Creating Safe Spaces

Centering the Voices of Black People to Address Safety and Access for Black Families and Outdoor Enthusiasts

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
“Like all life there is no one single story or experience...that common thread is a desire for opportunity, for welcome, for safety and yet that desire is not uniformly fulfilled. Places are not always welcoming, safety outdoors is not assured, opportunity to access and enjoy the outdoors is not available to all.”

– Lynn Scarlett, Chief External Affairs Officer, The Nature Conservancy

To launch our multi-year Creating Safe Spaces initiative, we sought to shed light on the challenges Black people face in safely accessing and enjoying the outdoors. Through a series of roundtables, in partnership with Outdoor Afro, Black AF in STEM, the Links, Incorporated, and Patagonia, the Federation and our partners sought to provide Black experts across professions with the opportunity to share their experiences in navigating green spaces to identify factors that inhibit Black people from navigating the outdoors safely. In addition to discussing the challenges and barriers, the roundtables also served as an opportunity to raise solutions that can be championed to ensure a safe and equitable experience for all.

“I just need to acknowledge how honored and joyous and emotional I feel from seeing the other Black people on this panel. I think white supremacy has a way of isolating us and making us think that we’re the only ones and I think these panels are so reassuring and healing and so beautiful to see.”

– Grace Anderson, Consultant

We seek to amplify the voices and perspectives from the roundtables and a national town hall held on April 27, 2021, through our policy advocacy efforts on Capitol Hill. Our long-term goals include hosting annual roundtables, focused on increasing access to the outdoors for different identity groups and implementing on-the-ground activities that provide concrete results to ensure everyone is able to safely access and enjoy green spaces.
Our Partners

Thank you to our partners for their leadership and contributions to the Creating Safe Spaces initiative.

We are in business to save our home planet, but we can’t possibly do this alone. We must focus on those most impacted by the environmental crisis and follow their lead. We are here for the work of forging a more just world.

Our Partners

Thank you to our partners for their leadership and contributions to the Creating Safe Spaces initiative.

We are a group of unapologetically Black scientists studying topics in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics-Creators of #BlackBirdersWeek

We’re in business to save our home planet, but we can’t possibly do this alone. We must focus on those most impacted by the environmental crisis and follow their lead. We are here for the work of forging a more just world.

The Links, Incorporated is an international, not-for-profit corporation, established in 1946. The membership consists of more than 16,000 professional women of African descent in 292 chapters located in 41 states, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of the Bahamas, and the United Kingdom. It is one of the nation’s oldest and largest volunteer service organizations of extraordinary women who are committed to enriching, sustaining and ensuring the culture and economic survival of African Americans and other persons of African ancestry. Our core values are friendship, integrity, honesty, service, commitment, family relationships, courage, respect for self and others, legacy, confidentiality, responsibility, and accountability.

Outdoor Afro has become the nation’s leading, cutting edge network that celebrates and inspires Black connections and leadership in nature. We are a national not-for-profit organization with leadership networks around the country. With more than 80 leaders in 42 cities around the country, we connect thousands of people to nature experiences, who are changing the face of conservation. So come out in nature with us, or be a partner to help us grow our work so that we can help lead the way for inclusion in outdoor recreation, nature, and conservation for all!
Participants

Thank you to our roundtable participants for their courage and tenacity to drive forward systemic change.

DECEMBER 8, 2020 ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Moderators: Mamie Parker, PhD, Director at Large for the Board of Directors, National Wildlife Federation and David Mizejewski, Naturalist, National Wildlife Federation

Opening Remarks: Collin O’Mara, President and CEO, National Wildlife Federation and Lynn Scarlett, Chief External Affairs Officer, The Nature Conservancy

Panel Participants:

- Shelton Johnson, Park Ranger, National Park Service
- Chris Schell, PhD, Assistant Professor of Urban Ecology, University of Washington Tacoma
- Harrison P. Pinckney IV, PhD, Assistant Professor, Clemson University
- Candice Price, Founder and CEO, Urban American Productions, LLC
- Wayne Hubbard, Host and Producer, Urban American Outdoors TV

Closing Remarks and Call to Action: Sanai Kintchen, Mentoring Program Member, the Links, Incorporated

JANUARY 12, 2021 ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Moderators: Mamie Parker, PhD, Director at Large for the Board of Directors, National Wildlife Federation and Mustafa Santiago Ali, PhD, Vice President of Environmental Justice, Climate, and Community Revitalization, National Wildlife Federation

Opening Remarks: Collin O’Mara, President and CEO, National Wildlife Federation

Panel Participants:

- Corina Newsome, Community Engagement Manager, Georgia Audubon Society
- Kelly L. Darden Jr., Outdoor Writer, TV Show Host, Former North Carolina Wildlife Federation Board Member, and Former Marine Fisheries Commissioner
- Aby Sene-Harper, PhD, Assistant Professor, Clemson University
- Christopher Joe, Founder and Owner, Connecting with Birds and Nature Tours, LLC

Closing Remarks and Call to Action: John Robbins, Eastern Vice-Chair for the Board of Directors, National Wildlife Federation and Brianna Aningwa, Environmental Education Supervisor, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge at Tinicum
FEBRUARY 2, 2021 ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Moderators: Mamie Parker, PhD, Director at Large for the Board of Directors, National Wildlife Federation and Dianne Dillon-Ridgley, Special Advisor for the Board of Directors, National Wildlife Federation

Opening Remarks: Collin O’Mara, President and CEO, National Wildlife Federation

Panel Participants:

Taishya Adams, Policy Director and Colorado Co-Lead, Outdoor Afro
Earyn McGee, PhD Candidate, School of Natural Resources and the Environment - University of Arizona
Grace Anderson, Consultant
Michelle Race, Co-Founder, Black Girls Trekkin’
Scott Gilmore, Deputy Executive Director, Parks & Recreation, City and County of Denver, Colorado

Closing Remarks and Call to Action: Miguel Ordeñana, Director at Large for the Board of Directors, National Wildlife Federation and Warren Dickson, Co-owner, 3rd Rock Hip Hop

To view all three roundtables, visit nwf.org/safespaces
About these Roundtables

In addition to gaining valuable insights to help strengthen National Wildlife Federation programs and policy advocacy efforts, the roundtables served as a key platform for participants to build relationships and share resources. Upon concluding the roundtable series, the National Wildlife Federation worked in collaboration with our partners and roundtable participants to summarize key issues and recommendations. The following information reflects these efforts.
Lack of Representation

“I think people can acknowledge that, when they see one Black person in a room, they know that there is an issue there but they don’t always know what that issue is because there’s not overt racism happening in front of their eyes. And one thing that I like to bring up is that in those spaces there’s a lot of othering that happens.”
– Michelle Race, Black Girls Trekkin’

According to our roundtable participants

- There is a historical lack of representation in the media of Black people, especially Black women in nature. This creates flawed perceptions among Black youth about what careers and recreational activities are possible for them to pursue in their lives.

- Black people lack representation in natural resources and conservation fields, including academia. A lack of representation creates feelings of isolation and disconnect for those in the field and creates hostile environments for young Black students seeking to enter the field.

- Representation is needed at every stage, from childhood experiences to professional settings and policy making.

- Being the only person Black person in a space, either in nature or in a professional setting, often leads to issues of “othering,” if not overt racism.

- Safety courses are not being led by individuals that understand the challenges that Black people face.
The moment I saw her it was like the blinds were taken off of my mind, in that moment I realized just how much power was in the fact that I had never seen a Black person doing this job, much less a Black woman doing this job. From that moment forward I decided and I recognized how important and powerful representation was and whatever I did in wildlife conservation I was going to do publicly, as publicly and visibly to young Black people as possible.

– Corina Newsome, Georgia Audubon Society

Participants recommended

- Hiring more Black people, especially in leadership roles and ensuring incoming, non-Black staff possess justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion competencies.

- Providing funding and/or access to communication platforms to increase representation of Black people, especially women, in the media engaging in recreational and professional activities in natural spaces.

- Increasing educational opportunities for Black youth to engage with and learn about the outdoors and employment opportunities in natural resource fields. These programs should include Black leadership so that the youth can see themselves represented.

- Institutions supporting professional mentorship programs between Black professionals and Black students to help encourage and engage students to thrive in their fields.

- More media and marketing to increase exposure of Black-owned environmental and conservation-based business.

- Allies helping in these spaces by not trying to speak on behalf of Black people, but by giving the microphone to the people who are being harmed in these spaces. Listening and not being dismissive is key to being a true ally.

- Taking active steps to increase representation by showing more Black people in marketing and communication efforts.
Physical Safety

There are legitimate reasons why we feel unsafe in those spaces ... Nature has been used to subjugate Black bodies, through slavery, through lynching. But also they’ve been intentionally excluded from public lands. When public lands were being established there was no room for non-whites including African Americans. And Native Americans were completely dislocated from those spaces.

– Aby Sene-Harper, PhD, Clemson University

According to our roundtable participants

- Black people often encounter discrimination, harassment, and both physical and mental violence when in rural and natural spaces.

- When one is clearly unwelcome in an area, it is hard to feel safe.

- Nature has been used to subjugate Black people through slavery, harassment, and lynching. Even the creation of national parks has a history rooted in white supremacy.

- Being a Black woman in rural and natural spaces is especially worrisome. It is important to recognize that both racism and sexism contribute to issues of safety and comfort in the outdoors.

- Black students may not feel safe collecting specimens and engaging in other academic-related activities in or near residential areas out of fear of harassment.

- Many white people are oblivious to the dangers facing Black people in outdoor spaces and specifically the dangers they face from other white people.

- Feeling truly safe means not having to worry about one’s blackness when outdoors, including in remote areas.
The day that I can just walk out and go onto some random piece of land and not have to worry about something bad happening to me, that’s when I’ll feel truly safe. And when I can just go out and not have to worry about being Black, I can just experience the outdoors for what it is.

– Earyn McGee, School of Natural Resources and the Environment, University of Arizona

**Participants recommended**

- Increasing Black representation in professions like park rangers and law enforcement to help people of color feel safer when entering these spaces.

- Acknowledgment from organizations and universities about the safety risks that Black people face when going into the field and providing resources to help.

- White people and non-Black people of color taking the time to listen to Black experiences and understand the inherent validity of their fears around safety in rural and natural spaces.

- Partnering with organizations made by people of color, for people of color to create safe spaces and the ability to experience the outdoors while feeling at ease.
Barriers to Access and Participation

We are in the frontlines of all of the passion and the joy of many of these Black kids loving nature being wrung out of them as they go through the pipeline and we have to stop that, meaning fixing the leaky pipeline. Talking about deconstruction, reconciliation, community mobilization, completely changing the way in which we do the academy, completely changing the way in which we evaluate what talent is. Because there’s a whole bunch of talent out there but unfortunately many of the structures that are put in place are white supremacy and they’re systemically unjust.

– Chris Schell, PhD, University of Washington Tacoma

According to our roundtable participants

• Many Black youth, especially in urban areas, lack access to experiential learning and recreation in the outdoors due to lack of funding, transportation, and opportunity.

• A lack of information means that many people don’t know where to go to safely enjoy the outdoors for birding, fishing, hunting, or other recreational activities.

• Too much funding is going to larger white-led organizations instead of people of color-led organizations that are best equipped to solve the problems around access and participation in their own communities.

• Access is important, but so is the quality of the experience. A dirt field is not a park and it does not provide the same level of experiences as a well-maintained public park.

• Terminology is important when conveying information and opportunities. There are different ideas and interpretations of what “green” means or looks like, for example.

• Outdoor recreation can take place in many forms that may not be considered traditional. The connection to land and nature can take place in different forms and professionals in these spaces need to expand their cultural awareness.
Participants recommended

- Institutions examining intersectional issues such as mass incarceration, lack of affordable housing, and lack of living wages and how they impact the experiences of Black people and their access to green spaces and jobs in natural resource fields.

- Increasing funding towards programs and opportunities to engage Black youth in the outdoors. Funding is needed to provide transportation, education, and ongoing programs.

- Funding Black-led organizations that are already doing this work in communities across the country.

- Equity maps are great tools to show where work needs to be done to improve access to natural spaces for people of color. Additionally, institutions need to maintain metrics on equity and inclusion to track improvement of access over time.

- Ensuring job opportunities to facilitate the ability for Black youth to secure long-term employment in the environmental and conservation field.

- Meeting people where they are by funneling resources, such as money or programs, to establish green-related projects and work opportunities within Black communities.

- Reaching out to organizations, such as churches in Black communities, that can reach a large number of people to help with access and information distribution.

- Cultivating shared stewardship. For example, bringing scientists and environmental leaders to youth to build trust and facilitating a similar opportunity for interaction in an outdoor natural space to increase comfort and a sense of safety among Black youth.

What do we do to make sure that all people have the resources and the pleasures of having a beautiful park in their neighborhood because if you can’t teach kids to love the park in their neighborhood, how are we going to teach them to love a national park?

– Scott Gilmore, Parks & Recreation, City and County of Denver, Colorado
History and Education

African American history is very much present in these outdoor spaces within these public lands. How do we make that visible? How do we tell their stories, highlight them, to really give folks, African Americans particularly, a reason that’s more than just camping or hiking to visit those places? Understanding what their history is and what their ancestors have done to help shape these American landscapes.

– Aby Sene-Harper, PhD, Assistant Professor, Clemson University

According to our roundtable participants

- African Americans have always had a connection to the outdoors because nature was a place of refuge for enslaved Africans. But people of color were barred from entering parks and lakes after emancipation.

- Black, brown, and Indigenous history is rooted in these natural spaces, even if commonly taught history ignores that.

- Lack of historical understanding about the contributions of Black people, and people of color, in natural spaces leads to feelings of a lack of ownership over public lands.
There has been a historical connection that even predates slavery between people of African diaspora and land and the outdoors but we don’t tell those stories enough.

– Harrison P. Pinckney IV, PhD, Clemson University

Participants recommended

• Reclaiming narratives of Black contributions and legacy in natural spaces to better educate the public, especially Black youth.

• More on-site information in public lands about the influence and impact that Black people have had in those areas.

• Communicating more broadly about the history of white supremacy in the legacy of public lands and about how the creation of those lands was done through the displacement of people of color.

• Acknowledging historical and current intersectionality of racism outside of natural areas and their impact on access to the outdoors.

• Building infrastructure around the need for equitable access to accommodate for people with varying abilities.

• Supporting organizations like Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences (MANRRS), which provide a venue for Black and other people of color to feel safe and supported during their academic studies.
Resources

Organizations and Groups

3rd Rock Hip Hop
Black AF in STEM
Black Birders Week
@BlackGirlEnvironmentalist
Black Girls Trekkin’
Connecting with Birds and Nature Tours, LLC
Environmental Learning for Kids
Green 2.0
Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences
Outdoor Afro
The Links, Incorporated
Urban American Outdoors

Researchers

Dr. Bunyan Bryant
Dr. Harrison P. Pinckney IV
Dr. Aby Sene-Harper
Dr. Chris Shell
Dr. Dorceta Taylor

Books and Publications

Black Faces, White Spaces by Dr. Carolyn Finney
Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry by Camille T. Dungy
Books by N.K. Jemisin
Children of the Blood and Bone by Tomi Adeyemi
“Green 2.0 Transparency Report”
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave by Frederick Douglass
Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements by Walidah Imarisha
“Safe fieldwork strategies for at-risk individuals, their supervisors and institutions” by Amelia-Juliette Claire Demery and Monique Avery Pipkin
The Black and Brown Faces in America’s Wild Places by Dudley Edmondson
“The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations” by Dr. Dorceta Taylor
Undercurrents of Power Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora by Kevin Dawson
To support our efforts in making our communities more just and equitable, visit nwf.org/DonateNow.

For more information on environmental justice initiatives at the National Wildlife Federation, please contact Rebeca Villegas at VillegasR@nwf.org.