



# Open Spaces for All

A Vision for an Inclusive, Accessible, and Equitable Open Space System in New York State





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**New York  
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# Executive Summary

In 2020, the Open Space Institute (OSI) and New York Outdoor Recreation Coalition (NYORC) partnered to spearhead *Open Spaces for All* to promote greater equity, inclusion, and access to and within New York State's (NYS) great outdoors. New York State's public parks, lands, waters, and trails, collectively referred to as "open spaces," are among the state's most treasured and defining assets. As the owner and steward of one of the largest state-owned systems of land and parks in the nation, New York State is a leader in the conservation, stewardship, and investment of its natural, historic, cultural, and recreational resources.

There are many advancements to be recognized and celebrated in New York. Over the past decade, New York State's Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) and Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) led the dramatic revitalization of the state's public lands, which received investments in capital infrastructure, amenities, and programs thanks to renewed commitment from state leadership recognizing the need for change. In particular, DEC and OPRHP have launched programs and initiatives in addition to creating new leadership positions within the agencies to elevate inclusion, justice, and equity. OSI and NYORC applaud Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature's support and commitment to protecting and enhancing New York's treasured state parks, lands, waters, and natural and historic resources.

To build on this legacy, we urge state leadership to continue to elevate diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) as integral elements of its future investments in the provision of open space and outdoor recreation.

The global COVID-19 pandemic underscored the critical importance of open space for human health and well-being as people flocked to parks and trails, which at the time were some of the only open places people could go outside their homes. However, the conditions of the pandemic also revealed that many people were not able to easily access and enjoy open spaces, spurring greater awareness about the barriers to accessing them, especially for low-income and marginalized communities, as well as the disproportionate lack of availability of green and open spaces in under-resourced neighborhoods. A concurrent groundswell for racial justice in 2020 further propelled greater recognition and understanding of the experiences and needs of underrepresented and marginalized communities.

OSI and NYORC, with research support from Potrero Group, brought together and engaged diverse stakeholders and open space users in the state to establish a vision to ensure that all New York State residents and visitors, regardless of their identity and lived experiences, can equitably access, enjoy, benefit from, and contribute to the state's open space resources.

**Through the planning process, the project team heard the following calls from a diverse constituency:**

- Not all New Yorkers have equitable access to the state's parks and public spaces. What's more, some do not always feel welcome, safe, or supported in these spaces. Personal identity, geography, and socioeconomic position impact people's experiences and opportunities to experience the outdoors. Investments that more equitably support, include, and engage a growing and increasingly diverse constituency of park users will promote greater health, opportunity, and quality of life.
- To build on the renewed attention and significant investments in the state's open space and outdoor recreational resources, the next era of open space investments must continue to prioritize equity to support diverse visitor experiences that better accommodate and facilitate greater access, relevancy, and safety for all.
- As New York State continues to develop and reinvigorate amenities, programming, and offerings at its public lands, marginalized and underrepresented communities want to be greater participants in developing community-based solutions to articulate their needs, directly address barriers, and improve their experiences.
- Public-private partnerships are essential components of an inclusive and sustainable open space system and can improve greater community access, interest, and engagement in the outdoors. However, partnerships between state entities and non-governmental organizations, businesses, and groups have proven challenging to effectively initiate, formalize, manage, and maintain without adequate relationship-building and support.
- As New York State's land management and outdoor recreation agencies expand their services and partnerships to reach and support new visitors and historically underrepresented and marginalized communities, they will require greater capacity and operational support to effectively deliver, grow, and support this work.

**The report recommendations propose opportunities and solutions centered on the following three goals:**

**Engage and empower communities and partners.**

Shift processes of engagement to be more upfront, continual, evolving, and interactive to reach, empower, and build trust, especially with underrepresented and historically marginalized communities, in identifying challenges and opportunities and developing solutions.

**Prioritize equity at the forefront of future park and open space investments.**

In coordination with communities, invest in the revitalization or creation of open spaces in, near, and connecting to communities; develop welcoming and accessible infrastructure; reduce barriers to use and participation; and reflect diversity and expand relevancy.

**Build support and capacity for implementation.**

Cultivate diverse partnerships to better enhance existing initiatives and identify new opportunities for collaboration and implementation; promote opportunities for more equitable funding and financial support; and build upon efforts to increase capacity and cultivate a diverse workforce and culture of inclusion.

The report also includes a section with recommendations specific to Indigenous people and lands in New York State to recognize the unique historical, cultural, and diplomatic circumstances that Native communities and nations face.

This document is intended to be used as a guide and starting place to spark future conversation, ideas, and action around how to enact positive change across the state. The primary audiences for this report include the state's leaders, local governments, recreation providers, and land managers, as well as the greater outdoor recreation industry, non-governmental organizations, community groups, and open space partners in New York.

**Our hope for this report is to cultivate a renewed 21st-century vision for open spaces that is grounded in equity, representation, and inclusion for today's New Yorkers and future generations, and to set a precedent model of leadership and commitment to greater equity and inclusion for the nation's state park systems to follow.**

A man and a woman are jogging on a paved path that runs along a body of water. The man is wearing a blue long-sleeved athletic top and a black beanie. The woman is wearing a purple long-sleeved athletic top. They are both smiling and looking towards the camera. The background shows a calm lake, some greenery, and a cloudy sky. The image is partially covered by a dark teal overlay on the left side where the title is located.

# Acknowledgements

*Open Spaces for All* was spearheaded in 2020 by the Open Space Institute (OSI) in partnership with the New York Outdoor Recreation Coalition (NYORC), with research support provided by Potrero Group. This report is made possible with the generous support from the Laurance S. Rockefeller Fund, Overhills Foundation, Samuel Freeman Charitable Foundation, and individual contributors.

*Open Spaces for All* was a collaborative effort involving many organizations and individuals from across New York State and beyond. The project team extends gratitude and appreciation for the hundreds of individuals who contributed to the process and shared their time, dedication, and expertise.

## New York Outdoor Recreation Coalition

NYORC is the state's leading advocacy network dedicated to promoting equal access to outdoor recreation and the continued progression of recreation-focused issues in New York. NYORC shares information, provides networking opportunities, and supports member-raised issues that advance the coalition's principles.

## Open Space Institute

The Open Space Institute protects scenic, natural, and historic landscapes to provide public enjoyment, conserve habitat and working lands, and sustain communities. Founded in 1974, initially to protect significant landscapes in New York State, OSI has since been a partner in the protection of over 2.3 million acres in the eastern US and Canada, from Quebec to Florida.

## Potrero Group

Potrero Group provided research, analysis, and guidance throughout the development of *Open Spaces for All*. Potrero Group is a strategy, research, and executive search firm working with conservation and public lands organizations.





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# Introduction



New York State's publicly owned parks, lands, waters, and trails—collectively referred to as “open spaces”—are for all New Yorkers. These open spaces are some of the state's most treasured and defining assets, including:

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**250+ parks, historic sites, and facilities;**

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**5 million acres of protected land (including nearly 3 million acres of “forever wild” Forest Preserve lands in the Catskill and Adirondack Parks);**

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**Thousands of miles of recreational trails; and**

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**7,600 freshwater lakes and more than 70,000 miles of rivers and streams.**

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Each year, millions of residents and visitors alike come to these open spaces and facilities seeking interactions with the outdoors for recreation, adventure, cultural enrichment, learning, observation, exercise, respite, and relaxation. These open spaces also provide crucial resources for wildlife and habitat, clean air and water, climate resilience, and local economies.

The global COVID-19 pandemic underscored the critical importance of open space for human health and well-being as people flocked to parks and trails, which at the time were some of the only open places where people could go outside their homes. However, the conditions of the pandemic also revealed that many people were not able to easily access and enjoy open spaces, spurring greater awareness about barriers to accessing them, especially for low-income and marginalized communities, as well as the disproportionate lack of availability of green and open spaces in under-resourced neighborhoods. A concurrent groundswell for racial justice in 2020 further propelled greater recognition and understanding of the experiences and needs of underrepresented and marginalized communities.

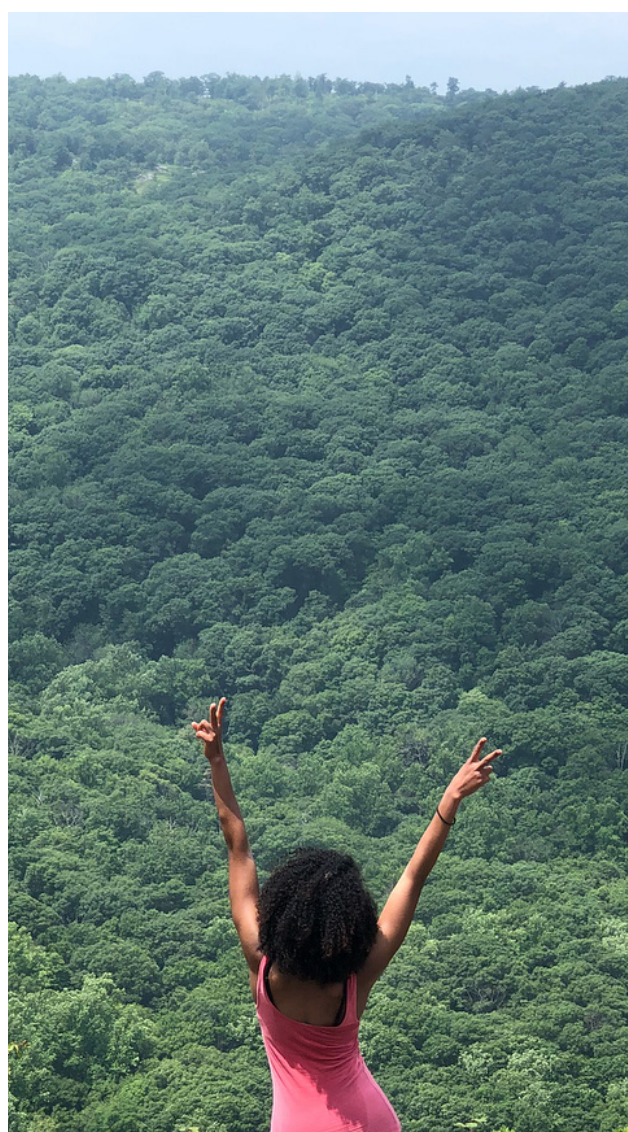
Recognizing the need to address equity, inclusion, and access in New York's great parks and open spaces, a broad coalition of New Yorkers came together in 2020 and conceived *Open Spaces for All* to better understand the barriers that diverse New Yorkers face within or getting to the state's parks and open spaces. Spearheaded and funded by the Open Space Institute (OSI) and led in partnership with the New York Outdoor Recreation Coalition (NYORC), this initiative aims to identify the complex challenges related to ensuring equitable access and inclusion throughout New York State's system of open spaces.



This report establishes a vision for change to support strategic priorities for improving and enhancing policies, programs, initiatives, and creative partnerships to support and engage a growing and increasingly diverse constituency of open space users.

The following findings and recommendations are grounded in the personal stories, professional expertise, research, and observations of New Yorkers of diverse backgrounds from across the state, including New York State residents, user groups, nonprofit organizations, community institutions (i.e., schools, churches, and libraries), businesses, local governments, and partners and friends of parks. This report draws from a synthesis of secondary research, interviews, focus groups, meetings, and survey results to uncover the deep-rooted challenges and a multitude of opportunities that can inform future action and catalyze change in New York.

This report establishes a 21st-century vision for open spaces that is grounded in equity, representation, and inclusion for today's New Yorkers and future generations. It should be revisited regularly with the understanding that needs continue to evolve and change quickly. While the report's findings reflect an unprecedented point in time in our nation and state, this document is intended to be used as a guide and starting place to spark future conversation, ideas, and action around how to enact positive change around the state. The primary audiences for this report include the state's leaders, recreation providers, and land managers, as well as the greater outdoor recreation industry, NGOs, community groups, and open space partners in New York. Our hope is that these findings and recommendations inspire strong leadership and commitment to greater equity and inclusion in New York State and in other park systems across the nation.



## Vision for the future of New York State's open spaces:

All New York State residents and visitors, regardless of their identity and lived experiences, can equitably access, enjoy, benefit from, and contribute to the state's public parks, lands, waters, trails, and natural resources.



# Setting the Context



New York State has long recognized the importance and immeasurable value of protecting its natural and cultural resources. The state's open spaces span a multitude of geographies, uses, and recreational purposes: from sandy beaches to urban playgrounds, to remote wilderness areas and quiet preserves and lakes in suburban areas. Park visitors seek and use different outdoor spaces for a multitude of recreational activities and purposes. The state's recreational lands are owned and managed by various government agencies, namely the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) and Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC).

There are many advancements to be recognized and celebrated in New York. Over the past decade, the state's public lands have experienced dramatic revitalization due to investments in capital infrastructure, amenities, and programs thanks to renewed commitment from state leadership recognizing the need for change. With the launch of Parks 2020, more than 700 park improvement and enhancement projects have been completed or are underway at parks and historic sites across the

state, managed by OPRHP. Through DEC, increased funding through the Adventure NY program has provided significant capital improvements to many campgrounds, boat launches, and improved public access points in the state's wilderness and forest areas. Serving more than 78 million people annually, continued investment in the state's 250 parks, historic sites, recreational trails, and other recreational facilities remains especially important as visitation continues to increase. Similarly, investments in the state's forest preserves and protected lands are necessary to continue accommodating the 25 million annual visitors to the Catskills and Adirondacks.

In addition to capital investments, OPRHP and DEC have made significant strides in supporting new and diverse constituents. From the well-established and successful First-time Camper Program and Connect Kids to Parks programs, to new pilot programs like Ladders to the Outdoors and the Albany Nature Bus, there are multiple initiatives underway that aim to connect more people to the state's outdoor spaces.





New York is a national leader in its support and commitment to protecting and enhancing the state's treasured state parks, lands, waters, and natural and historic resources. However, the state must continue to elevate diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) as integral priorities of its future investments in the provision of open space and outdoor recreation. As more people continue to seek and visit the state's open spaces, the state's outdoor recreation providers must look to the future to identify and meet the needs of increasingly diverse visitors. Additional attention should be given to more equitably expanding access to open spaces for marginalized and underrepresented populations. New York State's *2020–2025 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan* identifies this need and recommends development of facilities, programs, and policies to help diverse user groups feel welcome and accommodate varying recreational preferences and abilities.

This report establishes a vision and plan for improving access and inclusion at New York's open spaces, including but not limited to New York State Parks, DEC forest preserves and wilderness areas, and other public open spaces and infrastructure. The findings and recommendations of this report are driven by extensive stakeholder engagement across the state with diverse communities and stakeholders. The next era of parks should evolve to focus on investments that connect people to open spaces by developing strategies to ensure that they are welcoming, inclusive, accessible, relevant, and equitably meet the needs of New York's diverse population. This is continuously evolving work that will require regular assessment, feedback, reflection, and modification.



# Program Spotlight

## Ladders to the Outdoors

Ladders to the Outdoors is a program operated by New York State Parks and the Natural Heritage Trust and funded by the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation that aims to connect underserved youth to unique and historic New York State Parks in Western New York. The program offers outdoor programming and recreational activities at multiple sites to help children foster a love of the outdoors. The program is framed around a “Learn to” mindset, where staff teach youth about a range of outdoor activities to build comfort outside. Additionally, Ladders to the Outdoors is integrated with the Connect Kids to Parks program, which provides transportation to the state parks where programming is held.

**Learn more** <https://parks.ny.gov/environment/ladders-to-the-outdoors.aspx>



## First-time Camper

The First-time Camper Weekend Program is a partnership between DEC and OPRHP that invites families that have never camped before to experience the activity without barriers by providing equipment, guidance, and programming at select campgrounds across New York State. The program lowers barriers around technical know-how and obtaining gear and equipment, and provides a sense of safety for those who may feel uncomfortable or unwelcome outdoors. The program provides Camping Ambassadors to teach families the basics and offers guided programming and assistance.

**Learn more** <https://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/109909.html>





# Terms Defined

Throughout this report, the term “**diversity**” is defined in the broadest sense of the word, recognizing the numerous identities, cultures, faiths, abilities, backgrounds, and preferences of New Yorkers and visitors. While the experiences and needs of specific identities are referenced throughout the report, the spirit of this report is intended to spur additional recognition of diverse voices and experiences, and identify ways to elevate them.



“**Equity**” is defined as the fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all people—while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups. Improving equity involves increasing justice and fairness within procedures and processes of institutions and systems, as well as in the distribution of resources.

“**Accessibility**” is focused on holistic access—the ability of people to reach and fully benefit from open spaces regardless of physical, geographic, and socioeconomic constraints; physical ability and disability status; or cultural or societal norms. In this report, accessibility refers to the conditions of a physical space (i.e., accessible to people using wheelchairs or other mobility assistance) or a person’s ability or circumstances to get to a space (i.e., travel distance, physical ability.). Accessibility also refers to the ability of a person to feel safe and welcome in a space.







## What We Heard

To understand the breadth of obstacles and solutions to improving access and fostering inclusion and diversity at parks and public lands across the state, the project team connected with individuals and representatives from multiple communities, organizations, and areas of expertise. More than 110 individuals representing diverse social and economic identities, community groups, nonprofit organizations, community institutions, businesses, existing users, thought leaders, non-traditional stakeholders, and government entities participated in ten cohort-based listening sessions to contribute their knowledge, expertise, experiences, and ideas. The project team also engaged four New York State agencies including DEC, OPRHP, the Office of the Governor, and Empire State Development. Additionally, more than 120 people participated in a targeted online survey to offer additional space for reflection on the experiences of specific groups and to offer unique insights or creative solutions. More detailed information about the project methodology is included in Appendix A.

The findings below illuminate the high-level themes and findings the project team heard throughout the planning process. This summary is just the beginning of what the project team intends to be a platform for many more conversations about the millions of unique and diverse perspectives of residents, visitors, and entities across the state. Ultimately, the project team encourages readers to continue to seek and make space for the stories, experiences, and ideas of traditionally underrepresented individuals, groups, and organizations to foster greater diversity and inclusion in New York's spectacular outdoor spaces.

### **Not all New Yorkers have equitable access to the state's parks and public spaces. What's more, some do not always feel welcome, safe, or supported in these spaces.**

Personal identity, geography, and socioeconomic position each impact people's experiences and opportunities to experience the outdoors. While these issues are not new, conversations and awareness around the importance of access to and

experiences in the outdoors grew in 2020 as the state faced unprecedented challenges in the face of a global pandemic, economic uncertainty, and calls for racial justice. These issues are also not unique to New York.



The Center for American Progress reported in 2020 that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and low-income communities experience greater disparities in access to nature as a continued effect of historic discrimination and racism in the United States.<sup>1</sup> While New York has wonderful parks, trails, and outdoor recreational areas, the project team heard feedback suggesting that many of the state's open space resources are disproportionately distributed geographically, and many people are unable to access opportunities to experience or benefit from these places.

Common themes expressed in the interviews and focus groups:

- Urban participants expressed the need for quality, safe, and well-maintained urban public parks and trails, not just a greater quantity of parks. Rural participants expressed a lack of accessible transportation to parks and open spaces.
- Based on visitation trends, there is a stereotype that BIPOC and low-income individuals do not like to visit and use parks and open spaces, especially wilderness and backcountry areas. However, BIPOC and low-income participants dispel this stereotype and suggest that there are a range of barriers that often prevent or deter them from accessing and enjoying these spaces.
- Some BIPOC and lower-income individuals do not always feel welcome or supported in open spaces, reporting to have experienced uncomfortable or at times hostile encounters, especially in areas with less diverse populations and visitation.
- Some park users report feeling safer and supported in group settings, which are not always available in wilderness areas.
- Low-income communities experience greater challenges to accessing open spaces. Further, many economically disadvantaged households report not having the time, means, or know-how to pursue outdoor experiences.
- LGBTQIA+ communities report the need for meaningful acknowledgement of inclusion at parks and open spaces to feel comfortable. More proactive and intentional measures can support more comfortable experiences in the outdoors and related facilities, such as providing non-binary, gender neutral restroom facilities.
- People with disabilities often feel unheard and misrepresented. While many advances have been made to improve accessibility as a result of the Americans with Disabilities Act, both individuals with physical and non-physical disabilities, including those with developmental, cognitive, sensory, or learning differences, continue to encounter challenges and barriers to accessing and enjoying parks.
- Indigenous communities desire access to and use of public lands to support cultural traditions and needs.
- There is a lack of data collection and reporting around demographics and people's experiences, which masks the visibility, seriousness, and extent to which these issues prevail and are adequately addressed.

New York has one of the country's premier park systems and wilderness areas and is poised to be a leader in broadening access to the outdoors and supporting opportunities for all New Yorkers to visit, enjoy, and reap the benefits of these special places. To build on the momentum of the past decade, the project team heard the call for investments that equitably support, include, and engage a growing and increasingly diverse constituency of park users in order to promote greater health, opportunity, and quality of life.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-nature-gap/>



## Marginalized and underrepresented communities want to be greater participants in developing community-based solutions to articulate their needs, directly address barriers, and improve their experiences.

The project team heard from constituents that while they believe parks and open spaces are important public assets, they are not necessarily all created or managed with the needs of marginalized communities in mind. There is a desire for a more democratic approach in which land managers and recreation providers move beyond top-down approaches that dictate what certain communities need without meaningful engagement and consultation. As New York continues to reinvigorate park development, programming, and offerings, communities want to participate in developing community-based solutions to articulate their needs and directly address barriers and improve their experiences. When planning and designing solutions, especially those that impact specific populations or groups, these communities should be an integral part of the process from the beginning.



### Community Defined

This report adopts the National Recreation and Park Association's definition of community as "any group of people who share common characteristics such as, but not limited to, location, age, race, ethnicity, ability, shared experiences, interests or other commonalities. The community impacted by projects will be different for a small pocket or neighborhood park compared to a large regional park or a park master plan."<sup>2</sup>

In the context of this report, the term community is not intended to be prescriptive or interpreted as one specific demographic or geographic makeup. It is also not intended to diminish the individual experiences or assign stereotypes to people who identify with certain groups or populations.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nrpa.org/contentassets/19b3cbe05a634d5e8d3b712dbc8aa9d0/community-engagement-guide-nrpa.pdf>





Engaging communities requires intentional effort and investment, especially when trying to reach underrepresented communities. Participants specifically communicated a need for:

- More inclusive public participation options that encourage and enable participants to be a part of the process, not just recipients of information. Participants no longer just want to have a “seat at the table” in decision-making processes. They want to “be in the kitchen” developing the policies and solutions that impact them.
- A multitude of ways to get involved, collaborate, offer ideas, or provide feedback. Participants desired greater opportunities to be involved and participate in public decision-making processes in a variety of inclusive formats. Limited opportunities and forums for involvement can inhibit and discourage participation. Leaders and decision-makers should actively seek to meet people where they are and offer multiple touchpoints for engagement.
- More consistent engagement with government agencies seeking public input. Many traditional public comment or hearing requirements allow for public input, but are not structured to build relationships, trust, or regular points of contact with communities. Inconsistent interactions with communities are often met with skepticism and may inaccurately capture their needs and preferences.
- Inclusion of youth voices in solution creation and decision-making to encourage future generations of park users and land stewards.
- A conscious effort to reduce stereotypes and assumptions in decision-making about solutions for specific affinity groups.

## Partnerships are desired by all, but can be difficult to effectively initiate, formalize, and manage.

Partnerships are increasingly recognized and sought after as essential components of a strong, engaging, and sustainable park system. New York State has a long history of partnerships that have been critical to expanding access and programming, increasing open space, improving park amenities and infrastructure, managing natural resources, and initiating creative solutions to enhance open spaces. There are many different types of partnerships taking place across New York State. These range from public-private efforts between the state and nonprofits and businesses, to more locally based initiatives with friends groups that coalesce around stewarding a specific park or trail. Partnerships are also very prominent in outdoor environmental education programming and expanding access to opportunities for youth. There are also partnerships happening across the outdoor recreation industry, such as the recent establishment of the New York Outdoor Recreation Coalition, which aims to provide a “unified voice of outdoor enthusiasts for New York’s diverse user groups across the industry.” Public-private partnerships serve many functions in communities and open spaces across the state. They provide critical fundraising support for projects, advocate for open space and user needs, develop and implement programming and education, facilitate community connections, and steward the land and its natural resources and recreational amenities.

Partnerships are recognized as more important than ever to cultivate a more inclusive park system and improve access for marginalized and underrepresented populations. While we heard that there is a desire to cultivate more diverse and creative partnerships to enhance existing programs and identify new opportunities for collaboration and implementation, we also heard that the challenges often lie in the ability and capacity to develop new partnerships, as well as manage and coordinate these opportunities over the long term.





Common issues identified included:

- A lack of consistent structures, systems, and roles can lead to difficulty sustaining positive, collaborative partnerships.
- Smaller organizations and less formal groups often lack information or capacity to initiate, establish, and sustain relationships with large state agencies, which can discourage diverse community partners from actively seeking and engaging in partnerships due to perceived or actual barriers.

Many staff from OPRHP and DEC expressed the importance of both interagency and public-private partnerships to achieve their missions and strengthen offerings for their park visitors. Both are taking active steps to pursue and develop more diverse partnerships.

While the agencies have the ability to explore and build creative partnerships, we heard the following:

- While there is a desire to expand and build greater trust with communities and institutions, there are capacity and geographic constraints to consistently and effectively nurture and maintain partnerships and relationships across the entire state. For state agency staff to effectively engage with local communities and partners, they should have an active and consistent presence in multiple geographies. However, this is not always feasible for state land and recreation providers from a capacity, resource, or geographic perspective. For example, DEC does not have land holdings in certain areas of the state and therefore may lack a presence or potential for partnerships in certain communities. Some communities are not even familiar with the existence, mission, and functions of some state agencies.
- There are opportunities for greater and more frequent collaboration among New York State's land management agencies to better align and coordinate on mutual interests.
- Partner initiatives, programs, and projects require continual assessment and evaluation to ensure that they are capitalizing on new opportunities, working effectively or seeking to improve, and growing to better serve varying constituents.

There is an important distinction between partnerships and community engagement. Community engagement refers to providing opportunities and intentionally elevating the public and stakeholders as important contributors in parks-related activities. While decision-making in public processes often lies with the state entity or leadership, equitable opportunities for involvement should be provided to encourage transparency, accountability, and ensure that multiple voices, ideas, and concerns are heard and considered. Partnerships evolve from a joint understanding and the ability of two or more entities to work together to achieve a desired goal or produce an outcome. Equitable partnerships aim to share power between those involved. The principles of meaningful engagement are honored and used throughout the process of developing and sustaining the partnership. Both community engagement and partnerships are increasingly important components of developing a more inclusive park system.



## Renewed investment in parks must prioritize equity to support diverse visitor experiences that better accommodate and facilitate greater access, relevancy, and safety for all.

Open spaces, natural resources, and supporting outdoor recreational amenities and programs are not just ancillary destinations or activities, but essential public infrastructure supporting public health, economies, and the environment. Recognizing this, state leadership prioritized significant investments over the last decade to repair and update aging park facilities, as well as provide amenities to accommodate increased visitation and demands for recreational opportunities. The state further advanced the protection of natural resources that combat climate change, provide clean water and air, and provide essential services to communities around the state on a multitude of levels. These public lands also protect places and resources that represent New York's cultural diversity and are of importance to historically marginalized communities.

In addition to continued investment in infrastructure, facilities, and amenities, we heard from constituents that the next era of park investment requires additional focus on enhancing diverse visitor experiences to better accommodate and facilitate greater access, relevancy, and safety across the state so that all New Yorkers benefit from public open spaces.

Many stakeholders expressed a desire for greater investment in bringing parks to people—or meeting people where they are in their communities.

We heard an overwhelming desire for:

- Enhancing public transportation systems and pedestrian and bicycling infrastructure to facilitate safer connections to open spaces and trails;
- Expanding the state's program offerings at state parks and public lands, as well as in municipal parks and public spaces where state lands do not exist or are less accessible;
- Investing in community and local open spaces and recreational assets, especially those that bring parks and open space to where people live and work, such as greenway trails and community parks; and
- Creating more opportunities for community involvement and leadership in the planning, design, and stewardship of state and local parks, public lands, and trails.

The project team heard that individuals' associations and experiences with the outdoors often begin at home in their communities. There is a need to redefine the possibilities for what it means to experience and enjoy the state's vast natural resources and creatively expand access in ways that are equitable. In doing so, New York State can create new opportunities to cultivate and support the next generation of stewards more inclusively.

The project team also heard that visitors are interested in the state pursuing measures to enhance greater relevance and safety in parks and open spaces. Equity and inclusion should be at the center of future program offerings, park and trail design, interpretation, and staff interactions. For people to feel welcome, they have to be acknowledged, supported, and represented. New or future updates to infrastructure, technology, interpretation, amenities, programs, and other park investments should be considered through an equity lens that supports diverse constituency groups and experiences.





## New York needs additional capacity and resources to prioritize funded diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in the state's open spaces.

Investments in New York's open space system are currently robust, but greater resources and capacity are required to broaden access for diverse users and to lead and steward parks into the future. Since 2011, there has been a 34% increase in visitation to state parks.<sup>3</sup> The Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserves, maintained by DEC, have also seen record-breaking visitation, which in many instances exceeded the ability of the state's agencies to manage alone. While recognized as a positive trend, managing and supporting visitors remains a challenge with limited staffing and resources. Further, as DEIJ efforts become a larger priority, agency staff and partners are often pressed to address these issues as an "add-on" to their work.

Agency staff aim to accommodate increasing demand, reach and support new visitors and historically underrepresented constituents, and prioritize a greater commitment to equitable and inclusive provision of services. Greater staff resources and operational support can more effectively deliver, grow, and support the state's open space programs and infrastructure. More specifically, there are opportunities for:

- Supporting diversity, equity, justice, and inclusion efforts as central to the work of the agencies as a funded priority;
- More regional staff to develop and deliver programs and interact with the recreating public. Staff also desire additional support and training to facilitate more culturally sensitive and positive interactions with visitors; and
- Greater tools and strategies for developing strong partnerships, communicating, and working with communities, as well as tools and systems for measuring and evaluating delivery of services and their reach and impact to inform future programs and services.

For many years staffing levels at DEC and OPRHP have been too low to meet the growing demands for greater engagement with communities and potential partners. The strength of the state's open space system is dependent on the dedicated staff who work to grow, enhance, and steward them, but current staffing levels are not sufficient to expand and reach greater constituencies.

Partners supporting and interacting with New York's open space system, including community organizations and institutions, nonprofits, businesses, volunteers, and social groups, face similar challenges. Smaller organizations and businesses have difficulty accessing funding; the state grants process requires technical know-how and substantial time and capacity to apply for and administer grants. There is capacity within many of these organizations to reach greater numbers of people and more diverse constituencies; however, many lack access to capital, funding, and technical assistance to do this work. Further, smaller organizations are often overlooked in favor of larger organizations that may be perceived as more effective. We heard a strong desire across the state to empower community groups, businesses, and local institutions to play a larger role in making open spaces more accessible and inclusive for all.



<sup>3</sup> <https://www.lohud.com/story/news/2021/02/15/ew-york-state-parks-best-to-visit-attendance-rankings-record-year/6727911002/>

# Recommendations



While many of the following goals and recommendations are directed to New York State’s primary outdoor recreation provision agencies—namely, OPRHP and DEC—they are also written with multiple audiences in mind, inviting the participation of individuals, communities, groups, organizations, stakeholders, and other local and state government agencies to join in the effort and assume a role in promoting greater access and inclusion in the outdoors. Many of the recommendations are intended to be flexible and non-prescriptive to allow for broad involvement of various stakeholders. The project team recognizes that different organizations and entities will offer unique approaches and strategies to implementation. Ultimately, the following recommendations build on the existing efforts of the state agencies and their partners to establish a unified agenda to inform future work, conversations, and progress. A section with recommendations specific to Indigenous people and lands in New York State is also included to recognize the unique historical, cultural, and diplomatic circumstances that Native communities and nations face.



**RECOMMENDATION 1:****Engage and Empower Communities and Partners**

**Engage communities in planning and decision-making processes and create mechanisms to ensure that participation is inclusive and accessible.**

- Shift processes of engagement to be more upfront, continual, evolving, and interactive to reach, empower, and build trust, especially with underrepresented and historically marginalized communities, in identifying challenges and opportunities and developing solutions.
- Develop goals, standards, and tools for community outreach and engagement to enable underrepresented or hard-to-reach communities to contribute and participate. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for engagement, and coordinating entities should take measures to build trust and meet communities where they are to ensure equitable engagement. This will require agencies and organizations to evaluate and expand their engagement strategies and identify where there might be gaps and opportunities.
- Designate and empower community ambassadors to facilitate communications, form relationships, and build trust. Compensation should be considered when appropriate.
- Planning processes that seek to address unique user group needs must engage and work with those communities to identify and co-create beneficial solutions.
- Support awareness and accommodation of different user groups and how they would like to engage with the state's parks and amenities. For example, where appropriate, park staff should be empowered to accommodate cultural and religious needs for visitors to use and enjoy parks in culturally relevant and meaningful ways. Park staff should be encouraged to create opportunities for greater formal and informal engagement among park staff and visitors.
- Support and/or develop new programs and initiatives in partnership with individuals, community groups, and institutions that represent historically marginalized and unrepresented groups to create opportunities and relevancy for new or improved engagement at parks and public lands.

**Develop priorities and programs in coordination with appropriate non-governmental partners to further equity, access, and inclusion efforts across the state's open space system.**

- Develop agency "Partnership Principles" to identify best practices and procedures for supporting agency and partner goals. This may include evaluation of current and past initiatives to determine areas of success and identify opportunities to improve practices. Information about partnership opportunities and principles should be readily and easily accessible on agency websites and materials, and should clearly outline opportunities for organizations to initiate new partnerships.



**Expand opportunities to engage youth in partnership with schools and community institutions to lend their voices and perspectives in projects.**

- In addition to state-sponsored internships, opportunities for youth might include learning and research-gathering opportunities for historic sites, leading discussion and public forums for decisions about or around outdoor recreation, and working with school leadership to co-create curricula that include outdoor education.
- Expand the Friends of Recreation, Conservation, and Environmental Stewardship (FORCES) program to all New York State park regions and expand program offerings and include opportunities for high school-aged youth.

**Utilize existing Regional Park Commissions to represent local interests in the management of parks.**

- Continue to encourage more diverse appointments and participation within the commissions and State Council of Parks to better represent regional constituents and diverse interests.
- Promote greater representation of the Catskill and Adirondack Parks within the State Council of Parks.

**Expand current efforts to collect data, and evaluate and track progress and change across programs, projects, and processes in order to measure equitable outcomes and ensure diverse voices are heard and accounted for.**

**Collect and coordinate data on visitor diversity and user needs. Explore and standardize methods for collecting user demographic, experience, and opinion surveys at parks in addition to visitor counts so that evaluation can better inform future needs. Create incentives or improve access for visitors to participate in self-reporting surveys.**





## Program Spotlight

### Black Girls Hike Buffalo Partnership

Black Girls Hike Buffalo (BGHB) and DEC's Reinstein Woods Nature Preserve partnered in 2020 to create a "Hike & Treat" Trick-or-Treat Trail event around Halloween as an alternative to trick-or-treat during the COVID-19 pandemic. BGHB members were spread out along the trail while trick-or-treaters passed, collecting treats while enjoying the hiking trail. DEC also provided participants with hiking patches and activity books. Building on the success of this event, DEC and BGHB partnered again in 2021 for a group snowshoeing event that helped promote BGHB's mission to diversify the outdoors and increase comfort for Black women and other women of color in outdoor activities.



With Black Girls Hike Buffalo – DEC website



### Friends of Recreation, Conservation, and Environmental Stewardship (FORCES) Program

The FORCES Program was launched by OPRHP in 2008. It provides college students with real-world experiences while offering academic, recreational, and career opportunities and developing their personal connections to New York State Parks. FORCES is currently offered and most active with students, faculty, and institutions in the Central, Finger Lakes, and Niagara Regions and is looking to expand to other areas of the state.

**Learn more** <https://parks.ny.gov/environment/forces.aspx>

### SUNY Potsdam Live Now Program

Clifton Harcum, director for the Center for Diversity at SUNY Potsdam, developed the Live Now program in collaboration with the Adirondack Diversity Initiative, the Wilderness Education Program, and Venture Outdoors to organize outdoor recreation outings specifically for students of color in the Adirondacks. The aim of the program is to build comfort outdoors in a group setting so students of color can feel confident and comfortable in nature. In rural areas, such as the Adirondacks, programs like Live Now help close the racial gap and make the outdoors more welcoming for people of color, while also growing the next generation of outdoor adventurers.

**Learn more** <https://www.potsdam.edu/studentlife/diversity/center-diversity>



**RECOMMENDATION 2:**

## **Prioritize Equity at the Forefront of Future Park and Open Space Investments**

**In coordination with stakeholders, expand open space in communities with a focus on serving areas that are currently under-resourced, lack access, or where barriers to local open spaces exist.**

- In future Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) planning processes, expand recreational assessment to include the development of a statewide Parks Needs and Equity Assessment to inform equitable prioritization of areas and parks in need of future investments.
- Create incentives for new park and trail development within and adjacent to population centers. Further, incentivize reinvestment at all levels of government in existing community parks and green spaces.
- Invest in critical infrastructure to support connectivity to parks and green spaces by expanding accessible, multi-use greenway trails and bicycle and pedestrian connections.
- Establish criteria for engagement to include diverse stakeholder representation and consistent community involvement.

**Develop physical infrastructure, park and trail amenities, and facilities that are welcoming and address the safety, privacy, and physical and informational access challenges and preferences for a range of user groups with varying abilities and preferences.**

- Prioritize and embed equity considerations and universal design into planning, design, construction, and maintenance of new or updates to front- and back-country recreational infrastructure and amenities.
  - Equity and universal access parameters should be established at the beginning of any project planning process.
  - Retrofit infrastructure at recreation areas to accommodate multiple forms of recreation and user groups, where feasible. For example, upgrades or enhancements to park entrances, trailheads, parking areas, and water access areas should prioritize universal access.
  - At the outset of new projects, plan for inclusive design with community representatives to ensure specific user group needs are considered and prioritized. For example, include persons with disabilities and/or representatives of the disabilities community in the planning for infrastructure and amenities intended to serve them.
- Regularly audit where improvements can be made to better support user experiences. Provide formal forums for public feedback, such as a web-based geospatial mapping feedback app, or a simple suggestion box or comment form.
- New York's open spaces provide a wide variety of recreational settings—from remote and primitive areas with little improvements, to flat and accessible urban parks with hardened infrastructure. While there is recognition that not every trail can be made universally accessible (for example, backcountry wilderness trails; or areas where development is legally restricted), state agencies should aim to establish and promote alternative opportunities to allow those that cannot access these spaces to similarly enjoy the benefits of the state's public lands.





- Communicate essential information that is clear, up to date, and easy to access and comprehend for multiple users.
  - Implement a signage program across the state's public lands and facilities that meets the need for multi-lingual, multi-sensory, and gender inclusive messaging. Explore and identify resources to make implementation consistent and replicable across the state.
- Continue to partner with the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics to ensure that consistent messaging around responsible recreation is used throughout New York's public land system.



**Support access to parks and open spaces by identifying and reducing barriers to entry—such as affordability, transportation, and communications—and growing efforts for new and continued participation in outdoor recreation experiences.**

- Expand efforts to offset and mitigate upfront costs related to transportation, gear, equipment, or other apparel typically required for outdoor activities.
  - Partner with outdoor outfitters and gear companies to provide on-site access to activity-based equipment such as bikes, canoes, and kayaks. Connect outdoor retailers with libraries, schools, and recreation centers to establish “gear libraries” that store and rent recreational gear and Empire Passes for free or at a significant discount to increase local access to opportunities.
  - Maintain and expand fee discounts and exemptions on admissions and licenses for New York State senior citizens, active military, fourth grader programs, residents with disabilities, and veterans with disabilities. Consider expansion of this program to include reduced admission fees for qualifying low-income resident households to promote greater and more equitable access to state parks and state-owned and managed lands. Expansion of fee discounts or exemptions will require state legislative action.
- Develop and expand partnerships with local and regional transportation authorities to establish and operate buses or shuttles from public transportation hubs and population centers to parks, such as the Albany Nature Bus.
- Clarify, streamline, and unify the requirements needed to access recreational resources, including permits, reservations, and licenses, as well as the processes to obtain them.
- Incorporate accessibility features currently available on sites such as the I LOVE NY Accessible New York website on all park and open space related websites. This can include additions such as the AudioEye and Ally Toolbar, which include text-to-speech options, a help desk, and virtual reader, to ensure visitors who are interested in information on parks and open spaces can access it successfully.
- With the input of visitors and local communities, update state agency staff and authority uniforms and dress codes style guidelines, where feasible, to convey trust and safety to the general park-using public.

**CASE STUDY****Get Outdoors Leadville! Community Gear Library**

In 2015, the city of Leadville, CO developed the idea for a gear library after determining that the high cost of gear and a lack of Spanish-language educational resources were major barriers to outdoor recreation for Leadville residents, of whom 40% identify as Hispanic or Latinx. The Get Outdoors Leadville! Community Gear Library (established in 2017) now provides affordable access to mountain bikes, camping gear, snowshoes, and other equipment through a membership-based lending program that is open to individuals, families, school groups and local organizations. The library has connected nearly 2,000 youth to nature, trained more than 200 educators, and recently opened a facility on the campus of Colorado Mountain College.

**Learn more** <https://www.getoutdoorsleadville.org/>



**Improve efforts to make outdoor recreation spaces, offerings, and resources more reflective, relevant, and tailored to diverse communities and visitors.**

- Highlight and encourage marketing efforts that are inclusive and highlight representation of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color; women; diverse faith and religious identities; people with disabilities; youth; LGBTQIA+ and gender nonconforming individuals; and other recreationalists often underrepresented in traditional outdoor marketing and informational material. Amplify inclusive messaging and language, including gender-inclusive and multilingual translations when appropriate. Publicity and visibility efforts should not exist on their own, but augment broader initiatives and efforts to create equitable and inclusive access to New York's public open spaces.
- Represent and amplify the contributions of historically excluded or underrepresented people in park and open space interpretation. Ensure these histories are accurate, comprehensive, and that the process of developing these interpretive histories involves participation or consultation with the communities being interpreted or celebrated.
- Increase the range of recreational activities portrayed in marketing and promotion materials to include a wide range of outdoor recreational activities, such as picnicking, children playing at playgrounds, activities on coastal or waterfront parks, and family or large group gatherings, for example, to show that everyone experiences outdoor spaces differently and all experiences are valid.



- Highlight the diverse experiences, narratives, and cultures of New Yorkers by actively promoting and supporting the work done by communities and providing access to various forms of programming across the state.
- Bring “parks to people” by growing the presence of state-sponsored outdoor programming, information, and resources on non-state-owned lands that are closer to communities and within neighborhood outdoor spaces. Programs such as the “Roving Ranger” mobile trailhead truck sponsored by the Golden Gate National Park Conservancy are creative models intended to expand outreach and engagement. The New York State Birding Trail is another example that is being expanded to multiple communities and emphasizes creative community collaborations.



#### CASE STUDY

### Roving Ranger at Golden Gate National Recreation Area

The Roving Ranger is a mobile trailhead designed to serve as a visitor contact and information center both within National Parks and outside the parks in local communities. It is based at the Golden Gate National Recreation Area where it is used to welcome visitors, recruit academic interns on college campuses, and participate in community events including parades. The truck is also used to conduct surveys in the parks and support park-operated programs.

**Learn more** <https://www.parksconservancy.org/programs/roving-ranger>



## Program Spotlight



### Albany Nature Bus

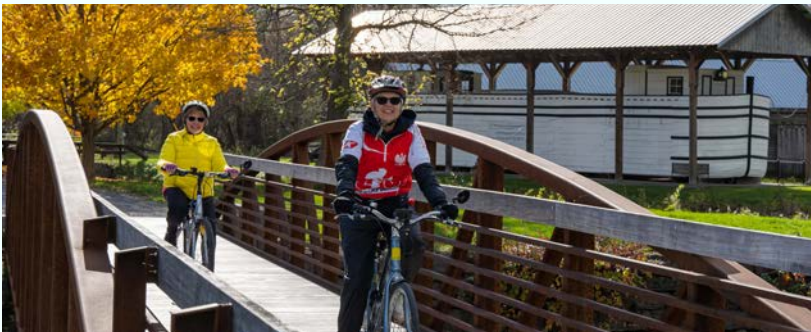
In Summer 2021, the Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy, the Capital District Transportation Authority, DEC, and OPRHP partnered to pilot a free bus service to connect the City of Albany residents to parks and natural areas in Albany County. The Nature Bus program included stops in the city's downtown and surrounding neighborhoods and helped visitors prepare by highlighting amenities available at the sites, such as picnic tables or cell service availability, in its promotional materials.

**Learn more** <https://www.cdfa.org/news/nature-bus-now-running>

### Greenway Trails as Community Connectors

In 2021, New York State developed a Statewide Greenway Trails Plan to provide a vision, goals and recommendations to guide future planning and development of greenway trails in New York State. Greenway trails, which are broadly defined as non-motorized and multi-use corridors, provide critical connections to communities and improve connections between trails and other transportation modes. New York State has prioritized greenway trail development in urban and under-resourced communities to improve public health, increase quality of life, improve safety and walkability, and contribute to community revitalization. In 2020, New York State opened the Empire State Trail, a 750-mile multi-use greenway that connects communities and open spaces across the state. Nonprofit conservation organizations like the Open Space Institute (OSI) and Trust for Public Land (TPL) are leading efforts as private sector partners to support and advocate for broader trail development and connectivity efforts. Recognizing the enormous community benefits that trails provide, OSI launched a Greenway Trails Initiative in 2021 to support greater trail and open space access for communities.

**Learn more** <https://empiretrail.ny.gov>



### Our Whole History Initiative

OPRHP's Our Whole History initiative aims to broaden interpretation at state historic sites to include more representative interpretation and programming and better embrace stories that reflect the diversity of New York at state parks and lands. The initiative is committed to developing new exhibits, signage, and programming across the state's historic site system that will better depict the diversity, humanity, and influence of New York State's people and further highlight the role that traditionally under-represented communities have played in shaping our history. At Philipse Manor Hall Historic Site, the initiative is being used to direct capital investment plans and proposed exhibits.

**Learn more** <https://www.friendsofphilipsemanorhall.org/>



## Autism Nature Trail at Letchworth State Park

The Autism Nature Trail (“ANT”) is a one-mile loop trail at Letchworth State Park with eight stations at various intervals that offers a range of experiences from quiet engagement to active exploration and adventure. It was designed specifically to encourage inclusivity, combat social isolation, and encourage skill-building in a natural setting that is welcoming to all people, especially those with autism spectrum disorder and others with disabilities. The trail was made possible by a public-private partnership among the Natural Heritage Trust, Camp Puzzle Peace, Perry Central School District, OSI, and OPRHP.

**Learn more** <https://autismnaturetrail.com/>



## Bringing Parks to People in Rochester

There is growing momentum and interest in expanding and enhancing the state park system into cities across the state.

Governor Kathy Hochul has proposed development of a new state park called Rochester High Falls State Park, which would provide new public access to the Genesee River gorge in downtown Rochester. Continued advocacy is needed to support local community parks and trails in the state’s cities and urban areas, where there is a growing need for maintenance and improvements to ensure that they are safe, accessible, and enjoyable for all.

Community organization Inclusive Woods and Us, a non-profit based in Rochester, NY, is working to support outdoor exploration and discovery for marginalized populations in Rochester. Founder and Executive Director Lucienne Nicholson leads and organizes guided hikes and outings for residents who are denied regular access to wilderness areas and green spaces like local parks and urban trails.

Nicholson also advocates for more holistic approaches to park improvements that focus on the neighborhood context, community participation, and quality of parks that facilitate more positive nature experiences in the outdoors, especially for marginalized youth.

**Learn more** <https://inclusivewoodsandus.org/>



**RECOMMENDATION 3:****Build Support and Capacity for Implementation**

**Cultivate diverse partnerships across New York to better enhance existing and identify new opportunities for collaboration and implementation.**

- Elevate public-private partnerships as core strategies for supporting agency missions and delivery of services. Provide sufficient resources and prioritize coordination within state agencies to centralize and streamline the management of collaborative public-private partnerships.
- Collaborate with the New York Outdoor Recreation Coalition as a champion of the *Open Spaces for All* report and its recommendations.
- Explore options for establishing a committee or working group to formalize collaboration

and consistent engagement among state agencies, private sector, local government, and other stakeholders to guide coordination and implementation of the *Open Spaces for All* recommendations. Functions may also include information sharing, collaborative programming, and devising a larger strategy for improving diversity, equity, inclusion, and access initiatives at state lands and in outdoor offerings. Prioritize representation from all regions of the state, especially from historically marginalized and underrepresented communities.

**Designate state funding to support partner programs and organizations that elevate inclusive and equitable outdoor recreation initiatives and resources across the state.**

- Establish an Outdoor Equity Grant Program to administer grants or sponsorship for smaller or nascent community outdoor recreation, environmental, and community service groups, especially those who support the goals of improving broad access to the outdoors for marginalized and underrepresented communities.
- Review and expand criteria for projects funded by the state Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) to prioritize DEIJ efforts and work with marginalized and underrepresented communities, when applicable.

**CASE STUDY****Colorado's Outdoor Equity Grant Program**

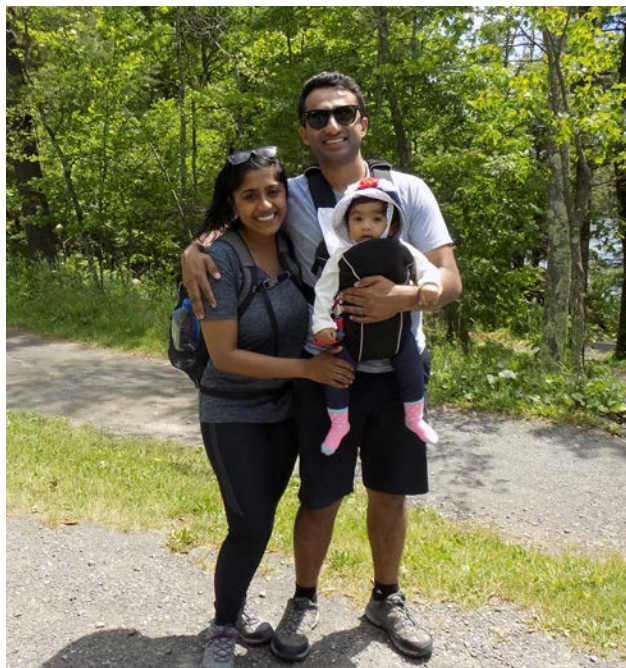
Colorado's Outdoor Equity Grant Program aims to lower barriers to the outdoors by providing funds and assistance to programs that create pathways for formal or informal conservation of Colorado lands, provide environmental education opportunities, and engage traditionally underrepresented youth and their families in outdoor activities. The grant program is funded through the Colorado State Lottery's general fund and is administered by a board of Council Members that work specifically on environmental justice, LGBTQIA+ equity, accessibility, and outdoor education.

**Learn more** <https://cpw.state.co.us/aboutus/Pages/Outdoor-Equity-Fund.aspx>



## Grow capacity to support diverse and inclusive workforces in the outdoor recreation and environmental sectors.

- Build tailored support for emerging and small businesses that provide outdoor recreation-based products and services, especially those that are owned by minority, women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, veterans, and other underrepresented communities.
  - Develop a New York State Outdoor Business Alliance Network to support the outdoor recreation industry and support diverse participation.
  - Develop programs, either through the support of New York State or through the private sector, for technical assistance, small business start-up programs, workforce development, and training programs to support continued growth of the outdoor recreation industry in New York State.
  - Adjust grant application and disbursement processes where appropriate and feasible to ease operational burdens for organizations and businesses that support recreation opportunities for historically marginalized or under-resourced communities.
- Prioritize filling existing open staff positions and create new positions where needed to build capacity to adequately support the state agencies' public administration of services and programs.
  - New York's leadership recognizes the importance of the outdoors, especially as more people visit the state's open spaces each year. Staffing has been increased to help manage New York's public lands and resources and serve visitors. To that end, continue to prioritize increasing the number of public-facing park and trailhead employees, including rangers, stewards, and environmental education and interpretive staff to assist and support visitors.
  - Create full-time regional community partner coordinator positions, program-specific or general, to facilitate opportunities for community engagement and involvement and identify partnership opportunities.
  - Hire dedicated personnel to increase capacity for DEIJ and community engagement efforts within state agencies.



- Build upon efforts to cultivate a diverse workforce and inclusive culture in the outdoor recreation and environmental sectors.
  - Grow and expand job training programs and business support to diversify the private and public sector workforce supporting outdoor recreation.
  - Grow current and create new programs to cultivate underrepresented candidates and develop pipelines for paid internships, mentoring, training programs, and credential certificates to support career pathways with the state or in the outdoor industry. Additionally, establish opportunities for professional growth and development for underrepresented staff.
  - Expand efforts to hire more diverse candidates beyond traditional open recruitment or word-of-mouth referrals.
  - Uplift staff and prioritize commitments to equity and inclusion in the workplace.
  - Continue to support initiatives within the agencies focused on developing a “visitor service” mindset in order to address visitors' needs as well as the management of natural resources.

## Program Spotlight

### New York State Birding Trail

The NYS Birding Trail is a virtual trail that highlights the best birding spots in New York. The initiative is led by DEC in collaboration with OPRHP as well as many local and regional partners such as NYC Parks, National Park Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Audubon chapters, land trusts, and municipalities. To create each segment of the trail, organizers are collaborating with organizations such as the Feminist Bird Club and Inclusive Woods and Us, and individuals such as Tykee James, one of the organizers of the first #BlackBirdersWeek. This outreach prioritizes the needs and interests of historically marginalized communities and promotes the trail as an inclusive experience for all. The Birding Trail not only showcases birding locations, but also highlights information on how people can get started birding in their communities or backyards, participate in birding events, and even join in an I BIRD NY Challenge. Materials on the trail and birding are offered in both English and Spanish.

**Learn more** <https://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/109900.html>



### Connect Kids to Parks

The Connect Kids to Parks Field Trip Grant Program ("Connect Kids") is designed to connect students in New York State with nature and history. Each grant provides reimbursement for eligible expenses of up to \$40 per student for field trips to public parks, forests, historic sites, fish hatcheries, and outdoor recreation areas.

**Learn more** <https://parks.ny.gov/documents/environment/ConnectKidsGrantsGuidelinesBrochure.pdf>









# Honoring Indigenous People and Their Connections to the Land



The State of New York is the traditional homeland of the Haudenosaunee, Muhheconneok, Lenni Lenape, Shinnecock, and Unkechaug peoples. Issues of equity and inclusion as they relate to Indigenous people are uniquely complicated because, in addition to all of the challenges of structural and episodic racism faced by other marginalized communities, as sovereign nations, Native communities have a unique government-to-government relationship to federal and state agencies. As a result, these issues of sovereignty, rights reserved in treaties with the US government, and protection of sacred sites, are central concerns of Indigenous communities engaging with the parks and open spaces of today.

To honor the unique circumstances specific to the Indigenous communities, the following recommendations have been developed:

## RECOMMENDATION 1:

### **Build support at an agency level for consistent communication with Indigenous communities**

- Prioritize opening lines of communication between state agencies and Indigenous nations. Continue to provide support for DEC's Indian Nations Affair Coordinator and the development of a new DEC Office of Indian Nations Affairs. Similarly, establish a position at OPRHP to advise on statewide issues and matters pertaining to Indigenous relations and interpretation at state parks and historic sites.



**RECOMMENDATION 2:****Acknowledge the original stewards of the land**

- Continue to identify and protect culturally significant lands, features, and natural resources in state land management plans. Incorporation and recognition of these lands, features, and resources ensures sustainable management and helps facilitate Indigenous access to these places.
- Consult with Indigenous leaders and experts to practice land acknowledgements in both written and spoken materials. Land acknowledgements should go beyond just naming Indigenous peoples in the areas and work to ensure that the historical and ongoing presence, culture, and use by Indigenous peoples on New York lands and waters are respected and understood by all. The meaningful practice of land acknowledgement centers on restorative relationships between people and place with the goal of addressing and healing the generational trauma caused by colonialism.
- Recognize the Nations' sovereignty and connections to the land by allowing admission and license exemptions at state lands for members of the state-recognized Indigenous Nations in New York. This program may offer free parking and access to New York parks and open spaces to streamline reservation and licensing processes for Indigenous people. This program should prioritize the use of state lands by Indigenous people to maintain their distinctive cultures, notwithstanding legal requirements. Expansion of fee discounts or exemptions will require state legislative action.
- Incorporate traditional ecological knowledge in the management of New York lands. Respect and recognize Indigenous peoples for the use of their traditional ecological knowledge. Create culturally relevant opportunities for Indigenous knowledge keepers to provide input in agency management plans. Incorporate traditional ecological knowledge in the management of New York lands.
  - For example, the Forest Stewardship Council and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative certifications have standards for implementing traditional ecological knowledge in management plans.

- Continue to allow periodic closure or limited access to sites during religious ceremonies or traditional practices. Develop and present educational programming to help the public understand why ceremonial access is vital.

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There are eight federally recognized Indian tribes with reservation lands within the boundaries of New York State. These include the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe of New York, Oneida Indian Nation, Onondaga Nation, Cayuga Nation, Seneca Nation of Indians, Tonawanda Seneca Nation, Tuscarora Indian Nation, and Shinnecock Indian Nation. A ninth resident nation, the Unkechaug, is recognized by New York State but is not federally recognized. In addition to these resident nations, unrecognized groups reside within the boundaries of New York State, including the Montaukett, Setauket, and Ramapough Lenape. Finally, there are several federally recognized tribes currently based outside New York whose ancestral lands lie within New York. These include the Delaware Tribe of Indians (Oklahoma), the Delaware Nation (Oklahoma), the Oneida Nation (Wisconsin), the Seneca-Cayuga Nation (Oklahoma), and the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians (Wisconsin). Like the resident nations, these displaced nations remain deeply invested in the protection of their ancestral homelands.

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**PROJECT SPOTLIGHT****Ganondagan State Historic Site**

The Ganondagan State Historic Site is the only New York State Historic Site dedicated to Native Americans, in particular the Seneca and Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) people. Ganondagan is an internationally recognized resource for Haudenosaunee history, culture, and living traditions that express universal ideals of peace, cooperation, and respect for each other and the natural world.

The Friends of Ganondagan is a nonprofit organization created in 1989 as a private educational partner to Ganondagan State Historic Site. They provide cultural programming and community events to enrich the understanding of Seneca and Haudenosaunee values, culture, and contemporary life. They collaborate with New York State, the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), and the local community to support and develop the Ganondagan State Historic Site.

**Learn more** <https://ganondagan.org/>



# Conclusion

Open spaces, natural resources, and outdoor recreational amenities and programs are essential public infrastructure. Recent events like the COVID-19 pandemic have underscored the importance of open spaces to our mental and physical health and well-being to relax, recharge, and restore us.

New York State has a responsibility to provide all its residents with equitable access to the outdoors. *Open Spaces for All* establishes the groundwork for a future where all New York State residents and visitors, regardless of their identity and lived experiences, can equitably access, enjoy, benefit from, and contribute to the state's public parks, lands, waters, trails, and natural resources.

This report outlines a 21st-century vision for open spaces that is grounded in equity, representation, and inclusion for today's New Yorkers and future generations. Our hope is that it inspires strong leadership and commitment to greater equity and inclusion in New York State and in other park systems across the nation.

There are innumerable organizations and local leaders who are excited to work with New York State to expand and improve outdoor access for all New Yorkers. By prioritizing equity, investing in relationships locally, supporting meaningful, mutually beneficial partnerships, and remaining open to innovation and change, New York State's open space and natural resource agencies will be poised to engage new audiences, increase their relevancy in the years to come, and set an example that inspires land managers across the nation.

## Next Steps

NYORC and OSI, through regular engagement with the state agencies and partners across the state, will:

- Regularly convene to discuss the report findings and recommendations, and develop implementation strategies;
- Disseminate and promote the report findings and recommendations widely to local governments, nonprofits, businesses, community organizations, and other stakeholders so they can learn from and adapt the recommendations in their respective communities;
- Regularly review and update the plan accordingly; and
- Coordinate and advocate for priority policy and budget needs.



# Appendix





# Appendix A

## Methodology

The planning team conducted qualitative research to identify underlying trends and ideas to inform the recommendations for *Open Spaces for All*. The goal of qualitative research is to illuminate important social phenomena, not to discover scientific truths. Conclusions, therefore, are subjective based on the analysis and the inputs provided by the research subjects who chose to participate in the study.

Direct engagement with constituents was the backbone of the *Open Spaces for All* report. Multiple direct engagement methods provided access points with the intention of gaining community buy-in, enabling the representation of diverse views, experiences, and ideas, and building an understanding of the current state and the existing body of knowledge surrounding inclusion in the outdoors. Primary methods included interviews, surveys, listening sessions, and secondary research.

The process included more than 200 touchpoints with individuals and representatives from organizations, community groups, businesses, and government agencies. Engagement spanned statewide geographic reach, individuals and groups representing diverse social and economic identities, existing users and organizations, thought leaders within the subject, and government entities. The research process also engaged four New York State government entities: the Department of Environmental Conservation, the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, the Office of the Governor, and Empire State Development. The sections below provide more information on the research methodology.

Due to the public health crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the project team was limited to using virtual engagement tools to solicit input.



## Cohort-Based Listening Sessions and Individual Interviews

Interviews were conducted with more than 110 individuals in 10 cohort-based listening and individual interview sessions. Participants represented a variety of organizations, communities, and areas of expertise. Listening sessions were organized into groups ranging in size from three to ten people who are engaged in similar issues, represent similar communities, or work in similar geographies. Within each conversation, participants were asked to identify the major challenges facing historically marginalized and underrepresented communities when engaging in outdoor recreation. Participants were also asked about existing or potential solutions that the state or other entities could use to address these obstacles. In many instances, participants offered connections to other organizations or individuals.

## Survey

The survey questions focused on respondents' affiliations with and impressions of New York State lands and actions, identifying the critical obstacles to connecting historically marginalized and underrepresented communities with the outdoors, potential solutions and tools that could be used to address the challenges identified, and recommendations for additional outreach and research. The survey was distributed to all interviewees and listening session participants, as well as to additional connections through the New York Outdoor Recreation Coalition. Further survey distribution support was provided by the Open Space Institute, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. The goal of the survey distribution was not to establish a statistically representative sample but rather to learn from representatives who could speak to the experiences of specific groups, visionary thinkers who might offer unique insights or creative solutions, and community members who wanted their voices and views reflected in report findings. Overall, the survey was distributed to more than 185 recipients, with 122 surveys completed. Respondents represented all major geographic regions identified in New York State and engage in work that represents a variety of underrepresented and marginalized communities and identities.

# Appendix B

## State Programs

### Interagency State Programs

#### **Connect Kids to Parks Field Trip Grant Program**

provides reimbursement of costs, including transportation, associated with field trips taken by K-12 students to public parks, forests, historic sites, fish hatcheries, and outdoor recreation areas.

**Fee discounts or exemptions** for select groups for outdoor recreation admissions, licenses or rentals. Various accommodations are available to active-duty military or National Guard, seniors, New Yorkers or veterans with disabilities, 4th graders and their families; through DEC, members of state-recognized Indigenous nations are eligible for free fishing licenses.

**First Day Hikes** are family-friendly hikes, ranging from 1–5 miles, held at parks, historic sites, wildlife areas, and other public lands across the state on January 1st each year.

**First Time Camper Weekend Program** enables families that have never camped before to register for a free, fully stocked campsite at select NYS campgrounds for a designated weekend.

**I Love My Park Day** brings together thousands of volunteers from across the state to participate in cleanup, improvement, and beautification events at New York State public lands. The event is held in partnership with State Parks, DEC, and Parks & Trails New York.

**Leave No Trace** principles are promoted to encourage responsible recreation and help sustain healthy and vibrant natural lands, even as visitation increases.

**NY Camping Loyalty Rewards Program** offers users the opportunity to earn points towards use fees on future camping stays for every dollar spent on overnight accommodations at all NYS campgrounds.

**NYS Camping Guide** offers an interactive resource to learn about NYS campgrounds.

**Multiple events and sites** recognize and celebrate Black history, Hispanic heritage, Native American culture, LGBTQIA+ experiences, and women's rights.

**Partnerships** with the Open Space Institute, the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation, and other nonprofits and state agencies add expertise and funding to support projects and programs.



## Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation Programs

**Camper Assistance Program** is a volunteer program that welcomes and helps visitors in exchange for free camping.

**Fresh Air Fund's Camp Junior** provides sleepaway camp programming in Harriman State Park for boys and girls, ages 9–13, from the Bronx.

**Friends of Recreation, Conservation and Environmental Stewardship (FORCES)** is a student volunteer program that provides real-world experiences and opportunities to further their academic programs, gain valuable resume experience, and develop personal connections to New York State Parks.

**Governor's Office NY Parks 100 initiative** commits funding to revitalize the State Park system and expand access to outdoor recreation.

**Heritage Area System** is a state-local partnership established to preserve and develop areas of significant natural, historic, and cultural resources.

**Heritage Trails** offer opportunities to explore historic sites linked by themes.

**Ladders to the Outdoors** provides introductory recreation programs for underserved youth with all necessary equipment, skills instruction, and transportation included. It is currently underway in the State Parks Niagara Region, with plans to replicate the program in all regions. The program is supported by both public and private funding.

**Learn-to-Swim Program** offers swimming lessons for elementary school youth in partnership with nonprofits.

**Nature Nearby & Virtual Nature Lessons** offer nature-themed activities, inspiration, and resources compiled by environmental educators.

**Our Whole History Initiative** aims to broaden interpretations at state historic sites to ensure that historic sites embrace stories that reflect the diversity of the state and nation's history. For example, new exhibits at Philipse Manor Hall State Historic Site tell the story of all who lived and worked on the manor

lands, including Native Americans, tenant farmers, enslaved Africans, and the Philipse family.

**Parks Explorer** is a mobile app for visitors that provides useful information about a variety of destinations and activities for current and prospective State Park visitors.

**We Are NY** is a video series that showcases personal stories about historic places, especially those connected to specific communities.

## OPRHP Grants

**Community Grant Opportunities** support projects that promote recreation, preserve our historic and natural resources, and generally improve the quality of life in communities throughout the state.

**Environmental Protection Fund Grant Program** for Parks, Preservation and Heritage (EPF) offers funding in matching grants for the acquisition, planning, development, and improvement of parks, historic properties, or heritage areas.

**Snowmobile Trail Grant Program** allocates funds to local governments to develop and maintain snowmobile trails.

## Federally funded grants that are administered through the OPRHP

**Boating Infrastructure Grant Program** supports the development and maintenance of facilities for transient, non-trailerable recreational vessels.

**Land and Water Conservation Funds, Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Program** is targeted at projects that will create or reinvigorate parks and other outdoor recreation spaces to encourage people to connect or re-connect with the outdoors.

**Recreational Trails Program (RTP)** offers matching grants for the acquisition, development, rehabilitation, and maintenance of trails and trail-related projects. It is funded by the Federal Highway Administration and administered by New York State through the Consolidated Funding Application for projects that are aligned with the goals of the *Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan*.

## Department of Environmental Conservation Programs

**ADA Accessibility Coordinators** provide concierge services discuss to individual needs and recreational pursuits.

**Adventure NY initiative** is a multi-year outdoor recreation campaign announced in 2017 to connect more New Yorkers to the great outdoors, including funding to improve access, upgrade facilities and increase public awareness of all the outdoor recreation opportunities in New York State.

**Becoming an Outdoors-Woman** offers three-day workshops for women, 18 years and older, to learn outdoor skills.

**Campground Ambassador Program** enlists volunteers to assist in welcoming and serving the millions of visitors to the Adirondack and Catskill Parks each year.

**Campground and Day Use Area Virtual Tours** offer interactive 360° panoramic virtual tours that allow prospective visitors to see a DEC campground or day-use area from the comfort of their homes.

**DEC Environmental Education Camps** are offered each summer for kids ages 11–17 and combine environmental education, hunter education, and outdoor recreation programs for a fun, hands-on experience.

**DECinfo Locator** is an interactive map that provides access to DEC documents and public data about the environmental quality of specific sites in New York State, as well as outdoor recreation information.

**Environmental Education Intern Program** offers internships for persons seeking professional experience in the field of environmental education.

**Hike Smart NY** educates hikers on safe practices and essential gear to carry on all hikes for a safe and enjoyable experience.

**HuntFishNY** mobile app enables users to display electronic versions of sporting licenses, privileges, and permits, report game harvests, and link to useful information.

**I FISH NY Education Program** offers free fishing clinics and days, a fishing rod loaner program, downstate programs for schools and special groups, and a beginners' guide to freshwater fishing.

**Licensed Guide Program** offers individuals the opportunity to participate in guide services for select recreational activities in New York State.

**Love Our NY Lands campaign** encourages visitors to state-owned and managed lands to practice responsible recreation. It includes in-person education at trailheads, expanded stewardship programs, virtual sessions about sustainable recreation and hiker safety, public-facing events, and instructional videos, as well as enhanced social media, public service announcements, and promotions by partner state agencies.

**National Archery in the Schools Program** provides instruction, information, and support for the implementation of archery in physical education curriculums for grades 4–12.

**NYS Birding Trail** is a virtual trail that provides information on birding resources, challenges, and events.

**Opportunities for Junior Hunters & Trappers** include special seasons and programs for junior hunters and trappers.

**Resources and training for teachers and caregivers** include institutes and workshops, lesson plans, and programs.







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