

PRISONS IN THE WILDLANDS:  
A CRITICAL LOOK INTO THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT  
AND IMPLICATIONS OF CALIFORNIA CONSERVATION CAMPS

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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The State of California has long relied on the labor of its incarcerated population to conduct public works projects. This thesis uses a qualitative methodological approach to interrogate one particular program that exemplifies the state's lasting interest in carceral labor. Emerging in 1946, the California Conservation Camp Program oversees over 2,000 inmates currently serving as wildland firefighters who are paid just \$1-\$2 per day for their work under extremely dangerous conditions. This thesis traces the evolution of the program over time, paying close attention to the discourse produced by state agencies in formal reports that indicate the cost-saving priorities that serve to undermine the value of inmate lives and labor. Further, given the nature of climate change and the ongoing proliferation of wildfire in the Western United States, this project looks to the Environmental Justice field to provide an analysis and critique of the Conservation Camp program over time.

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In solidarity with incarcerated people around the world, and with those who continually resist structural violence.

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## INTRODUCTION

In May of 2017, Matthew Beck, an inmate serving time as a wildland firefighter in one of California's Conservation Camps, was killed on the fireline after a tree fell and severed his femoral artery (Goldberg, 2018). One of three inmates who recently lost their lives to the program, Beck's story draws attention to the risks taken on by the 2,200 fireline-qualified inmates in California who constitute somewhere between thirty and forty percent of California's wildland firefighting force (Fang, 2017). According to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) website (2018),

The primary mission of the Conservation Camp Program is to support state, local and federal government agencies as they respond to emergencies such as fires, floods, and other natural or manmade disasters. CDCR, in cooperation with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) and the Los Angeles County Fire Department (LAC FIRE), jointly operates 44 conservation camps, commonly known as fire camps, located in 27 counties. All camps are minimum-security facilities and all are staffed with correctional staff.

While Conservation Camps, or fire camps, have recently emerged as central to the penal labor debate, they do not constitute a new model for the State of California - or for the United States more broadly. Sociologist Philip Goodman detailed the history of California fire camps in 2010, tracing fire camp origins back to 1850 when California had created "road camps" where men convicted of crimes lived in prison camps while constructing much of the state's early infrastructure. Goodman explains that the state's last road camp closed in 1974, but the prison work camp model had already evolved into forestry camp programs, many of which focused on fire suppression during the labor shortage of World War II (2010). The first prison fire camp was founded in 1946 with its origins also linked to the Civilian Conservation Corps, a New Deal program that provided much needed jobs to those who would risk their lives on the fireline. Many of the existing Conservation Camp facilities once housed workers during this time. In 1959, Governor

Pat Brown promised to bolster forestry camps and officially named the Conservation Camp program as such (Janssen, 2009). While prison fire camps have existed in some capacity since the mid-19th century, the program has seen numerous changes since its inception. Even as there have been changes over time, the program has remained a steady component of California correctional programming.

While a few scholars have traced the history of California Conservation Camps, namely Thorpe and Goodman, the program has yet to be investigated alongside the socio-political conditions that have led it to its status as an integral part of California land management. However, resulting from the broad coverage of California's recent wildfires, fire camps and prison labor are now the center of much controversy as journalists and policymakers attempt to shed light upon the realities facing inmates serving in this capacity - especially in light of climate change and the proliferation of wildfire in the region.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the earth's average temperature has now increased to at least 1 °C above pre-industrial levels (2018). The IPCC states that as temperatures continue to rise, the threat of extreme weather events - including wildfire - poses serious concerns for the most vulnerable communities around the globe. In many contexts, such effects are already measurable and recent wildfires in California are no exception. As of November 11, 2018, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) in collaboration with the US Forest Service measured an aggregate 1.6 million acres burned during the 2018 wildfire season. This total reflects a near quadrupling of CAL FIRE's average yearly measurements over the past five data collection periods (California Department of

Forestry and Fire Protection, 2018). The Camp Fire in Northern California Butte County alone resulted in a death toll of at least eighty-four people, garnering international attention to the increasing risks associated with drought and climate change. As the gravity of recent wildfires weighs heavily on public consciousness, California now grapples with the future of forest management and its fire suppression regime.

Considering the increasing risk of wildfire, two issues in particular stand out regarding the Conservation Camp program: 1) the level of risk inmate firefighters face may be disproportionate to the so-called crimes they have committed, and 2) the racist, classist drivers of imprisonment may also maintain social and environmental injustices, impacting inmate firefighters disproportionately. In the hope of investigating these concerns, I looked to annual reports, legislative analyses, and other government publications that outline the changing priorities and impacts of the program. This analysis of the program's formation, evolution and implications has allowed insight into the following research questions: 1) *what are the socio-political preconditions that have led California to rely on the labor of inmate firefighters*, and 2) *in the context of climate change, what are the implications of such a program as they relate to the risks borne to inmates serving in fire camps?*

While my research questions reflect an ethical concern that the program maintains and produces a series of injustices related to environmental risks and social injustices, they also point to an important intersection between three academic frameworks that are critical of Capitalism, the Carceral State<sup>1</sup>, and environmental inequities. The following

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<sup>1</sup> In their introduction to a special issue of *The Journal of American History*, Hernández, Muhammed, and Thompson (2014) discuss the Carceral State as both a product and a driver of mass incarceration in the United States. They explain that “Mass incarceration has had a major impact on everything from how urban and suburban spaces have evolved to how electoral maps are drawn to how national borders are defined and

literature review expands on these areas, exploring the ways in which scholars in the fields contribute to our understanding of Conservation Camps in California.

The first field, Ecosocialism, takes issue with state-led activities that contribute to climate change and environmental inequality (i.e. divesting in conservation and subsidizing polluting industries). It helps us understand the ways in which California's unique political economy serves as a precondition for wildfire proliferation and the state's decision to restrict related spending. The second field, Critical Prison Studies (CPS), also allows us to interrogate the state's political economy, paying particularly close attention to what they reveal as the racist and classist drivers of prison population expansions and the exploitation of inmate labor. CPS scholars take an explicitly abolitionist perspective. Therefore, their work confronts the very laws by which inmate firefighters have been convicted and sees them as incentivizing economic growth over social and environmental justice. Lastly, Critical Environmental Justice (CEJ) rounds out this analysis by exploring the disproportionate risk inmate firefighters, whose lives and labor are diminished by numerous actors (i.e. state agencies, legislators, and industry), face when compared to that of "free" firefighters and civilians. Together, these three frameworks inform my look into the historical development of California Conservation Camps for reasons I outline in the following literature review. Further, they help us build a critical understanding of how California came to rely on the labor of inmates in the realm of conservation.

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maintained to how state and federal resources are distributed to how social movements are made and unmade to how gender roles are bolstered and undermined to how cultural norms and identities are forged and reinforced to how sexuality is profiled and policed" (p. 19). They elaborate further that the Carceral State is one whose political economy maintains its power and presence.

Following the literature review, I explain my methodology before offering an analysis of the development of the Conservation Camp program over time. Synthesizing annual reports produced by state agencies, congressional reports, and some newspaper articles, I identify the drivers and implications of the program. More specifically, my research reveals how it is that California came to rely on the labor of inmates in the context of conservation, considering the ways in which state actors have mobilized narratives that position the state as the central beneficiary and steward of the Conservation Camp program.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

California Conservation Camps are sites where inmates collectively conduct millions of hours of risky work each year. Their work encompasses the conservation efforts of the State of California, from fire suppression to trail building and campground maintenance. However, due to the critiques that emerge from the fields of Critical Prison Studies (CPS), Ecosocialism, and Critical Environmental Justice (CEJ), and the consistent work of prison reformation movements, it is no surprise that the camps are the subject of controversy. Recently, this is in part due to the fact that anthropogenic environmental change has exaggerated the risk of wildfire and consequently, the workload of inmate firefighters. The severity of the 2018 and 2019 California fire seasons, in particular, indicate a need for additional investigation of the Conservation Camp model and its implications. Given the program's long history, it is surprising that it has not been taken up within academic inquiry in ways we might expect. An exploration of relevant literature indicates that conversations surrounding California Conservation Camps are largely informed by journalism that has helped point out the significance of

these issues. The ongoing 2019 fire season has extended the impact of this journalism, with visceral images of inmate firefighters debuting on computer screens and newspapers alike. *Fortune Magazine*, in particular, made a splash this year by revealing some of the dangers inmates face as participants in the program (Goodkind, 2019). Their article explores the risks and rewards of the program, but only hints at some of the major themes that scholars have illuminated in CPS, Ecosocialism, and CEJ.

Only one contemporary scholar, however, is widely cited as having written on the dynamics of Conservation Camps. In multiple articles, Philip Goodman explores the complexities of prison labor in the unique context of fire camps in California (2010, 2012). One contribution to this area is his observational study that shows the contentious nature of prison labor is more complicated than the binary thinking often touted by both those critical and supportive. Goodman explains, “most women and men ‘doing time’ in a fire camp think of grade work and firefighting as partially exploitative and partially something to appreciate as good, useful, or at least better than the alternative” (2012, p. 368). This assertion, while based in the lived experiences of firefighting inmates, does not address questions as to the voluntary nature of the program and prison labor programs more broadly. Scholars such as Zatz (2008), for example, explain that inmates face coercion “of a different order than conventional employees” (p. 886). Further, because inmates are not protected by the Thirteenth Amendment<sup>2</sup>, they are not afforded the constitutional rights granted to free laborers. Zatz and others agree that due to the legal

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<sup>2</sup> The 13th Amendment of the United States Constitution states “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction”. The 1865 amendment, while abolishing slavery in a general sense, did not disallow the indentured work of prisoners serving time in state and federal penitentiaries. This interpretation of federal law means hundreds of thousands of prisoners in the United States work for very little (if any) compensation in correctional facilities around the country.

compulsion of prison labor, it cannot be classified as employment, but rather as involuntary servitude, effectively a form of slavery (p. 887). In this case, an inmate's labor is "merely an incident of...incarceration" and cannot be seen as voluntary (Bair, 2007; DeVito & Lichtenstein, 2016). However, like Goodman, DeVito and Lichtenstein (2016) illuminate the fact that experientially, inmates may come to define their work differently. Certainly, this speaks to the harsh realities of life in confinement. More speculatively, the differences in experiential narratives may be a manifestation of internalized discourse surrounding deviance and criminality; it may also be a way for those engaging in prison work to negotiate their own perspectives of the crimes by which they are convicted. Additional research ought to explore this dynamic but cannot be addressed by the scope of this particular inquiry.

Critical Prison Studies (CPS) scholars also understand that the experiential realities of prison inmates differ contextually; because of this, they "have collaborated with incarcerated thinkers—in itself an intervention into what counts as theory and knowledge—to analyze the conditions and ramifications of so much confinement, revealing the intensity of state violence and racism in criminal justice in the 'land of the free'" (Seigel, 2018, p. 124). Consequently, CPS takes an explicitly abolitionist perspective in an attempt to address the racism and classism embedded in the U.S. prison system (Critical Resistance 10, s2008). Emerging out of the Black liberation movement, CPS scholars (i.e. Gilmore, Rodriguez, and Muhammed) trace the origins of the prison system in the U.S. to the post-antebellum political economy which could no longer rely on the violence of slavery to support economic growth. They argue the criminalization of Blackness allowed slavery to continue in the prison setting where southern Black men

“worked without choice or compensation to build the [southern] region’s infrastructure and industrial system” (Gilmore, 2007, p. 27). Other scholars discuss class as another factor manipulated by the Carceral State. Due to these realities, CPS sees prison abolition as a necessary step toward rectifying the continued racial and economic injustices embedded in the carceral system. CPS scholars also agree that while this history is inextricable from contemporary prison systems, the capitalist mode of production has played a significant role in the proliferation of prison populations.

Discussing the contemporary California prison system specifically, Gilmore (2007) argues that due to the development of surplus value in the state’s economy, prisons serve as a market regulator that reduces risk of financial crisis (p. 56). In this way, capitalism demands incarceration to ensure the absorption of surplus lands, labor, and capital - incentivizing competition and demand for these elements. Accordingly, the racialized mechanisms of policing and imprisonment allow “the state” to effectively disappear “undesirable” populations (i.e. people of color, the poor, and the politically dissident) while bolstering its economy (Gilmore, 2007, p. 82). These dynamics, as Gilmore explains, have led to a 500 percent growth rate of prison populations in California since 1982 (p. 22).

Expanding on this concept, ecosocialist scholars Foster, Clark, and York (2010) explain that the capitalist mode of production relies on competition and therefore, surplus absorption (p. 187). They elaborate, “the motor of capitalism is competition, which ensures that each firm must grow and reinvest its ‘earnings’ (surplus) in order to survive. By its nature, capital is self-expanding value, and accumulation is its sole aim” (p. 187). Extending this kind of analysis to the U.S. prison system, scholars like Smith and Hattery

identify carceral labor as “a mechanism whereby the privileged can segregate or cordon-off these unwanted members of society, thus increasing the efficiency of the capitalist economy and its insatiable desire for expansion, without the moral burden of genocide” (2008, p. 84). This supports Gilmore and other CPS scholars who understand the U.S. prison system as interwoven into the framework of capitalism. Leading to unjust criminal law that aims to propagate a system that subsidizes industry as well as state-led activities, the use of penal labor can then be seen as a system that supports and perpetuates “capitalism and the system of racial domination [that] collude to exploit the labor of male and female inmates thus increasing profits...simultaneously reducing competition for scarce jobs in an increasingly tenuous domestic labor market” (Smith & Hattery, 2008, p. 84).

Bridging the aforementioned conversation in CPS with that of Ecosocialism, Foster, Clark and York (2010) explain that the same capitalist mechanisms of competition, accumulation and surplus absorption driving the reliance on prison labor are also the principle drivers of environmental degradation and climate change. Read as an urgent call to action, the authors contend “today we are threatened by the transformation of the entire atmosphere of the earth as a result of economic processes” (p. 187). This is ultimately linked to what Marx coined “the Metabolic Rift,” or “a rift in the metabolic exchange between humans and nature” (Foster, Clark & York, 2010, p. 80). This rift is founded in the expropriation of natural resources, mined for the sake of wealth accumulation and resulting in enormously consequential outputs. The fossil fuel industry is a particularly important driver of the Metabolic Rift and its impact on the environment. Ian Angus, ecosocialist scholar, argues that capitalism’s impact has pivoted the

biophysical state of the earth such that a new geological epoch has emerged. Climate change and other anthropogenic environmental change (i.e. land transformation and nutrient cycle disruption) have sparked the beginnings of the Anthropocene, implying “human activity now equals or surpasses nature in several biogeochemical cycles” (Angus, 2016, p. 71). When put into conversation with CPS scholars, it is clear that the common thread of capitalism has driven an escalation of both environmental crisis and problematic prison regimes.

Environmental Justice serves as an additional link between the fields of Ecosocialism and CPS. Luke Cole (2001) explains,

Environmental hazards are inequitably distributed in the United States, with poor people and people of color bearing a greater share of pollution than richer people and white people. This intuitive idea—think for a moment about the most polluted parts of your region—has been borne out by dozens of studies completed over the past two decades (p. 10).

David Pellow (2018) also reflects this sentiment, arguing “the harms suffered by ecosystems today are closely linked to and mirror the harms experienced by the most marginalized human beings across the planet – what many scholars call the problem of *environmental injustice*” (p. 2). However, Pellow (2018) believes traditional Environmental Justice (EJ) scholarship does not adequately reflect the realities of environmental injustice. Amid scholars such as Holifield, Porter, and Walker (2009), Pellow believes EJ work ought to both incorporate and move beyond a distributional justice model. Instead of asking *where do environmental hazards show up and who is harmed*, he offers Critical Environmental Justice as a framework that attempts to address questions such as *what are the socio-political preconditions that have led to environmental inequity?* Further, Pellow’s framework acknowledges that those issues - such as the prison industrial complex - that were once ignored by some mainstream EJ

scholarship are better captured by CEJ because it “question[s] assumptions and gaps in earlier work in the field, by embracing greater interdisciplinarity, and moving toward methodologies and epistemologies including and beyond the social sciences” (Pellow, 2018, p. 3). It would be appropriate, then, to position CEJ as an intervention that challenges and complements both Ecosocialism and Critical Prison Studies.

However, it is important to give credit to those Environmental Justice scholars who set the stage for Pellow’s framework. Braz and Gilmore (2006) explain that the traditional EJ movement “has struggled with mainstream environmentalists over the bounds of the term environment” (p. 96). Grappling with racist and classist environmental laws, the movement has been forced to reconsider the boundaries of *the environment* such that focus has shifted “from an environment “out there” in the wilderness to “right here”—where we work, live, study, and play” (p. 96). This provides an opportunity to consider the U.S. prison system in context with this discipline.

Informed by activist networks and the work of Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Pellow (2018) references the Prison Ecology Project which in 2015 formed to investigate the “U.S. prison system and environmental threats” (p. 67). This project uncovered the fact that prisoners are placed at particularly high risk of environmental harm.

Aforementioned scholarship references the drivers of such risk; the same ecologically dangerous economic processes discussed by Foster, Clark and York (2010) and Angus (2016) make prison conditions ecologically hazardous. Pellow argues that government agencies have found prisons taking cost-saving measures that do not comply with environmental safety standards. However, given incarcerated populations are not valued by these agencies, little action is taken to resolve these discrepancies (p. 73-74).

Consequently, inmates confront hazards on a daily basis. While Pellow is not the sole contributor to a CEJ lens, his CEJ framework is particularly helpful in this context because it explicitly calls into question the mechanism of state power and its reinforcement of social and environmental injustice (2018, p. 22).

Compounding risks brought on by anthropogenic environmental change offer additional complications in the context of wildland firefighting. More specifically, literature in the natural sciences indicates anthropogenic climate change is driving an alarming increase the number of fires in the Western United States. However, climate change is not the only variable affecting the increasingly prolific nature of wildfire. As both ecosocialist and natural sciences literature has suggested, land-use change, urbanization, and industry are also important variables. In an investigation into the driving factors of wildfire, Syphard, Keeleyb, Pfaffb, and Ferschweilera (2017) explain that the driving factors of wildfire are very much dependent on geographic variables. Yet the driving factors - climatic or otherwise - are usually anthropogenic. The authors also found that areas such as the Pacific Southwest (i.e. Central and Southern California), are particularly vulnerable to climatic variables as opposed to human ignition of fire (Syphard et al., 2017). There is a general consensus among natural scientists that as humans continue to drive environmental change (climatic or otherwise), wildfire will only become more problematic. This is not a recent discovery; Westerling and Bryant (2008) predicted that a business-as-usual approach to climate change in California would make its landscapes vulnerable to ecological regime-change,

with increased temperatures promoting greater large fire frequency in wetter, forested areas, via the effects of warmer temperatures on fuel flammability... [and] reduced moisture availability due to lower precipitation and higher

temperatures [leading] to reduced fire risks in some locations where fuel flammability may be less important than the availability of fine fuels (p. S231).

Environments not presently adapted to fire are at risk of burning. Human communities not presently at risk will also be forced to confront the dangers of wildfire. And of course, non-fire-adaptive ecosystems will have to cope with its introduction as they become drier and more vulnerable (Stephens, Collins, Fettig, Finney, Hoffman, Knapp, & Wayman, 2018).

While both natural scientists and those on the fireline are uniquely positioned to sense and measure change on the ground, fire historian Stephen Pyne (2016) traces these dynamics as they pertain to the cultural, political, and economic dynamics of California. He argues that California's history includes the development of a unique culture around fire and fire suppression that is both unprecedented and precedent setting in the U.S. More specifically, the gold rush and rapid settlement of California led to the violent abolition of Indigenous fire practices that once ensured relative stability. As this became violently disrupted by settler colonialism, fire became a dominant and dangerous element in both Southern and Northern California landscapes. California's tendency toward urban sprawl also drove its fire regime to serve landowners and economic growth rather than ecological stability. This sprawl, coupled with more people living within the wildland-urban interface, has encouraged the state to fight fire. These efforts directly confront Indigenous-lead land management praxis. Pyne elaborates, "rather than rely on social norms to regulate behavior, the state erected a rigid infrastructure as a shield, or it suppressed what was deemed dangerous. Hard-power investments by government replaced the soft-power ordering of society" (p. 21-22). Here, Pyne draws a connection between California's fire regime and its prison system. The rigidity and scope of both

programs is reflected by the state's tendency to look "to technological surrogates—patrol cruisers and helicopters, for example, rather than community relations. Its solution to rising crime was to commission more prisons" (Pyne, 2016, p. 22). Out of this dynamic emerged hotshot crews, aerial firefighting, and other militaristic approaches to combating wildfire. Pyne's history implies that Conservation Camps are a manifestation of this approach as well. When coupled with Goodman's (2010) history of Conservation Camps, Pyne's analysis of the California fire regime reveals that the fire camp program evolved as an offshoot of both of its predecessors: The Civilian Conservation Corps and prison road camps. The Civilian Conservation Corps, an important program of the New Deal, extended employment options to those struggling during the Great Depression. Prison road camps, on the other hand, were outlawed due to their shared history with slavery (Goodman, 2010).

Before I present my analysis, it is important to note that my work does not aim to make claims about the varied and valid perspectives of individual inmates, but rather understands prisoners in this sense as a collective who are placed within the structural, material, and symbolic relations and processes that I discuss below. A synthesis of Critical Environmental Justice, Critical Prison Studies, and Ecosocialism informs my research as I examine the program and the historical conditions that shape it. Below, I detail my methods before presenting an integrated history and discussion that elaborates on these conditions, interrogating the priorities and activities of the California Conservation Camp program as they have contributed to and benefited from social and environmental inequities.

## METHODS

Examining the California Conservation Camp program with my research questions in mind required a look into both the historical development of the program and its contemporary implications. My methodological approach reflects analytical attention to the historical, political, and economic dynamics and the ways in which these shape contemporary relationships (Braun, Dreiling, Eddy, & Dominguez, 2015), with particular attention to discourses used by state actors over time (Braun & Dreiling, 2010). I analyze these discourses by examining publications produced by state agencies as they pertain to the fire camps over the course of the evolving program (1946-2019).<sup>3</sup> My approach is informed by and centers the application of critical theory to both the development and implications of the program.

Specifically, I synthesized existing historical and contemporary accounts of Conservation Camps by working with archivists and librarians at both the Archive of California and the California State Library, compiling documents that mention the program, document its origin, and trace its impact. Due to the breadth and extent of the information available, I focused on annual reports and legislative analyses published by the program's managing agencies as well as congressional members and committees. As the first permanent camp opened in 1946, my investigation begins there while acknowledging the program's predecessors and its evolution. I sorted these reports into temporal categories, attempting to address particular phases of the program such that I could read them in context with the historical moment in which they are situated.

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix for the list of primary sources that informed my research and analysis.

Annual reports were available from years 1959 to 1974, written by the California Division of Forestry<sup>4</sup> in collaboration with the California Department of Corrections<sup>5</sup>. During this period, reports followed a similar format and included maps of camp locations, future plans, detailed reports of inmate work hours, and information regarding the participation of other state agencies such as Fish and Game and Parks and Recreation. The reports vary in length, the shortest roughly fifteen pages in length and the longest over seventy. Complete with photos and anecdotes of program activities, the reports contain a breadth of information. They also make reference to other relevant reports, often legislative analyses and summaries, which provided me a deeper understanding of the decision-making processes related to the camps. During my investigation, I often found myself digging for a report mentioned by another, eventually building a network of resources that have informed my analysis. After 1974, however, reporting on the program shifted and became incorporated into the broader scope of the Department of Corrections (as of 2004, called the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation) and its publications. Therefore, there is a significant gap in information available in the archives between 1975 and more recent years when the government agencies formally published information on their websites. In order to address some of these gaps, I looked to some California newspaper archives to help build a more complete picture of the program during the late 1970s through the 1990s. These publications were usually small, local

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<sup>4</sup> Once titled the California Division of Forestry, the agency elevated to a Department status in 1977 and took on the name California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, which is often known as its informal title, CAL FIRE. Throughout this paper, I refer to the agency by the name it had at the relevant moment in time.

<sup>5</sup> Like the Division of Forestry, the Department of Corrections also underwent title changes. In 1915, the agency formed as the California state Detentions Bureau and in 1951, it elevated to Department status as the California Department of Corrections. More recently, in 2004, the agency's name changed again to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (or CDCR). I refer to the agency by the name it had at the relevant moment in time.

newspapers that dealt with one particular case of prison inmates conducting a conservation project or related to the construction of a new camp.

The differing ways in which information about the program has been shared with the public might be indicative of shifting priorities for the program, as I will discuss in the forthcoming sections. Regardless of the motivating factors of these shifts, however, information about the program has been variable and at times inaccessible. Most recently in late 2019 the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation removed a great deal of information from their websites, including a program history written by Goodman (2010) and statistics related to inmate working hours. It is unclear if this information, or further details, will be republished on their website.

My work attempts to address some of the gaps in the history of the program and is informed by historians and other scholars, namely Philip Goodman and Lloyd Thorpe, who have built partial histories of the program and California's unique socio-political history as it pertains to fire. My work diverges from these scholars as I look at the development and evolution of the Conservation Camp program over time to interrogate the factors that led the State of California to rely so heavily on the Conservation Camp program and incarcerated labor to fight its many wildfires. In my forthcoming discussion, I cite contributing scholars where appropriate; otherwise, I reference data that I personally collected and analyzed through close reading and qualitative coding. The codes I used to signal themes and important realizations evolved and developed as I read due to the iterative nature of my methods (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2014). They included "state as Beneficiary," "Environmental Risk," and "Legislation" to name a few.

Additionally, I tracked my thoughts and documented my reasoning in memos, eventually compiling a useful set of notes that informed my analysis of fire camps in conversation with the theoretical frameworks I chose to engage. These methods allow me to speak to my first research question, *what are the socio-political preconditions that have led California to rely on the labor of incarcerated firefighters?*, and reveal insights into my second question, *in the context of climate change, what are the implications of such a program as they relate to the risks borne to inmates serving in fire camps?* Lastly, I put my findings in conversation with existing theories in Critical Prison Studies, Ecosocialism, and Critical Environmental Justice as I have outlined them in the preceding literature review. As these three fields are critical and normative in their approach to social problems, they not only helped me identify emerging themes in my archival work, but also informed my ability to speak to the broader socio-political conditions that both inform and emerge from California Conservation Camps.

My methodological approach, iterative and qualitative in nature, allowed me to expand on the program's history while offering an analysis informed by the three frameworks that emerged as most important to this inquiry. While I draw on the work of other scholars to pull this history together, my analysis is driven primarily by my findings in the annual reports and legislative documents that I reference below. In the analysis that follows, I synthesize findings from my collection of data to provide a new, critical reading of an integrated history of the Conservation Camp program.

## **THE HISTORY OF CALIFORNIA CONSERVATION CAMPS: A CRITICAL READING OF THE PROGRAM'S INCEPTION, EXPANSION, AND CURRENT MANIFESTATION**

Waxing and waning over the years, the California Conservation Camp program has seen both periods of great expansion and periods of relative dormancy. Irrespective of those shifts over time, today the State of California relies on the program as an essential part of its wildfire suppression and conservation approaches. Evolving from road camps in the early decades of California's statehood, the program is now a stable institution of the state's forestry and corrections programs. In my archival work, I was able to identify a number of significant periods in the program's history that point to the ways in which state agencies and legislative bodies have conceptualized the program over time. The themes I analyzed from the documents I collected, namely annual reports published by the Division of Forestry and legislative reports published by congressional committees, also speak to the cultural and political contexts in which they were written. In the discussion that follows, I focus primarily on contextualizing the history of the Conservation Camp program, weaving an analysis of the drivers and implications of the program into that history. In doing so, I also point to the current state of the program, shedding light on the dynamics that, in many ways, remain unchanged.

### **Early Years: From Inception to Growth**

One of the earliest indicators of the evolving nature of the Conservation Camp program, pointing to the shifting ways in which California has utilized prison labor, are the changing titles of its predecessors. First, in 1944, road camps became highway camps. In 1945, inmates worked hard to build the capacity of the state's agricultural system

through newly titled harvest camps. When the Division of Forestry and the state Detention Bureau formed their coalition in 1946, their new program took on several names including fire camps, forestry camps, and honor camps. It was not until 1959 that the Conservation Camp program found its permanent name - one that accounted for the central mission of its managing agencies.

Before the program had a name at all, however, inmates served the state by contributing to public-works projects. Since at least 1915, the state used prison labor to construct roads and railroads, build agricultural capacity, and respond to environmental hazards. According to Goodman (2010), road camps in particular may date back to as early as 1850. Goodman (2010) also explains that “those familiar with today’s fire camps may be surprised to learn how much” the two incarnations of the program have in common (p. 1). He references the inception of wages for inmates and the risky nature of the work conducted by inmates as examples. It was not until 1946, however, that the first permanent fire camp was opened with this explicit purpose; Camp Rainbow was the first of its kind, creating the first permanent facility for adults in the program. Modeled after the New Deal Conservation Corps camps, the facility provided inmates with living quarters that were not confined to cells. Today, the same camp exclusively houses female inmates now that the program has grown beyond only men. Before the first major expansion of the program and its subsequent adoption of the Conservation Camp title, the number of facilities grew to include sixteen camps throughout the State of California before its expansion in the late 1950s.

Unlike the other reports of its kind, the 1962 annual report prepared by the California Division of Forestry (now known as CAL FIRE - the California Department of

Forestry and Fire Protection) summarizes the early history of the program. It first names the New Deal Civilian Conservation Corps program as an instrumental influence on the Conservation Camp program, arguing the program pioneered “an action program in the two vast areas in which the current conservation camp excels - the conservation of human and natural resources” (p. 1). Here is an example of a consequential choice on the part of the Division of Forestry to frame conservation work as a human resource. This language reappears in nearly every relevant publication and this report, in particular, helps to trace its origins. As I will demonstrate throughout this discussion of the program’s history, there is a consistent effort on the part of state agencies to frame inmate labor and lives as resources to be *used* to benefit state conservation efforts.

The 1962 report goes on to explain that the World War II economic recovery “resulted in a reduction of the population in the [Civilian Conservation Corps] program after 1935” and “brought more pressures on the forest and other wildland resources” (State Board of Forestry, p. 1). This pressure included an increased need for lumber, outdoor recreation opportunities, and other wildland resources (p. 2). Simultaneously, the California state Departments of Youth Authority and Corrections were confronting an increasing prison population due to a “mass migration of people from all over the nation into California” and “the various social conditions associated with the waning years of the war” (p. 2). In an attempt to address the decreased availability of civilian labor in the conservation arena, the state’s Forestry and Corrections programs came together to establish the first youth (for ages 18-25) and adult conservation camps. The report explains that the first six camps were built by inmates with a budget of \$1.8 million, but organized labor objected to “the use of inmates where free labor could be used” and

therefore, many of the camps were completed using union artisans (p. 3). Congressional reports explain inmate labor in conservation camps does not compete with that of free labor. However, given the prior existence of the Civilian Conservation Corps and the many opportunities offered by the Division of Forestry (i.e. ranger, firefighter, and general laborer positions), I am skeptical of this narrative. Coupled with the fiscal discourse presented by state agencies, I understand the central drivers of the program's initial inception as related to cost-savings and the regulation of labor markets. In this way, it makes sense that the Division of Forestry and the Department of Corrections were concerned with increasing the efficiency of inmate labor and reducing what they called inmate idleness in their facilities.

### **Expanding Capacity in the 1950s**

In a 1953 report titled *Study on Prisons*, the California Senate Special Committee on Governmental Administration argued that inmate idleness was a problem in need of the prison administration's attention. They claim, "useful and productive employment for inmates of the penal institutions is lacking for a large segment of the prison population" (p. 9). Building on the program-building efforts of the previous decade, one of the favored solutions to this so-called problem was the further expansion of the "honor camp program." Seen as a mechanism of conservation, punishment, and rehabilitation, the program's managing agencies positioned it to accommodate more inmates and more working hours all the while satisfying the committee's need for "fruitful" cost saving measures (Senate Special Committee, 1953, p. 9-10). Further, the report indicates a concern over growing inmate populations. An appealing option for diverting some of California's nonviolent inmates, "honor camps" addressed the concerns of the state while

additionally subsidizing the cost of conservation work. During this time, the program saw a number of expansions and new contracts with state agencies such as Fish and Game and Parks and Recreation.

In 1959, the California Division of Forestry published its first formal annual report related to the Conservation Camp Program. This decision was, in part, the product of legislation passed the same year, responding to the call to expand the program and extend its impact. California Senate Bill 516 not only led to an expansion of the number and size of camps, but also established a Division of Conservation within the California Department of Corrections. A 1961 Senate committee report explains “under the accelerated program it is anticipated that with the conservation center and its branches the number of functioning camps will be increased [from 16] to 42 with an occupancy of at least 3,037 inmates within a five year period” (Senate Fact Finding Committee, 1961, p 10).

This legislation and the consequent changes to the Conservation Camp Program (including its name change) marked a significant shift in the historical development of the program. According to Goodman (2010), this shift was made possible by the support of then Governor Pat Brown, who called for the expansion of the program due to its potential to simultaneously prioritize conservation, rehabilitation, and the development of natural resources while ensuring the utility of inmate labor. My archival work supports Goodman’s explanation, showing it was at this time that the program as we know it today began to take shape; officials worked to create formal infrastructure and direct institutional changes. One such change included the inception of the program’s aforementioned Conservation Centers, “the link between the penal institution and the

conservation camp” (Senate Fact Finding Committee, 1961, p. 11). The primary function of the Centers, which continue to operate today, is to make “each camp function smoothly and to operate at the peak of its capacity” (p. 11). Centers serve to train inmates, administer the program, and supply camps with necessities.

An even more significant result of the Conservation Camp program expansion, however, was its impact on the program’s population and consequent uptick in inmate work hours. I found that in 1959, the program saw an eighty-percent increase in the number of inmates housed in Conservation Camps (State Board of Forestry, 1959, p. 3). Due to this increase, inmates worked nearly one-million hours more in 1959 than in 1958, a total of over 2.9 million hours (State Board of Forestry, 1959, p. 5-6). These hours were spent not only conducting fire-suppression work, but also include other conservation projects such as road building, insect control, erosion control, emergency response, and the building of forestry telephone lines (1959, p. 5-6). Reflecting the expansion of the program’s scope, a 1957 report from the California Senate Interim Committee on Natural Resources reads, “there is virtually an unlimited field of work which should be done by inmate labor to conserve and develop the state’s natural resources” (p. 9). Elsewhere in the 1961 report, the authors explain the camps not only function as mechanisms of fire suppression and conservation, but they also serve to “alleviate overcrowded conditions in the institutions, reduce inmate idleness, and provide a practical and effective rehabilitation program through constructive work” (p. 5). These sentiments circle back to the original concerns of state agencies and policy makers who wanted to see the Conservation Camp program expand. During the 1950s, fifteen camps were opened, six of which opened in 1959 (Division of Forestry, 1962, p. 4-5). Consequently, the period

that followed marked substantial development of the program – from increased capacity of existing facilities to the construction of new ones and to the expansion of the program’s scope.

### **Mid-Century Expansions: Building Purpose**

Between the years 1959 and 1966, program administrators made significantly expanded. During this time, the program grew to include forty-two camps and 2,880 inmates - most of whom were trained for the fireline - which constituted 8.7% of the total prison population at the time (Goodman, 2010, p. 2). The Division of Forestry’s annual reports detail the number of working hours for each camp and the program as a whole, and reflect inmates work on projects that beyond fire suppression, range in terms of their associated risks and include nursery projects, construction, pesticide application, and wildlife management. This period saw steady increases to inmate working hours as the number of projects required of the men inside the camps became more substantial. As the 1959 annual report discusses, changing the name of the program from “honor camps” to Conservation Camps reflected the state’s desire to prioritize the development of natural and human resources.

In terms of so-called human resources, the state’s congressional committees, the Division of Forestry, and the Department of Corrections all made significant effort during this time to emphasize the rehabilitative capacity of the Conservation Camp program. Perhaps reflecting a cultural shift away from punitive imprisonment, every annual report published by the Division of Forestry provided anecdotal evidence of inmates finding joy in their work. However, the same reports coupled with their congressional counterparts indicate the Department of Corrections’ rehabilitation efforts end when profitability is

compromised (Senate Fact Finding Committee, 1961, p. 12). Further, I found that a great deal of the rehabilitative efforts conducted by the agency centered work and preparation for “a successful return to competitive society” (p. 12). According to the Department of Corrections, cited in a 1961 congressional report, “pride in an individual’s ability to perform hard physical labor can be rekindled and developed” through work at the Conservation Camps (p. 25). The Department continues, “an individual’s pride will transmit to his living-working-training unit of 16 men and become a group pride. This will stir competition and increase efficiency in both work and training” (1961, p. 25). These assertions may be measurably true, but they certainly frame the rehabilitation of inmates exclusively around the value of their labor, pointing to concerns around programmatic costs and the commodification of inmate bodies.

The same annual and congressional reports also pointed to a counter-narrative related to redemption for inmates. For example, in the words of California Senate Committee members Arnold, Miller, and others, “it would be foolish to save our trees but lose the fight to save the men from further wasteful lives” (1961, p. 12). Here, the report frames inmates as having wasted their lives until contributing to the Conservation Camp program, which is positioned as a means of salvation from their so-called wasteful lives. For instance, during this time the program introduced a therapeutic community concept in addition to religious programming as central to their rehabilitation efforts (Senate Fact Finding Committee, 1961, p. 25). However, given the number of disqualifying convictions, only certain inmates were allowed to participate in the Conservation Camp program. Therefore, only some were considered deserving of this kind of rehabilitation through conservation. Coupled with the view that inmate’s lives are wasteful when not in

service to the state, this narrative also contributes to the devaluation of inmate life and labor as they are not viewed as *inherently* valuable.

Considering the risky nature of their work, these value systems are reflected by the inmate pay rates. While the 1961 report labels inmates “willing workers,” later sections describe forty-eight hour work weeks and \$15 per month pay rates for laborers with an additional thirty cents per hour for “extra time for firefighting in excess of the regular eight hour day and for emergency inmate firefighters taken directly from the institutions” (p. 18). Important to acknowledge, too, is the fact that these pay rates have increased only marginally in the past fifty years; today, inmates make roughly \$30 per month, plus an additional \$1-2 per hour on the fireline. This pay structure seems to be modeled after the program’s road camp predecessor, where in 1915, prison laborers were also receiving \$2 per day for their work. Current laws that dictate prison labor practices in California do not include pay scale information; instead, Section 2700 of California’s Penal Code, titled “Employment of Prisoners Generally” reads,

The Department of Corrections shall require of every able-bodied prisoner imprisoned in any state prison as many hours of faithful labor in each day and every day during his or her term of imprisonment as shall be prescribed by the rules and regulations of the Director of Corrections. Whenever by any statute a price is required to be fixed for any services to be performed in connection with the work program of the Department of Corrections, the compensation paid to prisoners shall be included as an item of cost in fixing the final statutory price. Prisoners not engaged on work programs under the jurisdiction of the Prison Industry Authority, but who are engaged in productive labor outside of such programs may be compensated in like manner. The compensation of such prisoners shall be paid either out of funds appropriated by the Legislature for that purpose or out of such other funds available to the Department of Corrections for expenditure, as the Director of Finance may direct. (Amended by Stats. 1982, Ch. 1549, Sec. 6.)

With this conceptualization of the program and the inmates serving in fire camps in mind, it is easy to see how the narratives present in legislative reports published during this

period constitute the state's willingness to invest in the Conservation Camp Program. The 1961 report titled, *Expanded Use of Prison Inmates in the Conservation Program*, states "It is difficult to estimate how many millions of dollars were saved by [the efforts of inmates] but it is known to be far in excess of the cost of the program," yet it goes on to explain that much of their work is conducted "under the most hazardous of fire conditions" (p. 13). My research has led me to conclude that the state saw immense opportunity in this program during this period to 1) address wildfire and conservation concerns, 2) save the state millions of dollars, and 3) address growing prison population and so-called inmate idleness. All the while, the state's actions suggest that many internal actors believed this kind of dangerous work was only suitable to those whose lives they were willing to risk.

### **1967-1979: Budget Cuts and Dormancy**

While the aforementioned period of expansion points to some of the most important decisions and attitudes related to fire camps, years following 1966 led to a period of relative dormancy for the program. More specifically, my research indicates the number of working hours fluctuated due to external factors such as the political orientation of the Governor and Congress. For example, there is an decrease in the number of working hours that came about after Governor Pat Brown was succeeded by Governor Ronald Reagan. The Division of Forestry's 1972 report points to this shift, citing a declining number of inmates available to the program. The report states

The peak population of the camps was reached in 1966, when there were 2,700 inmates and 360 wards [of the Youth Authority] on crews in a number of locations. For several of the past years, there has been a trend toward a steady decline in the number of minimum-security male felons available to man the adult camps. The trend assumed serious proportion in 1971 and continues into 1972 with a slight inclination to level off at 1,050 men in the last three months. Despite

the decline in numbers of suitable men for the adult camps, there has remained a heavy dependence on them in 1972. (p. 2)

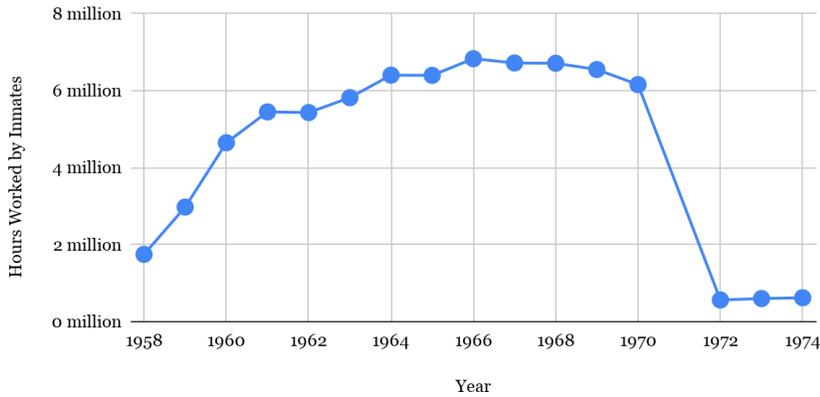
The authors of the report implicate a particular probation subsidy in this decline, explaining that new social concepts surrounding the rehabilitation of prisoners led to more house arrests than minimum security sentences (State Board of Forestry, 1972, p. 2). Contextualizing this shift historically, it is easy to see how cost-savings narratives had taken precedent during the Reagan governorship. For example, the 1967 Division of Forestry report suggests “economic and social changes during the year contributed to the closing of nine camps by June 30, 1967” (p. 2). Like Goodman, one might speculate that these economic and social changes were the product of a general regime shift and broad budget cuts once Reagan took over the Governorship in California.<sup>6</sup> It is also important to note, however, that these decisions were very much responding to the global recession of 1973-1975.

I created Figure 1 to illustrate this dynamic, showing the number of working hours conducted by inmates in the program versus the year. There is a drastic reduction in working hours between 1970-1972 as the Reagan-era budget cuts and consequent reductions in staffing and the number of inmates working for the program.

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<sup>6</sup> While this section does not include a discussion on Neoliberalism, the economic and social shifts that took place during Reagan’s Governorship indicate an important shift in the state’s (i.e. its many agencies) decision making. During this phase of the program’s development, budget cuts and cost-savings measures that ultimately restructured social programs - including this one - are manifestations of neoliberal thinking and policy making. But while this conversation is an important one, it is not within the scope of this particular project. Additional time and thought are necessary to better understand the relationship between Neoliberalism and the Conservation Camp program.

Hours Worked by Inmates in the CA Conservation Camp Program 1958 - 1974

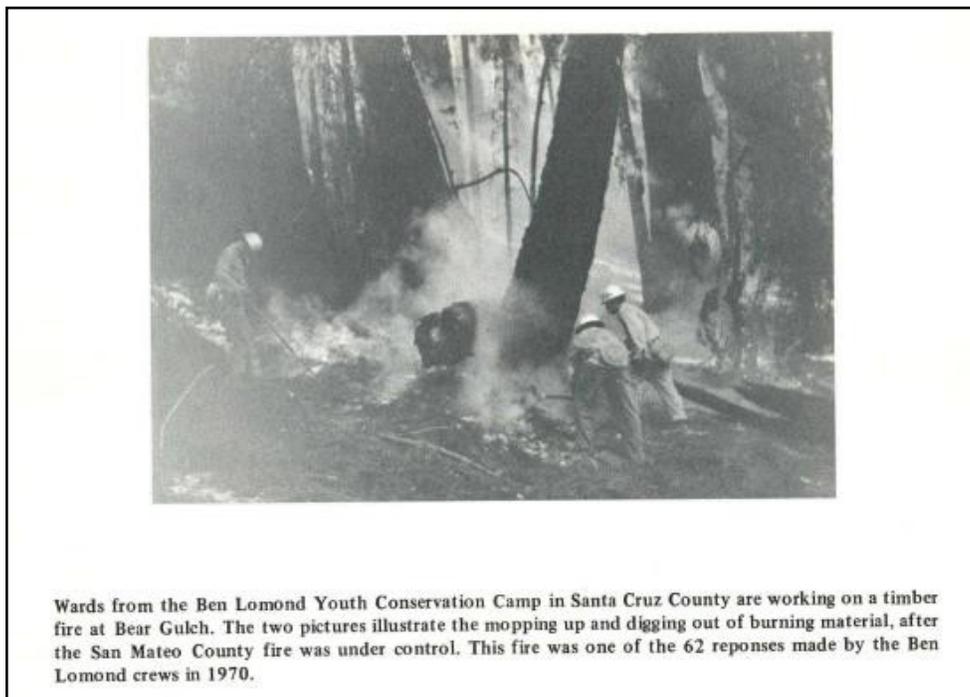


**Figure 1.** Hours Worked by Inmates in Conservation Camps (1958-1974).

Between 1972 and 1974, the Division of Forestry continued to publish programmatic reports that detailed the hours, activities, and impact of inmates in the Conservation Camp program. After 1974, however, this kind of reporting ceased, and the camps were rolled into the more general report conducted by the California Department of Corrections. Not only does this signal a shift in the program’s dynamics, it also means there is a significant gap in accessible information as it pertains to the program. While it is challenging to determine the details of the program’s form and function during this time, it is clear that as the 1970s continued, the program remained important to the state’s forestry programming, but certainly fell back in terms of its relevance to the overall prison administration. The fact that annual reports were no longer a facet of the Conservation Camp program is - in and of itself - indicative of shifting priorities for the state. The population of the program lingered around 1,000 inmates while there were few expansions and many closures during this period of time (Goodman, 2010). According to the 1970 annual report, inmate firefighters contributed 13.46 percent of the “total of all

work produced during the year to fire line duty” (State Board of Forestry, 1972, p. 11). This total percentage was the second highest since the program’s expansion in 1959, when inmate firefighters conducted 21.9 percent of all fire line work (p. 11).

It is true that this period saw a decreased number of program participants, but the nature of their work - risky and arduous - remained the same. Figures 2, 3, and 4 are photos I extracted from the 1970 annual report, prepared by the California Division of Forestry. While the photographer is unknown, these photos illustrate the nature of the work conducted by inmate firefighters. These photos also serve to illustrate the environmental hazards to which the inmates are exposed, including smoke inhalation, falling trees, burn injuries, and dehydration to name a few.



**Figure 2.** Inmates extinguish a flame (State Board of Forestry, 1970, p. 13).

Boggs Mountain State Forest

Inmates from the Konocti Camp, in Lake County, collected cones from standing sugar pine trees on Boggs Mountain State Forest. These cones, which always develop at the ends of the branches, can vary in length from 10 to 26 inches and 4 to 5 inches in diameter, when the cone scales are fully open.



An inmate pauses on his climb up the tree.



Sugar pine, with cones at tips of branches.

**Figure 3.** Inmates collect pinecones (State Board of Forestry, 1970, p. 37).

Ben Lomond Forest Nursery



Applying deer repellent to Monterey pine seedlings in the seed beds. Despite the fencing, deer do get in occasionally. Note the air filter mask, which the nozzleman is wearing as a protection against inhaling the toxic spray.

**Figure 4.** Inmates apply deer repellent to seedlings (State Board of Forestry, 1970, p. 36).

## **1980s through Today: The Carceral State and Climate Change**

The Conservation Camp program underwent a number of shifts during the first twenty years of its formal existence, indicative of the changing ways in which the program was utilized and conceptualized (Goodman, 2010). Ironically, it was during a Democratic governorship that the State of California transitioned to a more “tough on crime” regime in its prison administration, leading to a boom in prison population and an increased need to place inmates in the Conservation Camp program. As Goodman (2010) explains, the 1980s meant the state felt a renewed sense that the fire camps served the state well by subsidizing the budget and reducing the burden of booming inmate populations.

In her work, *The Golden Gulag*, Gilmore (2007) explores the ways in which California’s political economy contributed to the prison population boom. She argues that shifts in decision making in the 1970s surrounding industrial investment and natural disasters ultimately led to “surpluses of finance capital, land, labor, and state capacity, not all of which were politically, economically, socially, or regionally absorbed” (p. 87). The state addressed some of these surpluses by building the new prison regime of the 1980s and 1990s. Gilmore (2007) states,

The new California prison system of the 1980s and 1990s was constructed deliberately--but not conspiratorially--of surpluses that were not put back to work in other ways. Make no mistake: prison building was and is not the inevitable outcome of these surpluses. It did, however, put certain state capacities into motion, make use of a lot of idle land, get capital invested via public debt, and take more than 160,000 low-wage workers off the streets (p. 87-89).

Simultaneously, “tough on crime” strategies wiped out some of the more serious rehabilitations in favor of building new facilities. According to Gilmore, in 1977 California ended its commitment to use the prison system as a means of rehabilitation and

simultaneously ended determinate sentencing in favor of indeterminate sentencing that resulted in many more life sentences for “Black, Latino, and white prisoners whose failures to be rehabilitated translated as their refusal to learn their proper places in the social order” (p. 87).

Interestingly, the Conservation Camp program actually saw a renewed sense of value during this time. Following a period of dormancy and the closure of several camp locations, five new camps opened in the 1980s. The program also expanded to include female inmates, with the first female camp opening in 1983. As Goodman (2010) explains,

Part of this increase and flourishing is due to the fact that there was yet another change in how fire camps were packaged and understood by those inside and outside corrections, including a renewed focus on saving the state money, protecting citizens and property, and the value of keeping inmates busy. (p. 3)

My research supports Goodman’s claim. In an attempt to address the gap in state-funded literature regarding the Conservation Camp program, I turned to the work of journalists. While they do not necessarily speak to the priorities of the state, I did find that cost-savings was a major theme in 1980s California newspaper articles that mention the program. For example, a 1980 article in the *Desert Sun* reads, “To ease the pressures of an increasing prison population and provide Southern California with additional fire and flood control crews,” the California Department of Corrections and the Youth Authority will open an additional Conservation Camp this year (1980, p. A5). The same article makes no mention of rehabilitation, a trend I also found throughout similar publications. It does mention, however, the many services provided to the state by inmates.

These trends continued throughout the 1980s, with state-funded discourse centering the state as the central beneficiary of the Conservation Camp program. It is

clear the program continued to operate with neither major transformations nor expansions. A 1990 pamphlet prepared by the Department of Corrections indicates this, as well, stating, “As they repay their debt to society, camp inmates also provide a real economic benefit to local communities. In 1989 alone, camp inmates worked 5.5 million hours--a \$43 million value” (p. 2). Here, we see the same kind of dehumanizing language that was woven into state-funded discourse regarding the Conservation Camp program throughout the 1960s and 1970s. My research leads me to believe that this kind of continuity is indicative of the general attitudes and beliefs held by the program’s managing agencies and law makers. As I have mentioned in previous sections, the state - regardless of its rehabilitation programs - prioritized budgets over lives as they convinced inmates to participate in an explicitly dangerous program.

While it does not constitute a major transformation, inmate pay did change between the 1980s and today. In 1983, inmates received “\$1.35 to \$3.75 a day depending on their jobs, plus 75 cents an hour for emergency fire and flood work” (Skorneck, 1983, p. A12). Today, base and on-duty wages are only marginally higher (one additional dollar per hour) and certainly do not account for inflation over time. However, aside from the numbers of dollars committed to the program and their allocation, it looks nearly identical in terms of its form and purpose.

Throughout the 2000s until now, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and CAL FIRE (also known as the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection) has used their websites as their primary reporting mechanism. Given older versions of their websites have since disappeared, however, it is difficult to trace this reporting over time. However, I was able to access a few archived versions of the sites

via the Wayback Machine<sup>7</sup>. Aside from changes to the site's functionality, aesthetic choices, and technological features, the information contained on the sites have remained very consistent since 2001.

The only major changes I was able to identify were related to the program budget and the amount of savings the program offers the state. On the 2009 website, for instance, the CDCR claims the program saved the State of California \$80 million per year. Earlier this year in 2019, the website stated the amount saved is more than \$100 million per year, but as the year nears its end, that information has been removed from the site completely. While I can only speculate, my historical research leads me to believe this was a deliberate choice made in light of recent controversy. MSNBC, for example, recently published an article that illuminated numerous problems with the program, including the fact that upon release, there is no guarantee that former program participants will be able to access employment as firefighters through traditional means (Eaglin & Henneberry, 2019). This is an unfortunate fact of the program, but it has not gone unnoticed.

In 2018, CAL FIRE introduced programming that more intentionally offers employment to inmates upon release. More recently in February 2019, Assembly Member Reyes introduced a bill that would “declare the intent of the Legislature to enact legislation that would provide a career pathway to individuals with previous criminal convictions who have demonstrated rehabilitation and desire to work as firefighters” (California Legislative Counsel, 2019, online). However, while there are numerous efforts to address the tensions related to the Conservation Camp program, there does not seem to be a question within the legislature or state government more broadly as to the

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<sup>7</sup> The Wayback Machine is an internet archiving device and website dedicated to logging different versions of websites such that they can be accessed after edits and changes are made.

potential and longevity of the program. However, recent changes to prison structures have impacted the number of inmates available to the program. In 2017, *The Atlantic* reported that decreased inmate populations put a new pressure on the program. Because the United States Supreme Court mandated the release of some forty-thousand prisoners due to unsafe and overcrowded conditions, many low-level, Conservation Camp qualified inmates were the first to be released (Neklason, 2017). Although the program has been struggling to populate its camps due to these recent mandates, we may see an opposite trend soon given California outlawed private prisons this year; the inmates once housed in private facilities will now be absorbed into the public system, making Conservation Camps an option for those who qualify.

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

### State as Beneficiary

Conservation Camps are now almost seventy-five years old. Considering the program's road camp predecessors, the concept has existed for over one-hundred years. My periodization of the program helps illuminate the numerous ways in which the program has been conceptualized over time. However, while I have traced the institutional drivers of Conservation Camps, I have purposefully omitted the perspectives of individual inmates who have varied and important perspectives of the program. Through my historical analysis, I point to how the State of California has very explicitly positioned itself as the central beneficiary of fire camps. While prioritizing the so-called rehabilitation of inmates has flowed in and out of popularity over time, one thing remains consistent throughout the program's history: the state saves millions of dollars and pays inmates virtually nothing. Irrespective of individual inmate experiences, this remains true and calls into question the priorities of the state. Why is it that the state sees inmates as more appropriately positioned to conduct conservation work than "free" laborers?

I argue that CAL FIRE and the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation engage in a consistent effort to devalue the lives of inmates - who are disproportionately Black, Brown, and poor - as deliberate in the sense that such devaluation legitimizes the state's decision to pay so little while gaining so much. Framing the program as rehabilitative does the same: inmate labor is presented as a means through which salvation is possible, validating the program's existence. However, the state creates another problem when it positions some inmates as more deserving of this kind of rehabilitation than others. If "pride in an individual's ability to perform hard physical labor can be rekindled and developed" through work at the Conservation Camps, why is

it that those convicted of the most violent crimes cannot receive this so-called opportunity (Senate Committee on Governmental Administration, 1961, p. 25)?

Related to the cost-savings benefits celebrated by the state's stakeholder agencies, David Fathi, director of the ACLU's National Prison Project, argues that cheap labor in the context of prisons and labor camps ultimately incentivizes mass incarceration and consequently, an unjust criminal justice system (Neklason, 2017). Leading to unjust criminal law that aims to propagate a system that subsidizes industry as well as state-led activities, the use of penal labor can then be seen as a system that supports and perpetuates "capitalism and the system of racial domination [that] collude to exploit the labor of male and female inmates thus increasing profits...simultaneously reducing competition for scarce jobs in an increasingly tenuous domestic labor market" (Smith & Hattery, 2008).

In 2015, California's Deputy Attorney General argued that reducing prison populations "would severely impact fire camp participation, a dangerous outcome while California is in the middle of a difficult fire season and severe drought" (Hager, 2015, online). This sentiment directly confirms of how the Carceral State of California understands the labor of inmates. It may experientially serve as a rehabilitation or job training program, but it simultaneously serves as a mechanism of exploitation that puts laborers at extreme risk. These facts contribute to my skepticism surrounding the voluntary nature of the program. Fathi argues that "voluntary work" in the context of a prison is impossible - that the inherently coercive environment puts inmates at risk to make decisions, such as serving as wildland firefighters, that might put their lives in danger (Neklason, 2017). This risk is very real in the context of California Conservation Camps, where inmate firefighters are at higher risk of injury and death than those

employed by traditional means (Vesoulis, 2018).

Further, one must consider the nature of the California economy and the ways in which offsetting the costs of public programming ultimately fuels the state's ability to buy into corporate welfare schemes whereby corporations receive millions of dollars in tax breaks. According to Good Jobs First, an organization aimed at making economic subsidies more transparent, California dished out \$21,892,981,322 in breaks to corporations in 2018 with a total of 5,270 different awards (2018). These forms of corporate welfare are most often directed at companies in aerospace technologies, entertainment, and the media. These huge contributors to the overall GDP of California and the United States, more broadly, are made a priority over the lives of people who are made into criminals by a system that creates criminal laws that have direct impact on the state's marketplace. Chang and E. Thompkins (2002) write about the mechanized and structural ways in which prisons and the Carceral State aim to utilize imprisonment to support the economy. They argue

When unemployment is low, the state relaxes imprisonment to allow sufficient labor to compete for wages in the free market; when unemployment is high, the state imprisons greater numbers to absorb surplus labor and suppress social unrest associated with economic deprivation... when the economy stagnates, Congress passes more federal laws that add additional activities as criminal offenses, mandates more severe penalties, and demands more strict law enforcement (p. 47).

My research, coupled with the work of socialist and ecosocialist scholars, allows me to conclude that the criminal law in the United States is merely employing a mask of morality in order to propagate what its government is truly interested in: supporting state sanctioned growth of the nation's GDP and economic viability at the expense of the exploitable populations it intends to propagate.

## **Environmental (In)Justice**

Importantly, additional tensions emerge as we enter the depths of the Anthropocene, a geological epoch during which human impact drives massively consequential environmental change. Inmates serving in Conservation Camps are positioned to bear a disproportionate burden of the aftermath. As wildfire, flooding, and other natural hazards become more prolific, so too will the risk inmate firefighters face on the fireline. During the era of climate change, inmates will also grapple with the state's renewed interest in conservation; ultimately, I argue this will drive inmate working hours up and their value as conceptualized by the state down. This devaluation legitimizes the risks borne to inmates, thereby reifying and worsening existing environmental inequities.

David Pellow (2018) argues that prisons in the United States already expose inmates to unique environmental hazards that others do not confront. He draws upon the work of Critical Prison Studies scholars and activists, namely those of the Prison Ecology project who

formed [in 2015] to investigate the links between the US prison system and environmental threats, uncovering and highlighting scores of cases across the nation where ecosystems, nearby communities, and prisoners themselves were placed at risk due to prison proposals, construction, and routine operations (p. 67).

It was this coalition that began to shed light on the ways in which prison inmates encounter additional environmental burdens due to their status as criminals. Pellow elaborates, recognizing the racist ways in which Black and Brown people are targeted by the Carceral State. He suggests that the laws by which inmates are convicted are based in an oppressive logic that takes aim at those populations that are always already structurally diminished. Given Conservation Camps are inextricably linked to

California's carceral regime, they too represent this relationship - both symbolically and materially.

In a 1990 pamphlet titled *Prisons Without Walls*, the California Department of Corrections provides the following breakdown of the Conservation Camp population: "The typical inmate is about 26 years old. Approximately 36% are white, 33% black, 26% Hispanic and 5% of other ethnic backgrounds" (p. 3). However, understanding that racial identities often intersect as both Black and Latinx, California's population the same year was about 70% white, 8% Black, and 25% Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 1992). Clearly the Black and Latinx demographics are disproportionately represented in the Conservation Camp program, but this is no surprise. It makes sense, then, that toxics and other environmental hazards would disproportionately affect inmate populations just as they have communities of color in the United States. The Conservation Camp program is an extreme example of this phenomenon. While fighting massive blazes, digging trenches, and conducting other hazardous conservation work, inmates are constantly confronting the most dangerous of conditions. Interestingly, I found that the state acknowledges and even celebrates this fact throughout its agencies' many reports.

## **Conclusion**

The inmates who participate in the Conservation Camp program are the subjects of a system that capitalizes on the fact that their bodies and lives are already devalued by their status as criminals, and often also as people of color. As I have shown, various state-funded publications point to claims related to an inmate's debt to society and potential redemption through work. These examples point to the ways in which various state actors have mobilized narratives to justify their decision to put inmate lives at risk.

Remembering Matthew Beck, Frank Anaya, and Anthony Colacino - inmates who died in

recent years serving the State of California's Conservation Camps - I am urged to consider the abolitionist perspectives of Critical Prison Studies scholars and activists. Pellow (2018) argues that Critical Environmental Justice imagines all people as indispensable members of the global community, unlike prisons where inmate lives are deliberately made out to be less-than. In this way, the abolition of prisons is a necessary step toward an environmental justice where all living things are seen as inherently worthy of life and freedom. Citing Angela Davis and Ruth Gilmore, Pellow argues that

prison abolition is not a vision focused on simply removing prisons from society. It is predicated instead on undertaking the more difficult work of making prisons irrelevant and obsolete by transforming the social relationships outside of prisons, throughout society, which feed and fuel the prison system (p. 106).

If prisons were to be abolished, so too would the Conservation Camp program. The risks taken on by participating inmates would be more evenly dispersed. In a truly abolitionist world, the state would be forced to value the inherent worth of all life, thereby rearranging not only its budget, but also its priorities as presented by its discourse.

My research, in conversation with scholars working in the fields of Ecosocialism, Critical Prison Studies, and Critical Environmental Justice, has shown where the state's priorities currently lie. I argue that it should reconsider these priorities, including an assessment of the classist, racialized laws by which inmates are convicted. Ultimately, tracing the history of the Conservation Camp program has led me to identify the drivers and the implications of the program at a structural level, allowing my critique of its current state. By answering the question, *how did California come to rely on the labor of inmates to fight its wildfires and conduct its conservation work?* I have come to understand its priorities as they relate to cost-savings, inmate rehabilitation, and conservation. In light of the changing climate and an increased risk of wildfire, it is time for the State of California to reconsider those priorities.

## APPENDIX

### PRIMARY SOURCE MATERIALS

#### Newspapers

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## **Legislation**

California Penal Code Section 2700-2705

California Public Resource Code Section 4126

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