



# From Urban Places to Outdoor Spaces: Field-Tested Practices for Engaging BIPOC Youth and Diversifying Outdoor Recreation

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This perspective piece offers tools from the field on crucial strategies for successful BIPOC focused outdoor recreation programs. Drawing from applied work in the field, we reflect on the role outdoor nonprofits have played in our family's relationship with "nature" and what we have learned from work with the Los Angeles based nonprofit Outward Bound Adventures (OBA) about diversifying outdoor recreation. We argue for more inquiries from the communication discipline on racial diversity in the outdoors, and suggest five important strategies to working with youth in outdoor nonprofits. These include: grapple with intersectionality, remind students "nature" is wherever they are, make change intergenerational, apply "forced" opportunity, and hire leaders reflective of the student population. In doing so, we hope to provide groundwork for potential studies from the communication discipline on the overall topic of outdoor recreation and race.

**Keywords:** Outdoor recreation, diversity, communication, leadership, nonprofits

## INTRODUCTION

As people dedicated personally and professionally to advocating for diversity in outdoor recreation, my uncle Charles<sup>1</sup> and I have spent our lives attempting to break down the barriers that the field can build for people of color. Our identities as both individuals and a multi-generational mixed-race family<sup>2</sup> are deeply entrenched in the projects and perils of fighting for diversity in outdoor spaces. We owe much of our passion to our relationship with a Los Angeles based non-profit called OBA.<sup>3</sup> OBA was founded by a woman named Helen Mary Williams who possessed immense conviction that urban kids of color had the right to the therapeutic effects of spending time in outdoor spaces. She was infamous for saying, "No is an answer for other people, it is NOT and answer for us," whenever anyone hit up against social, racial, and financial barriers blocking them from outdoor experiences

<sup>1</sup>While I (Mariko) frame this essay from my perspective for clarity, this essay was co-constructed with Charles's writing and voice.

<sup>2</sup>Charles is Black and Japanese and identifies as mixed or Black. Mariko is Black, Japanese, and white though often read as white and afforded the racial privileges that Charles has not been. While related, Charles has experienced the daily trauma and disadvantages of being a man of color, while Mariko experience has had more to do with carrying the historical trauma of her relatives.

<sup>3</sup>Outward Bound Adventures - OBA (different than the more nationally recognized Outward Bound), was formed in the 50's as a Junior Audubon science club that progressed into the oldest nonprofit in the nation supporting underserved Los Angeles area youth with meaningful environmental education and access to wilderness and careers in conservation.

and other pursuits towards education. In the 1960's, her work provided an opportunity for members of our family to spend summers backpacking with their peers, a respite from the chaos of poverty and racism they experienced in the inner city.<sup>4</sup> Charles was deeply affected by his involvement with OBA, which gave him purpose after a stint in juvenile detention that could have ended many possibilities for him. He quickly moved into a leadership position in the organization in the 1970s and 1980s and a directorship in the 1990s. He has spent his life leading crews of largely BIPOC kids (me included) into deep wilderness areas<sup>5</sup> in the Sierra Mountains of California, teaching outdoor recreation skills, life skills, land stewardship, and forest ecology.

Charles and I have both dedicated our lives to building strong environmental relationships within ourselves, and our communities. We have worked in our separate vocations to diversify outdoor spaces by supporting minority youth in practicing the social and environmental tools necessary to become empowered ecological citizens, often through the channel of outdoor recreation and education. We believe that kids need to love and be in relation with an environment in order to defend it. Because of this, we use outdoor recreation to support BIPOC youth, believing that confidence in outdoor spaces and knowledge of environment produces leadership that reflects the needs and elevates the voices of BIPOC communities. Climate change experts have noted the environmental justice issues in that people of color experience the effects of climate disruption more gravely (Harlan et al., 2015) and that being a person of color is also more often correlated with poverty in the U.S. (Taylor, 1989; Census.gov, 2019). This makes our national need for BIPOC environmental leadership and access to “nature” for BIPOC youth an urgent movement with potentially perilous consequences for communities of color. With the resounding anxiety of climate disruption exacerbating inequalities in what Desmond Tutu called the “climate apartheid” (Tuana, 2019) our work is pressing, and we feel immediate need for more scholarly allies in this cause. While we have most often approached this with on-the-ground sweat equity, we argue that the communication field with its potential for diverse approaches to research could do much to aid this cause moving forwards. Communication scholars walk the boundaries between material and social or symbolic processes, and argue that environmental ideas, policies, and practices are mediated by communication (Carbaugh, 1996; Cox, 2007). We believe that increased understanding of the mediated world between physical environmental access and the social, symbolic, and material roadblocks in access could provide vital information on the

pervasiveness of inequality in outdoor recreation and other environmental matters.

This perspective piece is an offering of tactics we have learned from intimate experiences of being a family of color dedicated to diversifying outdoor recreation and fighting for BIPOC<sup>6</sup> leadership in environmental spaces. It is also an invitation for communication scholars to put their energies towards more studies supporting fieldwork and practical experience. In the following sections, we give a brief theoretical overview of interdisciplinary literature important to our offerings. Then, we present five practical suggestions for those who wish to work and study in this topic, including, to grappling with intersectionality, reminding students “nature” is wherever they are, making change intergenerational, “forcing” opportunity, and always employing leaders whose cultural identities are reflective of the student population. We have noticed significant gaps in literature that approaches the work of diversifying outdoor recreation and leadership from communication perspectives. There is space (and certainly need) for communication studies to contribute more to researching outdoor recreation work with BIPOC communities. Our aim in providing these suggestions is to lay groundwork and inspiration for what we already know works, so that other scholars may have a starting point to expand, study, amplify, nuance, and question this kind of work.

## DIVERSITY, OUTDOOR RECREATION, AND RACE

Working towards diversifying outdoor recreation and environmental leadership are pressing and intricate communication issues that when combined with fieldwork and the expertise of practitioners (like Charles), could help change the landscape of environmental leadership in the US. However, how to support diversity in the institution of outdoor recreation and mainstream environmentalism is an emergent conversation,<sup>7</sup> and Charles and I find ourselves needing to lean into the dynamism, adaptability, and potential interdisciplinary approaches that this issue might require. Lack of diversity in outdoor recreation is a problem in motion. As Ahmed (2012) writes, diversity in institutions is often a shorthand for inclusion but it needs to be a conversation and something that must be “followed around” to be understood. This means that both scholars and practitioners must engage in consistent and longitudinal work with institutions like outdoor recreation nonprofits that aim or claim to promote diversity.

While not the only intersection of “nature” and racial politics, US outdoor recreation and environmental movements are deeply impacted by the chokehold of structural racism and oppression.

<sup>4</sup>While inner city is sometimes used as a pejorative term conflated with race and poverty and we respect the modern questioning of the term, the Thomas family was geographically from the innermost neighborhoods of LA which especially in the 60's were nearly all poor black and brown communities. It is a term that still means something about membership and identity to many who lived in that space during that time.

<sup>5</sup>We are also aware that wilderness can be a contested term relating to purity politics of the sublime and an erasure of indigenous land stewardship, but it is still language that outdoor recreation uses to connote spaces less-altered by humans.

<sup>6</sup>An option for an inclusive acronym that stands for Black, Indigenous and other People of Color.

<sup>7</sup>Here we are inspired by adrienne maree brown's (2017) work titled *Emergent Strategy*, as a process that acknowledges the dynamic, ever-unfolding process of social change that relies on practioners constantly adapting as new information becomes available.

Our experiences show that basic outdoor pedigree sits firmly in white middle-class to upper-class families. This contributes to structural inequalities for most other groups in comfortably navigating (Lee et al., 2001; Krymkowski et al., 2014) and participating in decision making about outdoor recreation (Rose and Paisley, 2012; Finney, 2014). This lack of access propagates myths and stereotypes of BIPOC disinterest in “nature” that ignore legacies of historical trauma (Taylor, 1989) and social, financial, and environmental privilege. As outdoor recreation culture relies on a long history of overt racism (Finney, 2014; Outka, 2016) and harmful media framings of race (Sturgeon, 2009), this isn’t surprising, though it is disturbing. Outdoor recreation has a long history of white leadership, patriarchy, and privilege. For example, The US National Park Service (NPS) is deeply imbricated in stolen indigenous territories (Kantor, 2007; Treuer, 2021) and sublime fantasies of “nature” (DeLuca and Demo, 2000) that obscure the cultural costs that national park creation and access have had on different racial groups. Recreation hesitancy can be exacerbated by dominant conceptualizations of authenticity in outdoor experience (Senda-Cook, 2012), and NPS workforce continues to be predominantly white over time, having been at 83.2% white full-time workers in 1975 and only changing to 79% in 2020 (NPS.gov, 2021). This can contribute to outdoor recreation feeling generally uninviting for BIPOC youth and unreflective of current US demographics.

Arguments for environmental scholarship’s overall responsibility in acknowledging race and diversity are not new (see Bullard, 1993; First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, 1991) and the topic has been approached from a range of disciplines. In terms of outdoor recreation and race, the bulk of research is from leisure studies. This includes work on how public park design can invite some cultural groups but reject others (Byrne, 2012), how intersectional lenses are important in improving outdoor park recreation design (Powers et al., 2020), and how resource-related constraints to outdoor recreation are continuously experienced more frequently by ethnoracial minorities—necessitating the adoption of more culturally relevant messages of welcome (Winter et al., 2020). Other scholars, such as Sze (2006), have written extensively on environmental justice in urban New York as an intersectional issue and Park and Pellow (2011) have noted that environmentally progressive locations can be rife with race-based inequalities. From a communication perspective, Sandler and Pezzullo (2007) book tracked the tensions between environmentalism and environmental justice, noting the fields’ historical lack of partnership, while Tarin (2019) has argued for environmental justice by showing the complexity of how human lives are affected by their cultural identities in conjunction with their ecological spaces. While we understand this is anything but an exhaustive exploration of extant literature, we still argue there is need for more. Communication scholars specifically have yet to expressly work on the gaps in research about outdoor recreation that focus on youths of color and their access to the outdoors and to roles in environmental leadership.

The following experiences we present use our lived experiences with OBA, our intergenerational relationship with

the outdoors, and the stories both lived and told (see Ellis and Flaherty, 1992; Thomas, 2020) to offer observations of what we find is already working in diversity-focused outdoor nonprofits but could use more attentiveness and research. In communities of color where academic literature is less prolific, it is especially crucial to understand our stories and community experience as important initial data. We propose the following critical practices for anyone, and communication scholars especially, who are beginning to write, work, or teach in the realm of diversity-focused outdoor recreation nonprofits. Consider the following as observations to contemplate when analyzing impact, practicalities, and importance of BIPOC youth participation in outdoor recreation and most importantly, as an invitation for more conversation, more research, and more participation in community organizations that promote BIPOC leadership and environmental relationships.

## REMEMBER IT’S ALL INTERSECTIONAL ALL THE TIME

We can never properly support youth in social change and building relationships with “nature” without realizing they come with the experiences of several cultural identities that are always already in operation (Carbodo et al., 2013), working in an interlocking system of oppressions (Collective, 1983), that ultimately, U.S. law systems and policy have historically ignored (Crenshaw, 1989). We know that women face more disadvantage in outdoor recreation (Warren, 2015), and that women of color face even more (Roberts and Drogin, 1993). This is amidst connections between race and poverty, making intersectionality an important practice to maintain in building diverse programs. It is crucial for a nonprofit to understand that a Black boy coming into an outdoors experience might have a completely different set of apprehensions than a queer Lantinx teenager based on the web of their lived experiences. Programs and team leadership should be constantly aware of intersectional differences and work to consistently renew their educations and sensitivities in various cultural identities, while mentoring and teaching with the fluidity of cultural identity in mind. OBA employs an initiative to assist in this. An activity done before going on any outdoor trips called “Who are your people,” works to promote a positive expository dialogue around race, ethnicity and culture for each participant and the entire cohort. In this, we acknowledge the various cultural groups youths are arriving with. Instead of shying away from the different ways these groups operate in different ways for different people, we give youths an opportunity to own them in their own words, and leaders a chance to understand the potential webs of oppression and privilege at play for the students they are supporting.

## HELP STUDENTS EXPLORE THAT “NATURE” IS WHEREVER THEY ARE

“Nature” is a relative term for a young person of color living in urban Los Angeles. The vistas of the Grand Canyon are as accessible to low-income urban youth as the Argo Chasma of

Pluto. However, “nature” is everywhere, from lizards living in abandoned lots to the bird’s nest perched in a sidewalk tree.<sup>8</sup> We are always surrounded by life, and research indicates humans direly need the exposure (Louv, 2008). Growing up poor in the vast expanse of urban space can sometimes disconnect folks from “nature” unless we understand “nature” is everywhere all the time and something we are all included in. Last year Charles listened in on a group of OBA youth during a meeting as the instructor attempted to explain the habits of a very common urban bird, the mockingbird. Not one youth present had ever seen a mockingbird. In fact, several believed that mockingbirds were invented for the movie *Hunger Games*. They were immediately sent on an urban mockingbird finding adventure. Our goal that day was to connect the youth to the “nature” that surrounds them daily, so as to de-exoticize the kind of “nature” outings they see on television or in outdoor industry advertisements. We want the youth to understand that “nature” could be the peak of Mt. Whitney, but is also the patch of grass across the street or the trickle of water through the concrete LA River. Youth are told constantly to care for the environment, but it is difficult and often unreachable if they aren’t supported in understanding the urban space where they live as part of the environment.

## **CHANGE IS MORE SUCCESSFUL WHEN IT IS INTERGENERATIONAL: EDUCATE (AND GIVE AUTHORITY) TO THE PARENTS, AUNTS, UNCLES, AND GRANDPARENTS**

If we are expecting to take BIPOC urban youth on extended wilderness outings or wish to engage them in some form of sustained outdoor recreational experience, cultivating relationships with the primary caregiver is essential. BIPOC populations often experience lack of access due to historical racism that works to create a fear for safety, discrimination as evidenced by lack of other BIPOC, financial burdens of entrance fees, transportation issues, and multiple other barriers (Finney, 2014; Winter et al., 2020). A principle of environmental justice is that BIPOC populations should be visible and heard in speaking for themselves and participating in improving community conditions (Sze, 2006) one of which includes the well-being of their children.

Low-income, urban families of color tend to be intentional non-users<sup>9</sup> of wilderness areas. One critical component necessary to move intentional non-users towards becoming intentional wilderness users is to focus on sharing information with the participant’s primary caregiver(s), i.e., grandmother, mother, father, etc. These individuals hold tremendous sway in getting a reluctant youth to feel confident recreating in the outdoors and

a potential conduit towards familial and community empowerment. If the caregivers themselves are unsure about the trip leadership, their voice in the situation, or imagining the possibility of their child being eaten by a wild animal or drowning, instructors have no chance of getting that child out of the house.

Caregivers need to experience three things to feel completely comfortable with sending their child out into the wilderness: an unmitigated trust in the organization’s wilderness and cultural experience, an authentic relationship with the staff, and a clear idea of exactly what their child will be doing on the trip. To address these areas, OBA created an overnight pre-trip program for the caregiver and child scheduled to go on an extended wilderness experience. This pre-trip, called Teach Me To Camp (TMTTC), is dedicated to having the caregiver experience what their child will do on the longer trips. It offers space to connect as a family and clarify family cultural values in connection with outdoor experiences. Additionally, it gives OBA instructors a chance to learn from and give authority to the caregivers in the child’s life. The caregiver and child are led in acknowledging one another’s goals and are given the opportunity to gain trust in the staff.

## **BE CREATIVE IN A “FORCED” OPPORTUNITY APPROACH**

More often than not, the intentional non-user BIPOC youth OBA works with struggle with the concept of going away from the amenities of their home - to sleep on the ground. No phone, no showers, strange food, no family. Most outdoor organizations tend to focus on the BIPOC youth who are already enrolled in the process of getting outdoors. This leaves huge numbers of underserved<sup>10</sup> urban youth of color. They are often youths whose caregivers say “no” to outdoor experiences, and also the ones who lack resources, inclination, and the knowledge of where to start when getting outdoors. In our experience, they also happen to be the ones who benefit the most from the opportunity to have sustained contact with “nature.”

OBA employs a technique called Forced Opportunity<sup>11</sup> to give these youth access to nature. While the term “forced” can feel problematic, our experience is that simply providing opportunity isn’t enough for many who have been barred historically from

<sup>10</sup>It’s important to remember that just because one is an urban person of color does not mean they are “underserved.” The truly underserved are those who lack access, opportunity, time, money and also—desire.

<sup>11</sup>Forced opportunity is a term to describe a technique developed at OBA that assists the participant in understanding the value of an outdoor recreation experience without the lens of an uninformed narrative that the person may hold. Nothing is truly “forced,” rather the experience is proactively promoted with facts, candor and persistence. The participant obviously must consent to the experience and often does so only after OBA employs Forced Opportunity. We find this only works after significant time getting to know a person and intimate knowledge of their social positioning and background. When not done under these circumstances, forced opportunity can turn into an insensitive form of white saviorism—or whitesplaining when not delivered by a person of color.

<sup>8</sup>See Sandler and Pezzullo (2007) for more on the importance of expanding definitions of what and where “nature” is.

<sup>9</sup>Intentional non-users is a term developed by Charles Thomas used to identify folk who intentionally avoid the use of outdoor spaces or participation in outdoor recreation—usually based on the above noted fears and lack of access that families might have experienced historically; these barriers ultimately evolve to become new and contemporary barriers that include a failure of prioritization, stated as a lack of time and a dis-interest in outdoor recreation.



outdoor recreation, so a certain amount of force is necessary to reach those who might otherwise stray away from engagement. Forced Opportunity begins with establishing a relationship with the caregiver, as done with the TMT program. The next step is to respond creatively and sensitively to the participant or parent's "no." Forced Opportunity requires that instructors engage in a sensitive fact-finding dialog with the youth so they can begin to unpack their fears and fallacies about the outdoors and address the personal concerns or stresses they have. This allows them to feel heard and validated in their fears, even it's just about disconnecting from social media, and assists in breaking down some of the historical trauma in regards to safety and belongingness in outdoor spaces. Forced Opportunity incidents are sometimes about basic nervousness; but often, we've found them to be about things like not having food to pack a sack lunch, or no clean clothes for hiking and no money for the laundromat—things that can be easily, quickly, and quietly assisted with by OBA once discovered.

## **MAKE SURE INSTRUCTORS REFLECT THE CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS OF THE POPULATION BEING SERVED**

Charles vividly remembers being the only outdoor education assistant of color in the 1980s at a specific Los Angeles County outdoor education school. While the staff waited for the bus of students to approach, they could see that the entire class was African American. Smiles fading and the color running from their faces, the two head naturalists ran over to Charles and to his horror, exclaimed, "Oh my god, what do we do?!"

Outdoor education, the environmental and conservation sectors can be exceptionally homogeneous. U.S. conservation foundations range anywhere from 75 to 100% white (Green 2.0, 2020). From our observations over the years (more towards 45 years for Charles), the demographics of mainstream outdoor education, wilderness instructors, conservation crew leaders, summer camp counselors, naturalists, nature center staff and docents, have been mostly white. However, the past decade has brought a comparatively large emerging cohort of nonprofits doing an impressive job of getting BIPOC youth outdoors, (e.g., Latino Outdoors, Outdoor Afro, Outdoor Outreach, etc). While we count this as a win, most of these organizations focus on getting BIPOC participants to recreate in outdoor spaces, while less are preparing the participants to move into managerial leadership positions that can more profoundly influence the power structure of the environmental and conservation sectors.

Our experience and numerous studies have confirmed that white instructors who have little to no experience working with communities of color tend to assume racial stereotypes and "implied deficits" when working with students of color (Utt and Tochluk, 2020). In addition, Charles has observed consistently that most BIPOC students' approach to learning is enhanced when mentored and taught by instructors of color. OBA instructors of color tend to understand the realities and situations students of color face and provide more culturally relevant analogies and metaphors that assist in describing and interpreting concepts from "nature." They also allow students to feel seen and reflected in roles of

power—an enormously important visualization when we are hoping to support more BIPOC youth in getting into environmental leadership roles. If diversity is truly the goal, leadership and mentorship (not just membership) needs to reflect this, and BIPOC leaders have a better chance of reaching students and building relationships with them, and often serve as the first expert outdoors person of color the student may have ever seen, changing the dominant narrative of who is responsible for being part of the outdoors, and part of an environmental conversation.

## **"Never Taking No"**

Over the years, OBA and other organizations like OBA, have managed to begin addressing the issues and importance of race and outdoor recreation, but attempts at demographic change in outdoor leadership and instructors has not kept pace with the nation's evolving demographics. We argue that while it is important, it is not enough to just get kids outside, and far too many environmental organizations confuse and accept statistics for diversity. Membership and participation numbers along with diverse social media photos are a band-aid, but do not create the real change we dream of in outdoor recreation and education. In addition, we believe that far too many organizations focus on working with those youth of color who are ready and willing to have an outdoor experience at the expense of ignoring the huge numbers of BIPOC youth who intentionally avoid the outdoors for various and potentially remediable reasons.

In our family, we were incredibly fortunate to have access to OBA from early ages. We talk often about how all the uncles and aunties were "saved" from the projects in one way or another. One chose religion, another—school, but most of them credit the fact that tiny Helen Mary Williams dragged them out of their house, pushed them up a mountain, handed them some bent tent poles and told them they'd best never take "no" as an answer from society. Charles has continued this legacy with his leadership in OBA, and outdoor recreation has been a cornerstone in our family's story of racial identity and environmental relationships, as well as in our ability to envision people from backgrounds like ours in leadership positions for environmental issues.

In this essay, we have put out a call for communication studies' involvement in diversifying outdoor non-profits. We have offered a non-exhaustive list of five offerings to help strive for diversity in outdoor recreation and as inspiration for the kinds of practices that could be studied from multiple perspectives. These offerings—grapple with intersectionality, remind folks "nature" is wherever they are, make change intergenerational, engage in "forced" opportunity, and hire leaders reflective of the student population, are a reflection on our work and our lives. We offer our lived experiences, fieldwork, and stories are legitimate knowledge, and we hold on strongly to the understanding that fieldwork like ours is important, but that this cause is big enough to need all hands on deck. We imagine what else we could learn if communication scholars were to get behind this issue with their broad range of methodologies and perspectives, as the issue of BIPOC environmental involvement and leadership is an issue for everyone who is affected by environmental decision making. BIPOC or not, we invite allies in this cause from all racial and research backgrounds. Charles and I owe our lives to the outdoors

and OBA, and will continue working, writing, and recreating in this field, and continuing to never just take “no” for an answer.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MT and CT worked collaboratively on this piece using the professional experiences and lived stories of CT to base the essay on and MT’s writing, theoretical perspectives, and

interwoven lifelong experience of Outward Bound Adventures to complete the piece. While MT is first author, this article would have been an impossibility without the 45 years of hands-on labor CT has put into environmental justice causes, and his experiential knowledge he generously shared.

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