

# EQUITY IN STATE-BASED OUTDOOR RECREATION & EDUCATION PROGRAMS:

## Analysis of Eight Western States

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### Why it Matters

- In 2019, 153.6 million people (more than half of the U.S. population) participated in some form of outdoor recreation at least once;
- Parks and recreation are considered “essential” to 82 percent of people in the U.S.;
- People of color are underrepresented in outdoor spaces due to reasons that include lack of access to parks and a systemic history of an exclusive and discriminatory outdoor culture;
- Decreased stress, improved sleep, and high levels of cognitive performance are all linked to nature-based experiences;
- Youth outdoor engagement influences the frequency and type of outdoor engagement as an adult;
- Having a safe space to recreate increases a sense of involvement and community.

**Background:** Access to the outdoors is a human right, and the benefits of outdoor engagement should be accessible to all. Outdoor recreation participation increased due to the pandemic, but nearly half of the population still did not participate in nature-based activities. Outdoor participation does not reflect the increasingly diverse demographics of the United States, as **almost 75 percent of participants in 2020 identified as white.**

Advancing equitable outdoor access is gaining legislative popularity, with successful state outdoor equity grant programs created in New Mexico (2019), California (2019), and Colorado (2021). There is an apparent increased political appetite for creating State Outdoor Equity Grant Programs.

**Project summary:** The need to consider and include equitable access opportunities in outdoor educational and recreational programming is a necessary step to reaching traditionally underserved and underrepresented communities. Understanding state-sponsored and run programs and funding opportunities will help remove barriers to engagement and ultimately increase representation in outdoor recreation and education programs.

In collaboration with Western Resource Advocates (WRA) and with funding from The Wilderness Society (TWS), the necessary steps to strengthen the argument for equitable outdoor access were scoped as follows:

1. Understand the existing state-funded and implemented outdoor education and recreation programs and grant opportunities within each of the targeted eight western states (**AZ, CO, ID, MT, NV, NM, UT, WY**);
2. Identify any equity components built into the state-funded programs;
3. Offer recommendations on how identified programs can improve equity components in programming to diversify outdoor recreation on a state and federal level.



**Methods:** Through collaboration with WRA, we developed targeted questions to understand the function, history, and equity components of state-based programs and grant opportunities. To build our understanding of the state-based programs, we utilized desktop research to review reports, relevant legislation, department grant manuals and applications, and government websites. To remedy gaps in available information, we spoke with staff members within the state departments that house the programs and grants. We compiled the gathered data into our inventory list to track and contrast program and funding opportunities, providing a holistic understanding of the network of available options. Discussing our findings and sharing insights across the eight states allowed us to identify room for improvement and learn from best practices for including components to increase equitable access. The nine-month effort culminated in a report showcasing each state's programs and funding sources, relevant recommendations for improving access for underrepresented populations, and an argument for federal outdoor equity grant program legislation.



**Deliverables/Outcomes:** A comprehensive report on the eight western states will serve as an advocacy tool to strengthen the case for a federal outdoor equity grant program. The report includes relevant background information describing the need for program and funding analysis, summaries of the identified programs, and state-based and overall recommendations for improving equitable access to the outdoors on a state and federal level. We will also provide WRA with the detailed inventory list that informed our research to use as a template for continuing research in other states.

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