



## Nature-Based Youth Programs

### Defining Robust Equity and Inclusion

**Nature-based youth programs are committed to expanding the idea of access for young people—access to the outdoors, to our national parks, and to opportunities for experiential and applied learning.**

At this moment, the United States of America is publicly grappling with persistent and fundamental inequities, which shape the lives of every person in this country and determine who has access to opportunities to learn and thrive and who does not. Reexamining the idea of access, which is central to nature-based youth programs, is a timely and urgent call.

**Robust equity** is the intentional counter to inequality, institutionalized privilege and prejudice, and systemic deficits, and the intentional promotion of thriving across multiple domains for those who experience inequity and injustice.<sup>1</sup>

**The science of learning and development is a multidisciplinary effort to integrate research from diverse disciplines.<sup>2</sup>**

This body of evidence covers biological, social, and behavioral processes, among others, that influence human learning and development. In addition, this scientific knowledge describes the individual developmental processes as well as the environmental and contextual influences on learning and development. As a convergence of findings from these disciplines, the science of learning and development can guide youth-serving systems in supporting all young people to thrive.



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**In a recent paper on learning and development, thriving, and equity,<sup>3</sup> the authors push for a new way to define the concept of thriving and equity within youth-serving fields.**

The authors advocate for a language and practice shift toward “robust equity”—a framing of equity that is rooted in historical awareness, intentionally counters inequality, and is mindful that different areas of youth well-being are interconnected. What would this look like in nature-based youth programs?

First, nature-based youth programs must examine how their initiatives have historically served youth, paying special attention to young people who are underrepresented. As a field, nature-based youth programs have been designed to disproportionately serve white, male, middle- or upper-class, and able-bodied youth.<sup>4</sup> Why might this be the case?



“Nature and the meanings ascribed to the natural environment are rooted in history, gender, race, and culture.”<sup>5</sup> In this country, for women, people with disabilities or limited means, and people of color, various inequities and collective historical experiences (including traumas like violence, discrimination, and exclusion) have made America’s natural spaces difficult to access, especially wilderness spaces like national parks. In addition, ongoing disparities are rooted in these same historic inequities and experiences related to which young people participate in nature-based youth programs.<sup>6, 7, 8</sup> People from these less-reached groups may have ideas about nature that conflict with “the traditional Eurocentric, able-bodied, male paradigm.”<sup>9</sup> How can these access barriers and disparities be addressed?

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### **Thompson Island Outward Bound**

has made all summer Outward Bound expeditions available exclusively to Boston Public School students free of tuition.

Programs aligning themselves with principles of transformative learning and development and robust equity must work to “create access and accountability moving from the margins into the mainstream.”<sup>10</sup>

**Expanding this type of historically and culturally aware and accountable access will require an examination of structural barriers, including program costs, narrow conceptions of what qualifies as “nature” and physical programming locations, and the accessibility of programs in all communities.**

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**NatureBridge** provides need-based scholarships to those students and schools who would not be able to explore the national parks without financial support. In the 2017–18 school year, they awarded over \$1.4 million in scholarships that reached 46% of participating students.

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**Student Conservation Association** partners with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the professional pathways-focused Career Discovery Internship Program (CDIP). CDIP introduces college freshman and sophomores who self-identify as being from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds to careers in conservation. The program is designed to help federal resource management agencies diversify their workforce, ensuring that people of all cultures and identities can see themselves in America's natural heritage.

However, equitable access also requires that nature-based youth programs address less visible barriers. Young people look for a sense of belonging in the programs they attend, but their perception of welcome is influenced by their sense of how much people like them, how they have been treated in the past in similar situations, and whether they can connect existing relationships or experiences to this new experience.<sup>4</sup> For many young people in America, the learning opportunities and spaces that nature-based programs offer are not connected to a perceived sense of welcome. Consider the national parks as an example. Data collected by the National Park Service Visitor Services Project show that Black Americans, Hispanic Americans,

and Asian Americans represent a small fraction of annual visitors to the national parks.<sup>11</sup> Within the national park system, more than 83% of employees are white.<sup>12</sup> Other factors are at play here, from a history of segregation in America's public spaces, to the shortage of non-white leaders in environmental organizations, to an absence of national monuments that celebrate the achievements of non-white Americans. The connected theme is one of exclusion and limited representation for many Americans. As nature-based youth-serving organizations work to expand access to their programs, they must work to ensure that all young people feel fully welcomed, valued, and represented outdoors in America.



This brief is part of a three-part series focused on connecting **the science of learning and development** to the approaches and impacts of youth serving nature-based organizations. The series includes [Why Does Nature Based Programming Matter](#), [Robust Equity in Nature Based Programming](#), and [Nature Based Youth Programs: Building Adult Capacity](#).

*The three briefs are based on a series of interviews with three prominent experiential and nature-based organizations:*

**NatureBridge** provides overnight, hands-on environmental science programs, taking children and teens to national parks to experience the wonder and science of the natural world, connect with peers, discover themselves, and develop a lasting relationship with the environment.

**Outward Bound** serves youth to adults through challenging learning expeditions that inspire strength of character, leadership, and service to others, both in and out of the classroom. Outward Bound provides nationwide programming through 11 chartered sites and more than 1,000 courses. Thompson Island Outward Bound, one of the 11 sites, partners with Boston Public Schools to provide free outdoor education programs to students on the island's 204 acres of preserved land in Boston Harbor.

**Student Conservation Association** is America's conservation corps, building the next generation of conservation leaders and inspiring lifelong stewardship of the environment and communities. Members engage in hands-on service to protect and restore national parks, marine sanctuaries, cultural landmarks, and community green spaces in all 50 states.

As we focus on building robust equity in nature-based youth programs, experts highlight the shift to a fieldwide focus on youth “thriving, not just surviving.”<sup>13</sup> Instead of merely focusing on creating equal footing for all youth in nature-based youth programs, organizations need an intentional, assets-focused, and inclusive approach that publicly names and counters historic inequalities. Research has suggested that youth who grow up in challenging environments experience enhanced resilience and overall well-being when they are exposed to natural experiences in outdoor programs.<sup>14</sup> Thus, there is a clear and compelling rationale for focusing on this group of young people. However, as with an expanded historic awareness, **acting intentionally and publicly to counter existing inequities will require an examination of fieldwide and organization-specific practices that create barriers to participation, engagement, and a sense of shared values.**

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**NatureBridge** offers an Educator Development Program (EDP), a multiweek, paid program for educators seeking to increase their experience with outdoor teaching and risk management. The program aims to increase representation of those who have had historic and systemic barriers to the outdoor education workforce.



Finally, nature-based youth programs must address the complexities and interconnections of youth well-being. Understanding how different experiences shape youth assets and needs is critical as programs work to create environments where young people feel safe, connected, and empowered. For example, program leaders and frontline staff must be prepared to understand how different youth's cultures influence how young people will interact with program content and teaching strategies. In a 2018 review of current practices in professional development, Richmond, Braughton, and Borden<sup>15</sup> found that few youth program staff trainings supported adults in learning how to better accommodate the norms, values, and beliefs of youth to be culturally responsive to their background and resulting assets and needs.<sup>16</sup> Establishing training standards, assessing impact, and providing organizational supports for youth development workers in areas of equity and cultural competency is one step that organizations can take to be better prepared to understand and address holistic youth well-being.<sup>17</sup> Organizations should work to build learning environments and program approaches that acknowledge how youth well-being is affected by many interconnected factors, and that support overall youth thriving.

Committing to robust equity in nature-based youth programs is not easy, but it is a powerful and necessary step. As nature-based youth programs increase access and deepen their approaches, programs must center themselves in an understanding of how nature-based programs have historically operated to include or exclude different groups of young people. Program staff can take active steps to ensure that all young people feel welcomed and seen in outdoor programming. At the organization and field-building levels, decisionmakers can examine and commit to systems that actively counter inequities and consider the multiple dimensions of holistic youth well-being.

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**Student Conservation Association** provides training for all corps members and staff in justice, equity, and inclusion. This training includes facilitated opportunities like a staff-wide book club, scenario or role-play-based learning, and workshops focused on holistic social, emotional, and mental wellness.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Quote from p. 3: Osher, D., Pittman, K., Young, J., Smith, H., Moroney, D., & Irby, M. (2020). *Thriving, robust equity, and transformative learning & development: A more powerful conceptualization of the contributors to youth success*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research and Forum for Youth Investment.
- <sup>2</sup> SoLD Alliance. (2020). *What we've learned*. <https://www.soldalliance.org/what-weve-learned>
- <sup>3</sup> Johnson, E., Rothstein, F., & Gajdosik, J. (2004). The intermediary role in youth worker professional development: Successes and challenges. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 104, 51–64.
- <sup>4</sup> Warren, K., Roberts, N. S., Breunig, M., & Alvarez, M. A. G. (2014). Social justice in outdoor experiential education: A state of knowledge review. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 37(1), 89–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825913518898>
- <sup>5</sup> Quote from p. 90, Warren, K., Roberts, N. S., Breunig, M., & Alvarez, M. A. G. (2014). Social justice in outdoor experiential education: A state of knowledge review. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 37(1), 89–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825913518898>
- <sup>6</sup> Jacobs, J. P., & Hotakainen, R. (2020, June 25). Racist roots, lack of diversity haunt national parks. *E & E News*. Retrieved from <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1063447583>
- <sup>7</sup> Scott, D., & Jerry Lee, K. J. (2018). People of color and their constraints to national parks visitation. *The George Wright Forum*, 35(1). <http://www.georgewright.org/351scott.pdf>
- <sup>8</sup> Warren, K., Roberts, N. S., Breunig, M., & Alvarez, M. A. G. (2014). Social justice in outdoor experiential education: A state of knowledge review. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 37(1), 89–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825913518898>
- <sup>9</sup> Quote from p. 91, Warren, K., Roberts, N. S., Breunig, M., & Alvarez, M. A. G. (2014). Social justice in outdoor experiential education: A state of knowledge review. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 37(1), 89–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825913518898>
- <sup>10</sup> Osher, D., Pittman, K., Young, J., Smith, H., Moroney, D., & Irby, M. (2020). *Thriving, robust equity, and transformative learning & development: A more powerful conceptualization of the contributors to youth success*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research and Forum for Youth Investment.
- <sup>11</sup> Scott, D., & Jerry Lee, K. J. (2018). People of color and their constraints to national parks visitation. *The George Wright Forum*, 35(1). Retrieved from <http://www.georgewright.org/351scott.pdf>
- <sup>12</sup> Jacobs, J. P., & Hotakainen, R. (2020, June 25). Racist roots, lack of diversity haunt national parks. *E & E News*. Retrieved from <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1063447583>
- <sup>13</sup> Quote from p. 28, Osher, D., Pittman, K., Young, J., Smith, H., Moroney, D., & Irby, M. (2020). *Thriving, robust equity, and transformative learning & development: A more powerful conceptualization of the contributors to youth success*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research and Forum for Youth Investment.
- <sup>14</sup> McArdle, K., Harrison, T., & Harrison, D. (2013). Does a nurturing approach that uses an outdoor play environment build resilience in children from a challenging background? *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 13(3), 238–254.
- <sup>15</sup> Richmond, A., Braughton, J., & Borden, L. M. (2018). Training youth program staff on the importance of cultural responsiveness and humility: Current status and future directions in professional development. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 93, 501–507.
- <sup>16</sup> Richmond, A., Braughton, J., & Borden, L. M. (2018). Training youth program staff on the importance of cultural responsiveness and humility: Current status and future directions in professional development. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 93, 501–507.
- <sup>17</sup> Johnson, E., Rothstein, F., & Gajdosik, J. (2004). The intermediary role in youth worker professional development: Successes and challenges. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 104, 51–64.



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