high school. They wanted help building a curriculum

that would represent the Siletz culture and beliefs so the students would feel like their education was more applicable to them.

Fisher worked with the Siletz teachers and OSU to develop science classes, including Native American botany and English classes that covered Native American literature. Once the curriculum was more culturally relevant to the students, the graduation rate increased substantially, she said.

The main factors to consider when creating a more inclusive environment for all, McComb said, is to make lived experiences available to others, humanize everyone's stories, create a climate of compassion, empathy, and authenticity, and go beyond the layer of politeness and platitudes around diversity and dig into the deep and uncomfortable conversations with others who have less power.

"With privilege comes power. We can choose to use that power to advance ourselves or to advance others," McComb said.

To listen to the full seminar or see the presentation slides, please contact the dean's office in the QCNR.