

OUTDOOR EQUITY NETWORK

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An Internal Landscape of Outdoor Equity Practices

FORUM FOR
COMMUNITY
SOLUTIONS
 aspen institute

 NATIVE AMERICANS
IN PHILANTHROPY

 **FRESH TRACKS**

BACKGROUND & HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Outdoor experiences have been historically and systemically inaccessible to large swaths of the population. Communities of color—and especially youth of color—are losing out on the benefits of the outdoors, which include increased physical and social-emotional health.

Parks, recreational areas, and wilderness retreats have often been exclusive havens, leaving behind those who could benefit most from the transformative power of the outdoors. The lack of outdoor access has contributed to a decline in the mental and emotional state of affected communities, exacerbating existing disparities such as opportunities for personal development and well-being.

Recognizing this historical context is crucial in understanding the depth of the issue at hand. It is a call to action, urging society to dismantle the barriers that have perpetuated inequities. The imperative is not merely to rectify historical injustices by granting access, but ensuring that outdoor spaces become inclusive sanctuaries for everyone through a shift in experiences and how we engage with these spaces. By addressing these systemic barriers, we pave the way for a future in which outdoor experiences are a universal right, contributing to the well-being and resilience of communities that have been historically marginalized.

Mental health, unemployment, and a lack of educational enrichment opportunities are cornerstone issues for philanthropists, policymakers, and advocates. There is an opportunity for outdoor access to be recognized as a linchpin issue, and increasing access to the benefits of the outdoors as a unifying strategy.

INTRODUCTION

The Outdoor Equity Network (OEN) is a joint endeavor between Native Americans in Philanthropy, Fresh Tracks, and the Aspen

Institute Forum for Community Solutions. The Outdoor Equity Network's present goal is to form a coalition that can build a movement for equity, policy, and ultimately systems change rooted in the healing power of the outdoors, culture, and Indigenous leadership and practice.

Important themes and priorities are emerging from network participants around key goals:

- Centering Indigenous leadership and culture in the pursuit of a more equitable future
- Integrating the outdoors as a tool for leadership development and cross-cultural youth programming
- Providing partners with the tools to connect with and invest in inclusive solutions, while challenging them to make racial equity and civic engagement true priorities

This Internal Landscape of Equity Practices highlights the present action and impact of the anchor Outdoor Equity Network partners: The Aspen Institute Forum For Community Solutions, Native Americans in Philanthropy, Fresh Tracks, Y BOLD & GOLD, and the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators (NCEL). The framework of this snapshot follows the OEN core focuses of **philanthropy, programming, and policy**.

The Outdoor Equity Network has a goal of elevating practices and solutions that center increasing equitable access to the benefits of the outdoors (grounded in Indigenous leadership and for the ultimate benefit of our most disenfranchised youth) as a core strategy both today and for generations to come.

Woven through each section are needs, promising practices, and recommendations to the field. As the Outdoor Equity Network continues to grow and gather support, there will be additional opportunities in each of these categories.

PHILANTHROPY: TRIBAL CONSERVATION PLEDGE AND FUNDING

U.S.-based philanthropic support of conservation efforts led by Tribal Nations has been largely non-existent and has often been approached through a Western lens that disregards the knowledge of Indigenous Peoples. As Indigenous-led conservation and stewardship continues to prove effective and gain recognition as a critical strategy to achieve the goals laid out by the 30x30 movement (a global effort to protect 30% of the earth's lands, oceans, and waterways by 2030), it is time for that to change. The federal government recognizes this as well and has ramped up funding for Tribal-led conservation efforts.

OEN partner Native Americans in Philanthropy (NAP) has launched a Tribal Nations Conservation Pledge & Funding Collaborative (named 'the Collaborative') that calls on the philanthropic sector to make significant investments in biodiversity and conservation projects led by Tribal Nations. With support from Biodiversity Funders Group (BFG) and The Christensen Fund, the Collaborative provides a forum to strategize, share knowledge and educational resources, and participate in a funding mechanism to quickly move capital to Tribal Nations.

NAP created the Tribal Nations Conservation Fund as a collaborative fund to accept contributions raised through the Collaborative and deploy those funds quickly and efficiently to support biodiversity and conservation projects led by Tribal Nations.

A Tribal Leader Advisory Committee comprised of Tribal leadership and staff, and leadership and staff from inter-Tribal organizations, helps oversee the Fund and makes recommendations on distributions from the Fund to make effective and equitable investments in Tribal Nations across the country.

"Collaboration is the compass guiding us towards a future where outdoor access is not a privilege but a birthright for every young soul, fostering a generation deeply rooted in the beauty of the Earth."

Key components of the Collaborative include:

- **A Fund** hosted by NAP that provides resources directly to the biodiversity and conservation efforts of Tribes, inter-Tribal organizations, and Tribal consortia
- **A Pledge** committing philanthropic institutions to a self-determined amount of funding, or a self-determined percentage of annual programmatic funding, over the next three years to support the biodiversity and conservation efforts of Tribes, inter-Tribal organizations, and Tribal consortia
- **A learning circle of funders** who have contributed to the Fund, or have taken the Pledge, that meet regularly for concerted dialogue and ongoing learning opportunities led by Tribal experts

Philanthropic institutions can participate by [taking the pledge](#) or by [donating to the Collaborative](#).

PROGRAMMING

Playing and learning in the outdoors is essential for young people's health and well-being. Connecting young people to the outdoors and nature can help them improve their sense of autonomy and self-concept, as well as their life satisfaction, sense of purpose, and enthusiasm, which all lead to more positive social behaviors and relationships with both peers and adults, reduced conduct problems and risk-taking behavior, decreased emotional stress, improved test scores, and increased attendance.

For these reasons and more, thousands of young people participate in outdoor programs year round. Outdoor programs come in all shapes and sizes. What defines the outdoor programs of OEN partners is that they intentionally promote young people's connection to the outdoors and nature in order to provide the opportunity for transformative experiences that disrupt unhealthy cycles promoted through social inequality.

So what is so special about outdoor programs? And, do they promote the development of social and emotional learning more than traditional out-of-school programs?

In partnership with 55 organizations, OEN partners Y BOLD & GOLD and Hello Insight developed a tool to measure the unique ways a young person grows when they engage with nature, whether they are exploring open spaces, collaborating with their peers on a nature challenge, being encouraged by a counselor to plant their first seeds, or hiking in the deep woods.

Hello Insight's advanced analytics engine informs which types of experiences in the outdoors are the most impactful to children's and young people's development. It gives organizations the resources to gauge social-emotional learning (SEL) growth, which is a

part of the benefits of access to the outdoors.

SEL is the process of developing the capacities young people need for their long-term success, leading to an increase in the likelihood of high school graduation, readiness for postsecondary education, career success, positive family and work relationships, better mental health, reduced criminal behavior, and engaged citizenship.

Core findings of the study:

- Young people in outdoor programs develop SEL capacities.
 - Young people in outdoor programs show a significantly larger growth in social skills, academic self-efficacy, and self-management than their peers in other high quality non-outdoor programs.
- Young people in outdoor programs experience more practices that allow them to engage authentically and promote peer bonds than in non-outdoor programs.

The study concludes that outdoor programming is a valuable method of supporting youth in disrupting systemic issues, a fantastic setting to promote young people's greater social and emotional competence, and has a particular benefit for boys and Latinx/e youth, who, along with other communities of color, are the most deeply impacted and disenfranchised. The findings suggest that a well-designed and well-implemented outdoor program can achieve even larger increases in SEL than other out-of-school programs.

Interested parties can get the full report of the study or sign up for a demo of the tool at [the Hello Insight website](#).

POLICY

Unfortunately, the benefits of meaningful experiences in the outdoors do not accrue for everyone. They are highly dependent on zip code, upbringing, race, and family financial resources. Because of this, there is an ever-widening gap between those who experience and benefit from the outdoors, and those who do not. Smart policy can play a role in changing this dynamic.

Many lawmakers across the U.S. are passionate not only about their state's outdoor economies and natural resources, but about ensuring all children benefit from time spent in nature. They know those meaningful experiences improve children's quality of life, health, and social well-being, and in turn their communities become stronger and more sustainable. Smart policies can bring the benefits of the outdoors to more children, with a substantial return on investment.

The Youth Outdoor Policy Playbook

(coordinated by a collaborative that includes OEN partner National Caucus of Environmental Legislators) highlights successful bipartisan policy initiatives and provides resources to support new statewide efforts to build healthy communities by increasing kids' regular, positive experiences outside through environmental education and youth engagement in the outdoors. It is a tool to help legislators and community leaders advance state policies that bring the benefits of time spent outdoors to more young people.

The Playbook is designed to:

- Highlight existing and promising policy solutions for building healthy communities through increased youth outdoor engagement
- Share the knowledge and expertise of environmental education and outdoor engagement champions to drive new, innovative ideas
- Connect on statewide policy initiatives across sectors, including health, education and outdoor recreation

State legislatures and other policy makers are passing laws and creating policies to enable, advance, establish, and fund youth outdoor engagement so more children have the opportunity to have positive experiences outdoors, regardless of where they live or their social or economic status.

Policy Strategies for Advancing Youth Outdoor Engagement:

- **Outdoor Access and Equity**
 - With the success of Outdoor Equity and No Child Left Inside programs in [California](#), [Colorado](#), [Minnesota](#), [New Mexico](#), and [Washington](#), states are increasingly turning to equitable outdoor access as public health, economic opportunity, and environmental justice solutions, especially in mitigating climate crisis inequity.
 - NCEL's new [Outdoors as a Climate Solution Briefing Book](#) highlights how states are advancing climate equity with outdoor policy.
 - States have enacted programs, funds, and incentives to increase green space equity, establish youth outreach programs, and lay the groundwork to understand and build accessibility.
- **Outdoor Learning and Education**
 - Focus on outdoor education increasingly overlapped with outdoor equity, with education policies trending towards reaching nature-deprived, underserved, and historically excluded youth through outdoor learning in schools.

- Outside for 5, launched in 2023, empowers educators and advocates to commit to supporting children getting outside for at least five minutes a day.

- **Outdoor Wellness**

- Time outdoors is a powerful public health tool offering some of the greatest benefits to youth and children. As climate change impacts youth most severely, youth health and wellness increasingly depends on time outdoors.
- States are turning to outdoor policy to build childhood and youth health, address outdoor safety inequity, and promote lifelong health through the outdoors.

- **Outdoor Funding and Governance**

- Funding and leadership are the most common limiting factors in states executing environmental and education goals. However, recent budget cycles have seen a renewed focus on investing in outdoor spaces and learning opportunities as a result of people spending more time outdoors during the pandemic and in response to climate change.

Our policy and investment recommendations reflect the understanding that the health of children and families, social and environmental justice, and the health of the natural world are inexorably linked.



**Everyone deserves the opportunity
to enjoy time outdoors, because
when people connect with nature,
we all benefit.**

OEN NEXT STEPS

- **Set up small groups to advance individual deliverables:** Work with current OEN members committed to offering funding, capacity, and other commitments to support on deliverables such as criteria for OEN engagement, landscape analysis and more.
- **Research and information gathering for a OEN Action Plan:** Building off of the exercises conducted at previous meetings, develop a short list of areas, programs, and policies for research and information-gathering that will inform an in-depth OEN Action Plan in the field of outdoor connection for youth.
- **Pilot program initiatives:** Work closely with partners to develop ways to incorporate Indigenous perspective into programs to better understand how we might extend centering this way of operating into more programs.
- **Begin to assess capacity and funding snapshot for current partners:** Through meetings and stakeholder surveys, assess funding, capacity, and engagement for the Outdoor Equity Networking moving forward to understand levels of funding support and unmet needs.
- **Begin to explore OEN participation and expansion plan:** Engage enthusiastic OEN participants to explore what an expanded Outdoor Equity Network might look like and discuss how expansion might be necessary to reach OEN goals, with a special focus on engaging existing networks of Native Youth and young people of color, and engage their expertise and leadership.

CALL TO ACTION

- **Philanthropy:** We want philanthropy to fund more outdoor equity work and recognize it as a core issue with downstream consequences they care about.
- **Policy:** We want policymakers to advance policies and initiatives that promote outdoor equity.
- **Programming:** We want program leaders to align with shared values and goals and center the shared impact of OEN.



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Outdoor Equity and No Child Left Inside programs

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- Colorado: <https://cpw.state.co.us/aboutus/Pages/Outdoor-Equity-Fund.aspx>
- Minnesota: <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/no-child-grants/index.html>
- New Mexico: <https://www.nmoutside.com/outdoor-grants-equity-fund>
- Washington: <https://rco.wa.gov/grant/no-child-left-inside/>

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Youth Outdoor Policy Playbook
<https://youthoutdoorpolicy.org/>