Chapter 1 | Introduction

The Metropolitan Council's research on strengthening youth connection to the outdoors fulfills a 2018 priority in the Council's Regional Parks Policy Plan. The plan pledges the Council to engage in "targeted studies to better understand and provide for the outdoor recreational needs and preferences from underserved populations, including youth." To date, no study has been conducted that informs public policy about the needs, motivations, and obstacles faced by youth in accessing and using the Regional Park System. This report focuses on youth age 12-20. Other terms used in this report to describe this age group are teens, young people, and adolescents.

This research used the strategy, outlined in the policy plan, to continue and expand meetings with stakeholders in collaborations with community-based organizations and Implementing Agencies. The research drew on multigenerational and multiracial members of a Council research team, youth researchers, youth participants, supportive adults from youth-serving organizations, and Implementing Agencies of the Regional Park System. The project generated valuable qualitative data and brought teens into parks through the research process. A toolkit with all the activities developed through the research is available for free use.

The research questions focused on how to build and strengthen connections between youth and the Regional Park System. Questions included:

A. What are obstacles to youth access? (W*hat changes can improve access for key subgroups and young people in general?)*

B. What does a great day in the park look like? (*What activities, amenities and experiences are most important to youth and adults who bring them to the park?)*

C. What advice or assets do youth have as they connect with the outdoors? (*How can youth themselves inform Regional Park System priorities*?)

D. How can park agencies build connections to encourage access? (*What can the implementing agency administration, park programming/outreach staff, and Council staff do to foster youth relationship to parks?*)

✓ *53% of residents younger than age 18 will be people of color in 2040. Connecting youth to the outdoors is essential to achieve equitable outcomes in the Twin Cities metropolitan area.*

Young people's access to the Regional Parks System is crucial to reach the goals of the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*. The plan draws on outcomes described in *Thrive MSP 2040,* the region's Metropolitan Development Guide: Livability, equity, stewardship, and sustainability. Parks offer multiple health and recreational benefits that contribute to the region's *livability*. Young people's park use is an important component of *equity;* Twin Cities residents under 20 years old experience higher rates of poverty and are more racially and ethnically diverse than older generations. Their use of regional parks and trails is vital to the *stewardship* and *sustainability* of the system. The system future depends on an ongoing societal commitment and public support.[1] Today's youth will create the shared future dedication to preserve the system's high-quality natural resources offered by our system.

A Council 2016 visitor use study showed that involvement in nature-based outdoor recreation among young adults and their children has declined since the 1990s. Their support is needed for maintaining broad-based public support for park and trail investments. Moreover, connecting youth to the outdoors deserves high priority to provide equitable opportunity. By 2040, 39 percent of the population will be people of color, compared to 24 percent in 2010. The share of people of color increases among younger age groups; 53 percent of residents younger than age 18 will be people of color in 2040. Connecting youth to the outdoors deserves the highest priority to achieve the equitable outcomes required in Council Regional Planning documents.

Why this research matters

Connecting teens with the outdoors has important implications for future public support for park funding, equity, and public health. Prioritizing this age group is important because teens experience unique developmental needs, obstacles, and circumstances related to park access.

The Future of the System Relies on Youth Support

The system's future depends on an ongoing societal commitment and public support for the parks and trails system. This commitment must be renewed with each generation.[2]

✓ *Connecting youth to the outdoors increases likelihood that they will support future public investment in parks.*

Young people become advocates in public outdoors access when they feel an investment in the well-being of natural spaces combines with a belief that civic participation matters and they have the skills to make their civic participation count. Combined, these elements create the basis of the civic commitment needed to support continued funding and enjoyment of the system.[3]

A guiding philosophy underlying this research is that youth connection to the outdoors increases the likelihood that they will support future public investment in parks.

Figure 1. Urban Roots youth enjoying Pine Point Regional Park

Prioritizing Youth Ensures Equitable Access to Parks

The regional park and trail system defines *equitable use* as conditions where social categories do not predict whether someone visits parks and trails in the system. The categories include age (youth and elders), race, ability, ethnicity, national origin, income, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation. In other words, equitable use would be achieved when access to the regional park system is designed with and for Twin Cities residents of all these social and demographic categories. The research team defines equity in the regional park and trail system as being achieved when these social categories are no longer a predictor of access to parks and trails.[4]

The research confirms the findings of the National Recreation and Park Association: Teen access to the outdoors is an important priority to achieve an equitable park and trail system[5]. Youth ages 12 to 20 are more racially and ethnically diverse than the region's general population. Youth who are Black, Indigenous, of color, experiencing poverty or low income, immigrants, or youth who have a disability are less likely to have access to the outdoors, park employment, or opportunities to be involved in the system's planning process. These obstacles pose a potential problem to future park support. If fast-growing segments of the region's population are not accessing the Regional Park System, future public support for the system will likely decline.

Figure 2. Autumn walk in Pine Point Regional Park

Youth Park Access Is a Public Health Issue

Public health includes all efforts to promote and protect the health of people and the communities where they live, learn, work, and play. The Regional Park System is a critical asset in promoting the health of the region's population. The system's unique resource-based amenities contribute to physical, mental, and social health, including cultural and spiritual development, as well as the health of the natural environment.

Access to parks and trails reduces medical costs, increases community trust, and provides mental health benefits to youth. Contact with nature is a low-cost public health measure compared to conventional medical interventions. Thousands of articles and four decades of peer-reviewed research publications lead to one general conclusion: Time outdoors will improve anyone's – including youth's – physical and mental health. When the community gets outdoors – into the parks and on the trails – health care is moved "upstream," from curing sickness in the medical system to preventing it.

Minimum dose of nature needed

Time in nature for 120 minutes per week achieves a higher degree of health and general well-being. This is true across all groups of people, including older adults and people with long-term health issues. It doesn't matter if the two hours happens all at once or across the week.[6]

Physical health benefits of time outdoors

Spending time in nature lowers probability of physical health ailments including high blood pressure, heart disease, allergies, obesity, myopia (nearsightedness), diabetes, and asthma. Time outside has been found to lead to improved general health in adults and children alike.[7]

Mental health benefits

Figure 3. Troop 100 enjoying the open field in St. Croix Bluffs Regional Park

Time in nature reduces stress, depression, and anxiety. Contact with nature generates greater happiness, physical and mental energy, a sense of well-being, and life satisfaction. Time in nature also gives our brains the ability to recover from the mental tiredness ("attention fatigue"). A 20-minute walk in nature – summer or winter – can improve a person's ability to concentrate.[8]

Special benefits to youth from time in the outdoors

Time in green spaces has an even higher positive effect on self-esteem for adolescents than for other age groups, with a bigger positive effect on those suffering from mental health conditions. [9]

Impact of nature connection on youth mental health

Feeling connected to nature protects and preserves mental health in adolescence, and reduces levels of distress, as well as emotional and behavioral problems.[10]

Teens Are Different from Other Park Users

Because young people have less autonomy than adults, they rely on someone else to get them to the parks. Young people rely more on organizations to get into the outdoors relative to children (who connect through family) and adults (who connect on their own).[11] Consequently, young people's situations call for unique strategies to enable and motivate them to use the regional parks.

The developmental period for adolescents is one of searching for identity and asking important questions about their place in the world. Prior research has revealed that this developmental process means that time in the outdoors is a chance to accomplish feelings of belonging, competence, responsibility, and self-regulation that are positively integrated into identity. Further implications have been noted in prior research. Adolescents:

- May experience reduced confidence in the outdoors compared with children. [12]

- Visit parks less often than children. This difference is greater for Asian and Latinx females but exists for all youth except African American boys. African American male teens are more likely to visit parks and be active while there.[13]

- Feel a need for outdoor spaces where others are not looking at them.[14]

- Promote physical, emotional, and mental development by spending time in recreational, restorative, and social activities: physical development, social competence, social responsibility, management of free time, self-identity, self-esteem, and sense of belonging. [15]

This Council research study examines these specific needs of young people in relation to outdoors access.

Research Process (Methodology)

Findings: What you discovered
Validity: Something that's real
        – Urban Roots Youth Researcher Definitions

This research project was designed to:

- Answer questions through relevant, credible data to enable the Council and Implementing Agencies to better meet the goals and requirements of the 2040 and forthcoming 2050 Regional Parks Policy Plan.[16]

- Enable youth to better engage in civic life.

- Build youth confidence in visiting parks

- Value community expertise and knowledge in the planning process

- Inform young people of how research is done and how they can do it for community change.

- Inform young people of career opportunities in parks, government, and research.

- Widely disseminate research for maximum impact

Table 1. Research Participants

Youth participants:	85
Age range:	12-20
Number of hours each youth participated:	2-10
Average youth researcher hours:	6
Supportive adults participating:	43
Adult focus groups:	6
Park agencies staff:	11
Council staff primary researchers:	5

The research was a community engagement process that connected youth organizations to park Implementing Agencies. Fieldwork, informal interviews, focus groups, and photography were generated as a way for youth to increase their awareness of the regional park system while contributing data and analysis. All members of the research team – Council project researchers, youth researchers, supportive adults and park staff – played a role throughout the research effort.

The term *data generation* acknowledges that the data were created by in a participatory and analytic process rather than "collected as a preexisting source." Council project researchers used qualitative methods, including a multi-faceted field experience, interview data, analysis of photos, validity conversations (a program of activities and discussion to verify the accuracy of the Council research findings), focus groups, and youth-led discussion groups.

The methodology is discussed in Appendix 1. The Council created a team that included Council researchers (four interns and one staff member), members of youth-serving community organizations (YSOs) and professional park Implementing Agency staff. Council researchers and YSO youth researchers and adults met at the start to identify priorities for outdoor experiences.

In the next step, Implementing Agency staff and Council researchers met to discuss park resources and potential staff contributions. Notes from these meetings became data to inform the findings.

From these three-way meetings Council staff developed in-park experiences for the youth participants, which took place during October and November 2019. In these experiences, youth completed a field research challenge, engaged in additional fun activities and educational activities with the naturalist, shared a meal, and discussed ideas with other participants.

In November and December, youth and Council researchers held validity conversations, a program of activities and discussion to verify the accuracy of the Council research findings. One YSO group analyzed visual data. The Council research team collaborated to create an activity book, this report, a toolkit of activities, and a presentation.

Figure 4. Urban Roots youth in a field challenge at Pine Point Regional Park

Chapter 2 | Obstacles to Youth Access to the Outdoors: Findings and Recommendations

The study's findings are derived from three primary data sources. First, Council research team members observed teens talking about or experiencing obstacles to access or enjoyment. Second, supportive adults answered questions in focus group conversations. Third, youth analyzed data in validity conversations that included reflections about obstacles. The chapter describes the obstacles and offers recommendations specific to the respective barrier based in data sources and additional literature review. The general recommendations at the end of this report contain additional steps that the Council and Implementing Agencies could take to reduce these obstacles.

Seven main obstacles prevent young people from connecting to the outdoors or diminish their connection to it were found in the study data:

- Safety concerns
- Lack of opportunity to learn necessary skills
- Racism and exclusion
- Low, or lack of, awareness of parks and amenities
- Time constraints
- Transportation constraints, and
- The intersecting obstacle of economic hardship

Safety concerns

When youth and supportive adults talked about safety, they expressed feelings about a range of factors. Youth needed to feel safe when spending time in parks. Supportive adults needed to know that their youth would be safe for them to give permission to visit the parks. Prior Council research about communities of color and regional park access note that safety concerns are a barrier, and "the concept and description of safety differ significantly across [racial and ethnic populations]." [17] Three types of safety concerns emerged in the youth and parks data: nature and remoteness, strangers, and law enforcement. The less time youth and parents had previously spent in nature-based regional parks, the more nature and stranger concerns were an obstacle. A summary of all observed safety concerns is listed in Table 2.

Safety as an issue has special dimensions for youth access to parks compared to other age groups. Because young people have less autonomy than adults, they rely on others to get to the parks. Addressing safety concerns of supportive adults is important to expanding youth access.[18] Additionally, social norms often view young people's time in the outdoors with suspicion or hostility. Because teenagers engage in different types of activities than adults, their presence in public spaces is sometimes perceived as either a threatening or a vulnerable presence.[19]

For example, parents and guardians the Organization of Liberians in Minnesota confirmed that their youth had had encountered hostility in public spaces and sought reassurances that the same would not happen to them in the regional parks. They feared for their youth's safety because people in neighborhood parks have called the police when their youth were there, when "all they want is to be out and about." Park agencies can help create safer spaces for

youth to hang out and consider how park spaces can be administered for successful intergenerational and intercultural use.

Table 2. Safety concerns expressed by youth and supportive adults

Concern	Example	Supportive Adults	Organizations
Strangers hurting youth	"People are dangerous."	Outdoor Latino MN, Urban Roots	Organization of Liberians in Minnesota, Outdoor Latino MN, Troop 100
Violence (gun violence, assaults)	Field notes: A boy's parents are reluctant to send him to outdoor spaces . They feel there is increased violence in the world, in the outdoors. And if there is violence out in the world, that violence can occur in the parks.	Urban Roots	Organization of Liberians in MN
Violence from police, negative police encounters	"We don't go to [certain counties] for programming because of the danger with ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement]. Families don't want to go there because the sheriff works with ICE." [20]	Organization of Liberians in MN, Outdoor Latino MN, Troop 100	Organization of Liberians in MN
Remoteness of park is dangerous (crime, illness, getting lost)	"I worry that they will get sick. With three or four kids, it's fine. With one alone, I worry about them getting lost. I don't know if there is some way that they can see where they're going. The parks are large, I do worry a bit about them getting lost."	Outdoor Latino MN	Asian Media Access
Protectiveness is a sign of good parenting	"It's a parent's job to worry about their kids and their whereabouts."	Organization of Liberians in MN, Outdoor Latino MN	Organization of Liberians in MN, Asian Media Access
Nature is unpredictable	Field notes: Youth noted that being in the outdoors can be "unpredictable." Asked about safety concerns, they said: "bad weather," "animals can come out."		Troop 100, Urban Roots, Asian Media Access, Org of Liberians in MN
Being in nature causes injuries	Field notes: When asked about winter sports, one boy talked about a sledding accident that ended in a fractured leg. It was clear the threat of injury was a major concern to him.	Outdoor Latino MN (E. coli concern)	Troop 100
Elders (grandparent generation) afraid for youth safety	"Older parents are afraid." A fear of guns in the park. Physical safety. A protectiveness of their girls. Family and community understandings of nature as dangerous.[21]	Troop 100, AMA group (elders, not parents in group)	Urban Roots

Concern	Example	Supportive Adults	Organizations
Poor sanitation creates unsafe conditions	One youth described a time when she went to Phalen Park to fish. "I looked at the water and it was so dirty. There was a bunch of food wrappers and then I found a needle." "There's a stereotype that places that are dirty and filled with litter make people feel unsafe."		Urban Roots

A lack of explanation about park events created a safety obstacle to enjoyment For example, one youth felt nervous all day at Elm Creek Park because she thought she heard gunshots. The group did not have a way to resolve the uncertainty without park staff or written information nearby. The youth also did not ask staff when she returned, perhaps because the large group setting did not feel like a good place to express fears. The young person continued to be distressed throughout the day, commenting on the noises. She was worried about gunshots in the area.

Nature and stranger-related safety concerns were more often expressed when someone had fewer prior experiences with regional parks. Without being familiar with the parks, adults and youth assessed park safety based on their experience with other public spaces. For example, one parent considered safety based on conditions at the Mall of America:

> *Are there going to be other people around us, other people besides us? Because with everything that's happening today, it's not safe. I go to Mall of America and I see really bad things happen, [even with] all the people around. … There is so much security there, [so] imagine what it must be like out here [in nature]? If you're out here by yourself, sometimes you start to think, "Is something going to happen to us? If it's just me out there?"*

Other youth and adults who had not spent much time in the Regional Parks considered safety there based on experiences in neighborhood parks, citing fears of "homeless people" and "strangers."

In addition, users with less experience in regional parks drew on general understandings about the unpredictability and lack of control associated with nature. Youth new to a space often wondered whether wild animals would be dangerous there. The remoteness of some of the visited parks created a concern about getting lost, being kidnapped, or getting injured. Youth spoke these concerns out loud during the first hour of in-park experiences in more remote park settings (for example, Pine Point Regional Park, Spring Lake Park Reserve, and St. Croix Bluffs Regional Park). Notably, these concerns were not mentioned after the first hour, nor at the later post-park validity conversations. Instead, in the latter part of park visits, the youth expressed increasing feelings of joy, wonder, curiosity, and observations from their experiences. Spending time in the park seemed to make them feel safer, at least when youth were in groups of people from familiar communities.

Strategies to Address Safety Concerns

Positive nature-based experiences diminish safety concerns. This was true for both youth new to the parks and for the groups that previously had more nature-based experiences. Youth expressed concerns about safety, but they completed activities after reassurance by adults who answered questions. No youth refused to participate due to safety concerns.

Parents with outdoor experience valued how time in the outdoors taught youth how to manage risk and be safer. A Troop 100 father commented how this was accomplished.:

> *'Don't fall over the cliff'. Or 'You're perched too close to the edge of the dock, kid, don't fall in'. General stuff. But being outdoors teaches those kids about those commonsense things. They learn what boundaries are like. I shouldn't jump over here or go beyond this point. It creates a certain boundary or distance for safety. A way of thinking.*

Park agencies can help foster feelings of safety when they provide information that helps users understand how to negotiate the park or trail. For example, what are the rules and tips that help make a safe visit? How can users get help from park staff or emergency assistance? What is the crime rate in parks compared with other public spaces? How are park staff there to help rather than discipline or discourage teens from having fun? What are the special rules and tips that help make a safe visit? After a discussion about visiting the parks in winter, one adult recommended more direct communication about safety:

> *You have to go to the community and tell them about things. There is also a fear of safety. I am afraid of ice fishing because I am afraid of falling in the ice. Am I safe? I need to be told about how this is safe.*

The girls from Asian Media Access (AMA) had a similar recommendation. When asked how to build confidence in parents to let them visit parks, the girls suggested that parents need more invitations to visit parks:

> *Invite them more often so [parents] will learn about the surroundings and then when we go again, they will say, 'Oh yeah, I've been there and I know what it's like,' so then they will let us go.*

Youth and adults recommended that parks and trails have accessible security staff who were not police. Researchers asked youth to discuss whether uniforms or being armed would make a difference in creating feelings of safety. The youth of Organization of Liberians in Minnesota said that these distinctions didn't matter if it wasn't the police doing security.

Public data show that the Regional Park System is a safe public space in terms of crime, injuries, and animal behavior. Furthermore, research demonstrates that park visitation provides an important health benefit by helping to protect youth from adverse mental health conditions and social isolation. In the discussions, park staff were able to turn the topic of safety into reassurances about visiting the parks and what they have to offer. Youth could build familiarity though in-park experiences, useful information, and encouragement to participate in activities and learning experiences.

Opportunity for Skills Learning

To enjoy equitable access to parks, young people need opportunities for skills learning. Skills knowledge helps achieve feelings of competence, a necessary element in building motivation for outdoor activity. Some skills, such as swimming, are baseline safety requirements to enjoy park amenities. The need for skills-attainment is a structural shortcoming due to lack of investment in opportunities. This issue was twofold. First, activities were often not clearly defined. Secondly, youth described a lack of structured opportunities to learn skills. Swimming was the most prevalent programming opportunity deficit, but others included biking, winter sports, camping, and archery. Programming, information, and relationship-building can overcome this obstacle. Many people, both youth and parents, said that they would love the opportunity to develop new outdoor skills. These skills include swimming, boating, camping, biking, ice fishing, horseback riding, and many others. "Just because they are not coming, does not mean they are not interested," the director of Asian Media Access said.

Why should the regional park system prioritize low-barrier access to skills building? Prior research offers two answers: Safety and increased motivation to visit parks. First, park activities need to be described clearly without assuming that visitors are already familiar with

them. During in-park experiences, some youth reported that they were seeing activities or learning what they were for the first time. These included archery, horseback riding, and cross-country skiing.

For example, one young person had a conversation with an outreach staff member at the archery range at Spring Lake Park Reserve. The youth saw the archery target and asked what it was for. The Dakota County staff replied that they're used in archery and asked if that were something he would be interested to try. He said no. She further explained what a bow and arrow are and how they're used in the park. He then exclaimed that he would like to participate in archery but did not know what they were before she explained it.

Other unfamiliar activities noted by youth included sledding and cross-country skiing. Girls in Asian Media Access heard a naturalist talk about the cross-country skiing trails. All the girls nodded but said nothing. The Council researcher asked them if they knew what cross-country skiing was, and they said they did not. The naturalist and researcher explained the activity, noting that it was considered a great form of exercise and a way to see the park in the winter. While clear information and explanations do not remove all obstacles to enjoying an activity, they begin to provide basic knowledge that youth can use to pursue further learning and possibly the activity itself.

Figure 5. Outdoor Latino Minnesota youth and a parent use binoculars to scan the scene at Spring Lake Park

Second, youth need structured opportunities to learn skills. During in-park experiences, youth described the learning they needed to be able to enjoy the parks. Swimming and cycling were the two most important skills in this category. Two in-park experiences were held near bodies of water that allowed for watercraft activities. At seeing these activities, youth expressed disappointment or fear about not being able to swim:

> *An eleven-year-old eyed the boats on the St. Croix River. He told a research team member, 'I wanna get over my fear of water because I don't know how to swim. But I want to learn how to swim… I'm scared of the water because I don't know how to swim and it stops me from going on a boat. But I want to know.'*

Parents in Troop 100 highlighted this as a concern for some of the youth in the Troop. One adult volunteer commented, "We just went swimming and not a lot of kids know how to swim. I know my kids don't know yet."

Swimming

The lack of opportunities to learn how to swim can be a significant obstacle for youth enjoyment of regional parks, which are located in a *"high-quality natural resource setting that are contiguous to lakes, rivers, or other water bodies." (2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan)*. Eighty-three percent of system parks, special recreation features, or park reserves (54 out of 60) have water-based activities such as swimming, paddling, or boating. When teens can't swim, they cannot fully enjoy these opportunities. For example, one youth visiting Elm Creek Park Reserve

was afraid to walk on the bridge going over a lake because he could not swim. Troop 100 was the only group where parents reported the opportunity for youth to take swim lessons. A supportive adult in Asian Media Access told Council researchers, "We say our kids don't know how to swim – they know how to drown!... Schools don't have swimming lessons. They don't have a pool. How are they going to learn?"

Historic conditions of segregated pool access and current spatial inequalities in access to swimming lessons mean that an estimated half of American children do not know how to swim. The figure is almost 80 percent among children in household incomes under $50,000.[22] In Minnesota, children of color drown at a rate seven times higher than that of white children. Open-water swimming presents additional first-time experiences that require still more knowledge to swim in an unfamiliar setting. Given the significance of water resources to the Regional Park System, this issue warrants attention to provide users with equitable access to park opportunities.

The situation faced by teens is unique because swim curricula assume the learner is a child. One adult leader in Troop 100 talked about how he felt pressure to hide his lack of swimming ability:

> *I personally didn't know how to swim until I was 19. I was in the troop. I always faked it.* [At this point, other adults in the focus group tease him.] *'You got promoted to staff, and then you just got to go to the tower [away from the water so you didn't have to know how to swim].' I was [at] level three for two years at camp, 15 and 16 years old.*

As a teen, feelings of shame about not knowing how to swim can lead to their taking risks to avoid being "revealed" as a non-swimmer, adding an additional safety concern for teen park visitors.

Other desired skills

Parents and adult leaders expressed a desire for their youth and themselves to have more access to additional outdoor skills learning:

> A parent at the AMA focus group: *I'd like to learn more about fishing. I fish a lot. I want to learn more about ice fishing. I know you need an auger, but that is expensive. How can I get to do those things?*

> A parent from Troop 100: *I would like for my daughter to learn to ride a bike.... When I came, a sponsor bought me a bike, and I couldn't ride it..., I want her to learn.*

Youth expressed the desire to gain new skills including:

- Youth from the Organization of Liberians in Minnesota said they wanted to learn camping skills. One of the boys then said he didn't know if he would like being outside like that for days if he went camping but was willing to try, if there was an opportunity to leave after one day if he didn't like it.

- Youth from Troop 100 said they wanted to learn fishing skills. The group all agreed that there was a lack of sport-related educational programs that parks offer to youths, such as teaching youths how to play a certain sport. An example a scout gave was, "I want them to teach me how to fish and have like a fishing tournament afterwards."

Youth expressed their most desired new skills as:

- Swimming
- Bike riding
- Camping
- Survival skills (fire building, orienteering)
- Sledding
- Horseback riding
- Archery
- Ice fishing
- Cross-country skiing

Strategies to Address Opportunity Obstacle

Park agencies in the region have innovated to remove skills obstacles for youth. Efforts include targeted skills-building classes and courses at low and no cost. For example, Dakota County and Outdoor Latino Minnesota created *Fiesta en la nieve* (party in the snow), a three-hour Sunday event where participants could try sledding and snowshoeing for free,

In addition to enjoying complimentary food and s'mores. Three Rivers Park District offers "Try It" experiences with no fees, including the annual Nordic Ski Opener and "Try It: Fishing." Three Rivers, Anoka County, and Saint Paul park departments offer camping skills courses. Three Rivers has a trailer of gear and provides training to organizational and community representatives to teach basic camping skills to be able to lead a group on an overnight trip. The gear is then free to check out, and Three Rivers staff can accompany groups new to camping to advise, as needed.[23]

The obstacle to swimming skill-building is not frequently addressed within the Regional Park System. The Swim Pond at Lake Minnetonka offers skill-building swim lessons. Learn-to-ride-a-bike programs are occasionally offered on regional trails through partnerships with Bicycle Alliance of Minnesota. Organizations, particularly youth-focused and with leaders who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color, have taught youth outdoors skills. The ability of such organizations to connect youth to the outdoors is discussed in Chapter 6.

Youth and adults talked passionately about the need to remove obstacles for families by eliminating fees and providing appropriate program scheduling. They said the application processes for free access to the parks for low-income families were cumbersome and difficult to find except for the extremely well-informed. Parks staff of the Council and Three Rivers Park District tried to apply on site for fee waivers on the day of an in-park experience

Figure 6: Youth enjoy bonfire with park staff at Three Rivers Park District

but could not because the process was too complicated to organize. Forms were difficult to fill out on mobile phones, and a bank of computers would have been required to complete. Lack of opportunities to gain skills hamper youth enjoyment and safety in the regional park and trail system. To enjoy full access to what parks can offer, young people need wider opportunities for learning outdoor skills. Skills building is a necessary component to achieve feelings of competence, a necessary element in building motivation for outdoor activity.

Some skills, such as swimming, are baseline safety requirements to enjoy park amenities. The need for skills-attainment is a structural shortcoming due to lack of investment in opportunities. Without this investment, the opportunity to enjoy outdoor activities is unevenly allocated based on economic factors.

In-park racism and unwelcoming park culture

Structural racism is an ongoing concern in park systems locally and nationally.[24] The issue of in-park racism was emphasized by parents of color and described by the youth research participants. Parents and youth recounted experiences with racism, racial exclusion, and cultural climate when visiting outdoor venues. The problem is barrier to achieving racial equity. A central priority in the Council's 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan is to "strengthen equitable usage of regional parks and trails by all our region's residents…"[25] Finally, racial equity is a crucial factor for youth access in particular, considering 40 percent of youth in the Twin Cities region are of color. At the same time, other research has found that cultural issues and racism are less important constraints to accessing recreation than limited knowledge, limited access, and feeling too busy to visit.[26] Although racism may rank somewhat lower than other constraints in this study, it nonetheless presents major personal and emotional obstacles for children, their parents, and other involved adults to fully enjoy the parks and their amenities.

The research identified two ways that racism affects the park experience for youth of color. The first is *in-park racist acts*, the encounters with police and other visitors that create a sense of discomfort, even danger. Encounters with racism are harmful to young people can cause parents to keep children from visiting the parks.[27] The second is *unwelcoming park culture*, the subtle and not-so-subtle messages that send the message to make people of color feel unwelcomed in parks.

Parents reported encounters with racism while visiting leisure and recreation spaces in the outdoors, including the regional park system, and in other parks in Minnesota. The spectacular resources of Twin Cities region outdoors are denied to many Minnesotans because of historical and contemporary patterns of racial exclusion.

The adults from all five youth supporting organizations interviewed for this study specifically named racism as a deterrent to park visitation and enjoyment. Participants in all adult focus groups recounted incidents of racism in Minnesota natural spaces, including within the regional park and trail system.

They had additional concerns about park inclusivity, such as lack of representative staffing, omission of their own cultural history, non-inclusive promotional materials, lack of multilingual materials, and "going to the park and no one like me is there." Adults and youth agreed that these elements sent the message that "parks are for white people." The fact that this group of the most motivated parents felt that racism was a barrier may suggest that infrequent and nonusers of color might also be limited by this obstacle.

No one variable or factor can explain racial exclusion in parks. Instead, a combination of prejudicial intrapersonal (attitudinal), interpersonal, and structural factors together create an obstacle to visitation for youth of color.[28]

In-Park Experiences

Police

Parents from Organization of Liberians in Minnesota (OLM) and Troop 100 explained that targeting by police was an obstacle to park visitation, particularly for young men. When asked in a focus group, "Is there anything preventing your kids from visiting the park?", a parent from Organization of Liberians in Minnesota immediately replied:

> *Now, our family has problems with racism in the park. There are problems with park policy. They see my boys, and they think they are some threat. This is the reason you don't see us in the parks as much. Our kids are loud…*

The program coordinator for the youth enrichment program at OLM agreed, adding:

> *We tell kids, 'Use your inside voice.' That means that the outside voice is loud… They want to run wild, but this does not mean they are violent. They are not violent. They are not causing trouble. People call the police on them. All they want is to be out and about.*

Racialized policing of youth of color in parks and other public spaces is a national problem. Young men of color are particularly vulnerable, as the OLM mother notes in her concerns. Race and age intersect to create unique vulnerabilities for young people of color through negative police encounters, creating a major obstacle that prevents a growing demographic of Minnesotans from enjoying their public parks.

Other visitors

Parents of color expressed concerns about the potential racist behavior of other park visitors, saying that they visited park spaces feeling concerned that something negative would happen. In the outdoors, they would receive subtle and not-so-subtle messages that indicated that some white park uses saw families of color as an anomaly in the outdoors.

One dad, Henry, was an enthusiastic mountain biker. He felt the mountain biking community was friendly. However, the risk of encounters with racist outdoor users was still on his mind:

> *I haven't had any racial confrontation or anything like that. The only thing we talk about [with other park visitors] is what we love to do. That's it. As far as thinking about taking my kids out, I do think about stuff like that, but it's never happened. You know, we get the stare and that's pretty much it. Like, 'Oh, I haven't seen you around.'*
>
> *Another dad in the focus group offered his interpretation of this kind of encounter: 'Yeah, you're out of place. What are you doing in this neck of the woods?' Henry agreed, 'Yes, like you're out of place.'*

Supportive adults of color described these encounters as ranging from "looks" to questions to aggression. Troop 100 supportive adults had spent more time with their youth in nature-based

recreation relative to other parent focus groups. They described experiences that remained with them when thinking about their youth getting outdoors.

A Troop 100 father described both the feeling and the incident he experienced:

> *We're minorities, we're people of color. Depending where you go* [in the outdoors]*, it can be tense. For example, if you're out west, you get questions about things a lot. In areas where it's predominantly white, in less diverse communities. So I, as a parent, that's always in the forefront of my mind.*

> *I was fishing down at Shakopee. We're on canoes. There's three of us. It's a tiny watercraft. But there's this bass boat that kept zipping. On this huge lake, but they are right there next to us, zipping by, creating wakes that will rock our canoe. After we left, they left, too. So maybe I might have been reading into it, but that whole experience of…you know, it wasn't very pleasant.*

Unwelcoming Climate

Another contributing factor to an unwelcoming climate for park access is created through operations and management of parks, including marketing and communications efforts, community engagement, physical features, programming, social context, and transportation.[29] Youth and adults talked about being "outsiders" – feeling out of place, overly strict park rules, and lack of diversity in staffing.

Feeling out of place

Young people and their supportive adults noticed and commented on occasions when they felt under scrutiny or felt too different from the majority of park visitors. For example, one Liberian-American youth described discomfort while visiting Elm Creek Nature Reserve:

> An OLM youth: *I feel like I am not at home here.* [Asked why he doesn't feel at home]*…'how awkward people make things.'* [Then asked how people make things awkward]*…'when people stare at you.'*

Even when having fun, a parent from Outdoor Latino Minnesota had the feeling of being the "only one" at an organized ski event. She commented:

> *There is a chance to do skiing with Outdoor Latino in December. One time, we seemed like the black bean of the family. We went, two families of Latinos, and we were the only ones. Only* [white people were] *there. No Black people. No Asian people. They like to do this sport. And you feel a bit weird, because you always see all races at the park. But not at that event.*

Negative responses of other visitors – staring or making comments – can turn discomfort into avoidance. Feeling out of place hinders visitation if the discomfort of visiting exceeds the pleasure and perceived benefits of visiting. As Ambreen Tariq, founder of @BrownPeopleCamping writes:

> *So, for many of us people of color, venturing into remote wilderness spaces to try something new or challenging, all [the] while hauling the extra weight of being self-conscious or anxious as a minority in the*

outdoors, can make for a pretty uncomfortable experience. I would, but no one out there looks like me. I would, but I don't feel safe being the only minority.[30]

Teens of color particularly tend toward avoidance when they feel out of place. Social relationships and "fitting in" are especially important to adolescents.[31] Park operations can pay close attention to ensuring that youth don't feel like they're the "only" in park programming.

Park rules

Park rules can contribute to the sense of exclusion. Youth are afraid of inadvertently breaking the rules[32], and this concern is shared by parents:

> *I want to make sure that my kids know all the rules. They need to know the limits and regulations and stuff. I want to make sure they know the law and respect the environment and all that stuff.*
>
> – Troop 100 dad

Navigating the rules is a concern. For example, young adults in their 20s and 30s who volunteered with Troop 100 described fear of rules being unequally applied to Hmong youth, particularly at regional parks in more rural areas:

> *The rules and regulations can be a barrier. Policing can [intimidate] in rural regional parks. We can get approached when we're not even doing anything wrong.*

> *We want to do karaoke outdoors at family gatherings. This is a competition that clans like to do at picnics. Every clan does a picnic. The whole clan will go together.*

Similarly, OLM adults noted that rules about food and music deterred adults from bringing youth to parks for family and cultural celebrations:

> *The health department tries to regulate traditional food. We are preparing our food, in our culture. They tell us that in order to be in the park, we have to cater our food. I might as well stay home and cook there.*

> *The first information is whether you can have facilities permission. The local parks do not want any music in the park. People have the event, and that is one of our community concerns, of music.*[33]

Adults and youth from the Hmong community mentioned a chain of circumstances in which youth would not be able to access parks because elders did not support the visitation, and elders would not visit in part because of a fear of inadvertently breaking the rules. As a young adult volunteer in Troop 100 explained:

> *I think the customer service aspect can do a lot, too. A lot of times, Hmong elders, their interactions with authority tends to be only because they're in trouble. Because it's negative. So people at the parks can just say 'Hi' and talk with them; [then] they won't have the mindset that anytime a park employee talks to me that something is wrong.*

As he made this response, all the participants in the Troop 100 focus group nodded. A mother of Scouts in the troop, added, in reference to her own elder relatives:

> *They want to get outdoors, but they're so afraid. They're not sure who to ask. They don't know, they're not sure who to ask. You're not going to get in trouble for asking questions. But they think that they are going to get in trouble for asking questions.*

Study participants wanted to make sure teens in the park followed the rules. Across six in-park experiences with over 80 youth, Council research staff did not observe a single disciplinary exchange with park staff or an example of breaking the rules. Teens and their parents want park visitation to be safe and environmentally sustainable. They also want the rules to be fair, applied equitably, and be established with multiple cultural contexts in mind. Hmong supportive adults noted that family relationships required elders to receive information and friendly exchanges with parks staff in order to feel secure about the rules. Sometimes, rules were an element to keep in mind, while at other times the rules were an obstacle to youth park visitation.

Parks staffing

One of the primary findings to emphasize is that parks staffing is a crucial component to connect youth with the outdoors. A skilled recreation professional provides a high-quality experience to build youth feelings of autonomy, competency, and connectedness. Staff diversity mattered. A staff member at Urban Roots provided feedback to the Council lead researcher during the validity conversation, "Your project works because you have a diverse team with researchers of color. The kids see that people in the outdoors look like them." This observation affirms research that f adolescents are more likely to see role models in adults who are like them, a concept known as "role model congruence.[34]

Figure 7. Former Troop 100 members guiding troop youth through St. Croix Bluffs Regional Park

The need for role model congruence with parks staff was most often advocated by supportive adults who themselves had recently been teens, offering feedback from the perspective of young professionals. Some of them worked in parks and recreation, while others served in other youth-serving professions. Like the Urban Roots staff member, they spoke frankly of a lack of parks staff of color in the park system:

> *The regional and state parks need to diversify their workforce. It needs to look like the people who visit. Not just the people who live close by. Because we don't live there, but we go up there every summer. You don't see…[a parks staff person who] represents the people of Minnesota.*

As early career professionals, they described experiences with institutional barriers of job networks that keep professionals of color out of desirable parks and recreation jobs. This can contribute to a lack of role models for youth of color in the outdoors.

This situation also contributes, as noted in the previous finding, to people of color feeling out of place:

> *My brother…had an experience. He's in water management, water research. And just going to those conferences, it feels like a very old white boys club. There is no representation in panels on those conferences. If you have to go through the employment line [to get a job like that]…the barriers you have to overcome…the qualifications you have to meet…. Other layers of hidden pathways you have to learn how to navigate. It comes down to who you know, [and] do they like you? These are some of the institutional barriers. This is my observation.*

In other regions, park agencies have worked to mitigate unconscious bias and diversify park staff, recognizing this effort as a key opportunity to engage and develop youth. These efforts include hiring that values applicant-lived experiences, networking opportunities for staff of color, professional development, and mentorship.[35] As the coordinating body of the Regional Park System, the Metropolitan Council could have a role in encouraging such a networking opportunity across the 10 Implementing Agencies.

Strategies to Address Obstacles of In-Park Racism, Exclusion and Climate

Addressing these obstacles aligns with all Regional Park System efforts to repair the historical, institutional, and personal harm created by racism. These obstacles make other barriers worse, such as lack of awareness of park opportunities, safety concerns, and lack of opportunity to learn new outdoor skills. Youth and adults talked specifically about racism in relation to in-park experiences, welcoming climate, non-inclusive cultural histories, and staffing. In addition to next-steps mentioned here, the findings and recommendations offer other potential opportunities for action.

In-park incidents and culturally exclusionary rules reveal the need for conversations about race, Engagement notes, racism and culture throughout the park system. Amanda Fong, supervisor of community

> *As we're doing community engagement, the changes need to happen [in other areas of park administration]. Do youth have trouble with park policy? What are the internal operations within the full system? It doesn't make sense to bring in an organization to enjoy the park if they then run into an issue with facility staff or the Park Police.... Our department's relationship with the police has been mostly good. The few conflicts that we've have led to further conversations, including coaching sessions for police officers involved, informal staff training, and increased communication between community engagement and police.*

Fong's analysis details two insights. First, efforts to end in-park racism and other forms of racial exclusion are an all-agency effort, with communication across agency sectors. Second, the efforts need to come from the park system rather than expecting community members to be the change agents. Conversations around rules, a specific context discussed by research participants, is one area where all-agency conversations could address this obstacle. Youth

researchers recommended parks that offered clear communication of rules and explanation of *why* the rules are in place.

Park agencies can set expectations that racist acts by visitors are unacceptable through public notices, help-line phone numbers, reporting protocols, and staff interventions. Communications can message to visitors that the park's visitors are a multicultural, multilingual population. Some of these strategies would also address issues of exclusion and climate. For example, Washington County obtained grant funding to install multilingual loudspeaker announcements and signage, informing *all visitors* that a diverse usership is expected. Research in the Council and nationally have found that these constraints can be addressed "by increasing diversity among park staff, creating programs relevant to racial and ethnic minorities, partnering with relevant community organizations (for example., church groups, communities of color coalitions), and considering more facilities and services where appropriate (for example, barbeques, picnic areas)."[36] Youth researchers spoke and read English fluently but noted that multilingual signs made it easier for their families to enjoy the parks. Information in non-English languages can also take the pressure of youth to serve as translators for older family members.

Creating welcoming park spaces

One suggestion was continued investment in creating more inclusive spaces. A father from Troop 100 described:

> *I think creating the space to be more inclusive. We do this all the time in schools, print posters of people who look like the kids going to school. Representation.*

Another parent in the group continued:

> *When [he] mentioned signs, it reminds me of the whole name change of Lake Calhoun. Changing it to Bde Maka Ska. I still have a hard time with the name. But even that in itself just changes the vibe around. It felt like a little bit more welcoming. More inviting all of a sudden. Not as dictated by boundaries, and history and who was here before. It had that aura all of a sudden. So maybe more inclusive practices from signs to training for people who work there. Maybe how to be more competent in working across cultures.*

The father's discussion of Bde Maka Ska expresses appreciation for Minneapolis Parks and Recreation's investment in inclusivity even when related to ethnic identities different from one's own. The new Metropolitan Council equity analysis requirement includes consideration of historical context. Many parks and trails have rich multicultural histories, including Indigenous connections to place (Indian Mounds Regional Park), immigration stories (Phalen Lake Park), African American architectural design (Lilydale Regional Park), and history of socio-economic inequality as a former poor farm (Pine Point Regional Park). Youth and supportive adults expressed enthusiasm to know more about these stories. Urban Roots youth wrote in their public comment letter about the Regional Parks Policy Plan amendment:

> *Parks are more impactful when they provide a bigger history…Telling histories is meaningful. Then, when visitors come, they know what land they're standing on, what it means to stand there, and who is connected to the land. When we visit a park, we want to know about all the events that happened there and how the land has*

changed…The histories need to be more inclusive, not just one group. It's neat to know these things. Can parks include more than one history?

Lack of culturally relevant programming is a constraint that prevents attachment and belonging to park spaces. Youth made many enthusiastic recommendations about programming to create connections between the park and area residents of color. Youth recommended bringing cultures together and celebrating specific cultural heritage events. Sesay of Urban Roots interviewed his uncle for the research project. Noted a Council researcher during Sesay's validity conversation presentation:

> *Sesay's uncle answered all the questions in the interview and Sesay took notes to present. Sesay highlighted that his uncle suggested winter ice skating and more pavilions to hold events at, as well to "make the park more inclusive [to all cultures and ethnic groups]." He suggested signage in different languages and large annual communal parties.*

Another Urban Roots youth researcher, Sadie, interviewed a neighbor. Sadie's interviewee suggested that the parks should have more communal projects. When asked what the neighbor meant by that, Sadie referenced the Pagoda/Chinese temple. They would like to see a "variety of projects that include everyone else's cultures [because] it might bring them in more or make them feel more welcome."

The findings in this section are not new or unexpected. Council and other research has extensively documented similar research results. In-park racism and park racial climate issues are not disconnected from the other obstacles discussed in this report or prior Council research. At the same time, the issue merits continued attention, honest dialogue, and bold action. Experiences of racism result in lost opportunities of youth connecting with our regional park system.

Increasing awareness of park opportunities

In the Twin Cities region and nationally, lack of awareness is a primary obstacle to park visitation. It exists across racial/ethnic and income groups and is more important than even proximity to parks as a constraint on visitation.[37] In a study of 37 communities and 34,000 respondents, only time limitations exceeded lack of awareness as a reported constraint. Enjoyment of and support for parks requires that potential visitors know that parks exist, programming is available, and that outdoor resources are accessible. National data show that the public tends to be less aware of trails and parks than of golf courses, swimming pools, and pharmacies. To influence visitation, awareness of park features and characteristics is as important as knowledge that the park exists at all.

This section describes how youth are affected by this constraint and the recommendations by youth and adults to raise awareness of parks and trails in the Twin Cities region. Particular recommendations address social media advice, teen-specific programming, and connecting with communities, not just individuals. This research affirmed the findings of the *2014 Park Use Among Communities of Color* that described knowledge gaps related to "a) what a regional park is, b) where regional parks are located, c) how to get to regional parks, d) regional park rules, e) what to do in regional parks, and f) events occurring in regional parks." Awareness, like skill-building, has multiple components. Potential users need to be aware of a park to be able to visit it. A frequent

comment from adults accompanying youth on visits was, "I didn't know this was here." When Celestial Paladins dance troop visited Battle Creek Regional Park, one of the leaders expressed amazement as she looked around, commenting, "This park was not even on the radar. I just didn't know, and it's in my neighborhood." Lack of information and wayfinding guides can be an obstacle enjoying the park and whatever events may be scheduled. Adults who brought teens to Spring Lake Park Reserve felt apprehensive traveling to the park because "it is a bit hidden, without any signs to find it."

Figure 8. Family activity at Spring Lake Park Reserve

Awareness includes park amenities and characteristics. Another element is a lack of shared vocabulary to understand what park agencies mean when they describe amenities. Participants in Outdoor Latino have connected around a love of doing activities in parks, but they sought clarification about how to define park units. In the focus group, the concept of a trail was unfamiliar to some:

> Council staff (in Spanish): *Have you been in a regional park or trail before?*
>
> Parent: *But what is the difference between a park and a trail? When you're in a park, it's because you're in a park, but what is a trail?*
>
> Council staff: *Sendero [path] es 'trail.' They are miles long. Very well known. For example, the trail that goes along the three lakes in Minneapolis.*
>
> Parent: *These are the most common; there are trails near us.*

Adults were also uncertain what, exactly, a regional park was. "Is there an identity to regional parks? State parks have their identity. Local parks have an identity. What about regional parks?" Many had visited a regional park, most often for picnics or walks.

Adult Awareness and Youth Visitation

Lack of adult awareness is a crucial obstacle to youth access to the outdoors. Because of transportation, family interdependence, and concerns about youth safety, youth most often access the parks through organizations or guardians. Three teenage girls from Outdoor Latino Minnesota talked about why they were at the in-park experience. One said, "Mom comes home and tells you you're going to a park." The other girls laughed and nodded their heads. For all of them, it was the parents who decided when and how they would get to parks. So lack of adult awareness is a barrier for both generations.

On the other hand, adults are influenced by what their youth and children want, and youth can be the ambassador to encourage families to visit. Explained one parent in OLM, "If [kids] are exposed, they will know and they will ask the parents to take them. I want to make my kids happy. If they ask me to go there, I will go. Kids are interested."

Lack of awareness vs. outdoor experience

Lack of awareness of the Regional Park System was not associated with a lack of experience in the outdoors. Young adults and parents in Scout Troop 100 had extensive camping, fishing, and cycling experience. Yet many had very little prior knowledge of outdoor opportunities in the regional parks. "With the regional parks, they're not as well known…. If [people] don't know anything about the regional parks, they can't get started," advised a Troop 100 dad.

Another group of experienced outdoor users were unaware of opportunities in the regional parks – the members of the Three Rivers Teen Council, a group of 14 youth who demonstrated ongoing commitment to civic engagement with the parks. They identified "not knowing about opportunities there [that] are for teens" as the second-most frequently mentioned barrier, after time constraints.

The focus on amenities and characteristics ("things to do") suggests that potential users need to know what they can do in the parks to be motivated to visit them.

Figure 9. Importance of interpersonal relations in connecting people to parks

1. Out of five participating organizations, how many found the opportunity without a direct email invitation?

2. Of the 14 teens who joined the Three Rivers Teen Council, how many participated based on finding the opportunity themselves from the website or social media?

Answer to both: Only one. The rest joined because a trusted person or organization shared the opportunity with them.

Strategies

In-park information builds awareness

When Urban Roots youth staff visited Pine Point Regional Park, they spent time carefully reading information board materials. "It would be good to have a second information board in the middle of the park. All of that information was good." They added that the signs should be in different languages because it is "more inviting" when not just English. "I learn when I go into the park. I went in to walk, and then someone tells you [about programming opportunities] when you are in the park. You see a lot going on, and then you go," explained an adult with Outdoor Latino. A youth from Outdoor Latino Minnesota said he liked reading informational pamphlets or signs. In her feedback for the Pine Point master plan, a youth from Urban Roots recommended there be signs to identify different trees and flowers, "You know, education to learn about the place."

Relationships foster awareness

Supportive adults in Outdoor Latino Minnesota reported that they occasionally found programming from public information from an Implementing Agency More often, they accessed the information through events on their organization's Facebook page. "It's better to visit with *Outdoor* [Latino], as they provide the information," commented a parent.

Research participants referred to communities of interest and relationships when they talked about raising awareness. They mentioned organization [groups], community, and gatherings. Girls from the Hmong community emphasized the need to build trust with elders , to foster youth access. "Invite [the adults] more often so they learn about the surroundings and then when we go again, they will say, 'Oh yeah, I've been there, and I know what it's like.' So, then they will let us go. Using multiple media to reach youth

Communication channels such as websites, social media, text messages and email lists can potentially reach users. Youth and adult recommendations demonstrated that using various types of media is just one strategy to build awareness.

The range of recommendations also included a warning that media can't replace first-hand experience. At the same time, social media, print, and peer-to-peer media contact were all described as ways that youth and their supportive adults gained awareness about parks and outdoor opportunities. Sometimes the search for adventure outside comes from the electronic world.

Seeing an activity for the first time on YouTube may spark someone to try it out on their own. For example, in the summer of 2020, the company, *Fish Sunflowers*,

grew a number of sunflower fields that became popular on a social media site and sparked interest in visiting the flower plantings.

Recommendations on media and communication strategies are summarized in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Adult recommendations on media, marketing and park awareness

"I pick up brochures all the time, when we go someplace (like the library), I pick up a bunch of brochures."

Sponsorship at affinity group festivals.

"Can you send stuff home with high school students? The kids got older and we never hear about anything anymore."

Facebook events to learn about things happening.

"Advertising via TV would reach more people."

"I visit the state park website and county park website looking at different places to visit. I live in Saint Paul, so I look at Ramsey and Washington County."

My information searches are "driven by interest. Do we want to go to a lake? Do we want to see birds? We do google searches. But also, we find out within our area. I live in Brooklyn district."

"I use a mountain biking app. Anywhere in the country, I can find a trail. Regional parks are in there. Any place that has a trail."

Facebook live events hosted by an organization,

Pop-up ads found in mobile phone games where you have to watch or earn items to continue in the game.

"I like to read informational pamphlets or signs."

Table 4. Youth recommendations on media, marketing and park awareness

Taking kids to the park is the best way.

Don't just use social media. "Instagram may be a great source, but it is not the only great source and it's better to learn from actually talking and communicating."

Books about the parks.

Programs at high schools. ("Three Rivers came to my school to talk about careers, and now I want to apply there.")

Interpersonal social media posts, "like snapchat stories saying, 'slide through' and put the location tag on." "Having events on Facebook (although Facebook is dead) and that they should tell youth that there will be food."

Peer-to-peer or social media influencer posts on Instagram about the parks. I'm on Instagram almost all the time, see and share with friends.

Put up information at schools and rest areas/gas stations. "I like to read informational pamphlets or signs."

Instagram isn't good. You may not know how to find information about the Regional Park System in Instagram. It can't explain "how it feels" to visit a park.

"Snapchat is the best because you have more people on it and mostly they're all your friends."

Pop-up ads found in mobile phone games where you have to watch or earn items to continue in the game.

"I like to read informational pamphlets or signs."

One-on-one meetings with YSO leadership

Meeting with YSO leadership (youth and adult) proved to be a way to build awareness and relationships. Before each in-park experience, Council researchers met with YSOs to find out what they wanted from outdoor experiences. These sessions identified the priorities, concerns, and definitions the YSO leadership used to connect their youth to the outdoors. In response, Council staff shared programming possibilities and the amenities of the Regional Park System. (A sample list of conversation questions is part of the toolkit on the Council website.) Outreach staff are a recommended investment to build awareness with schools, outdoor clubs, religious congregations, affinity groups, career clubs, and other youth serving organizations.

Hosting awareness events

Youth and adults were eager for their respective communities to know more about the parks. "Can you host a party for the community to get to know the [park]?" brainstormed one youth from Urban Roots. "You need to have a gathering to introduce what is there… Parks need to get out to people, let them know what they can do there." "There could be a teen night, a parents' night out, a ladies' night to enjoy the park," recommended an adult leader in Organization of

Liberians of Minnesota. These recommendations were then converted into a "word cloud" graphic, where many common terms reflected ideas defining awareness in active terms such as "activities," "events," and "participate."

Other potential avenues of outreach included:

- A park representative who could talk about the opportunities the parks offer and what there is to see that would make you want to go there.
- Sponsorship at organization's festivals.
- Programs at high schools. ("Three Rivers came to my school to talk about careers, and now I want to apply there.")
- Information posted at schools and rest areas.

Transportation access to parks

For teens, transportation challenges can determine whether they can access the parks alone or with peers. Transportation issues for youth differ from those of adults, who typically have drivers' licenses. Fewer teens are getting their license than in the past. Additionally, teens are affected by their parents' transportation constraints. Youth in this research expressed a desire to spend time with peers only, even though they also enjoyed time with family in the outdoors. For these reasons, park agencies that want to attract teens to the outdoors need to be aware that youth have particular transportation obstacles compared with adults.

Teens Depend on Adults to Get to Parks

When asked about how they accessed the parks, one youth responded, "By car with family or biking or walking if alone." Some teens could rely on parents to get them there. A Scout in Troop 100 commented, "I feel like riding a bike is useless because you can just use a car." "But you can't drive," the researcher replied. He shrugged and said, "Yeah, but the adults can."

For others, the reliance on adults sometimes means they don't get to go out because parents are too busy to drive. "My parents have two jobs. I don't get out. I'm stuck in the house," a youth researcher explained. Teens felt that a lack of a driver's license prevents them from accessing parks. When thinking about getting to the parks by car, a Three Rivers Teen Council member replied, "For my family, yes, but it's hard for me individually, as I don't have my driver's license or a car yet, and public transport is difficult."

Transportation Costs Matter to Some Families

Transportation was not the most frequently mentioned obstacle, but it has unique dimensions for youth compared with adults Private transportation costs can limit park visitation by youth, and park visitation can be a lower priority relative to other ways to spend money for leisure activities that involve transportation.

Analyzing the relationship between car use and park visitation, teen researchers found:

> *It is easy to get to parks with the condition that I would actually go to the park in the first place.*

> *Sometimes families have to conserve the gas that they use to do fun things because they have to use that gas to get other places, and using to go to the park would be [perceived as] a waste of money.*

I can get to the park with a car but we have limited time and I don't want to waste gas money. My parents would feel safer if there was a bus taking me there or a chaperone present.

[I] just walk. Don't have a car. True, we can get there by car, but there is no time or commitment to use gas all the way there.

Public transit was an option for park access for some older teens over 16, but it was less popular than walking, biking, or riding with parents. When the Asian Media Access group visited Battle Creek Regional Park, naturalist Ken Pelto explained that even though many of our parks were inaccessible, the Route 70 bus runs through Saint Paul and comes directly to Battle Creek. At the time, the girls in the group talked about how physically inaccessible parks are. When AMA analyzed their in-park data, an adult in the group said that the bus route information was not relevant because, "We don't take city buses." Another AMA adult confirmed that sentiment. "We've never taken the city bus before."

Older teens in Urban Roots had taken the bus to parks, and they traveled by bus to work. But they recommended different options to connect youth and families to parks. The regular bus would take too long and be a burden to the family. "Good transit is key because it is a waste of gas money to drive your car."

Strategies to Improve Access

Youth researchers raised the need for expanded and more creative ways to access parks. They suggested that, to visit alone, walking and biking trails would need to safely connect them to parks. They also requested that signs be posted that told them what parks they could reach from a trail. "One time, I got on the trail and had no idea where I was going. I rode a long ways. I got lost and made it home late. My mom was mad at me," said one Urban Roots youth analyst.

Dedicated buses to parks was a popular recommendation. Transit routes sometimes require taking more than one bus, stops located far from park entrances, and long travel times. When asked how to solve the problem of transportation to the parks, youth in Urban Roots and Troop 100 offered similar suggestions:

Rapid transit/special buses that would go to the parks in a timely manner. Perhaps a shuttle or train route.

An express bus or train route only in the inner city in the metro area that went only from pick up locations and directly to the park.

We would use designated shuttle or tourist bus if offered.

A parent in the Troop 100 focus group affirmed that idea.

What if you adopted the casino model where you take the buses to certain hubs? I see the Mystic buses all the time, taking the old folks. They know how to hop and transfer buses to get to the Mystic line. What if that were available for the day?

This solution could involve collaboration between the Council's Parks Unit and Metro Transit. The City of Seattle provides summer weekend bus shuttles from transit centers to trailheads, expanding in 2019 due to popular demand. Other communities have used philanthropic efforts to create dedicated funding for transportation to get youth to field trips focused on environmental education.

Park agency collaborations with organizations can remove transit as an obstacle for youth. Youth in Organization of Liberians in Minnesota reported that their only prior regional park visitation had been through field trips where a bus transported them to the park and back to school at the end of the day. Youth serving organizations have access to transportation and parental trust to transport youth. This factor is discussed in in the recommendations section.

Priorities and time constraints

What do teens and parents mean when they say they don't have time to spend in the outdoors? The constraints are complex. Part of the obstacle is rooted in competing priorities and a lack of time. This issue can particularly affect youth populations, such as homework and school obligations. And it can overlap with household priorities, families' understanding of the benefits of park visitation, and the perceived relevance of outdoor recreation in light of other aspects of young people's lives.

Youth and their guardians sometimes feel that recreational activities are less important than time spent on academics. In this cited study, young people reported lacking time to visit parks because of school requirements, parental work, and their own work hours. At the Teen Council of Three Rivers Parks, 70 percent of youth identified lack of time as the most significant personal constraint to park visitation. Schoolwork and too-busy parents were cited as specific obstacles. Youth without access to their own transportation relied on supportive adults to get them to the outdoors.

A parent from Organization of Liberians in Minnesota explained, "Parents are low income and they work a lot. They have a hard time making time to go to the park… Now that I am working full time, I can't take my youth out a lot." A supervisor from Asian Media Access explained that "many of the parents work night shifts, so they are unable to attend evening events." A parent from Outdoor Latino described similar situations: "There are many parents who can't take their kids because they have to work or [do] other things. They can't make time to take their kids out, so they can run and see things, enjoy the animals. It's important that there be activities like the ones you do in the park system [because parents do not have time]." Youth Council members of Three Rivers Park District could not drive and provide their own transportation.

Some youth had work commitments that cut into leisure time. A youth visitor from Outdoor Latino told a research team member that he was tired because he had to work nights while going to school. He reported working five nights a week on an overnight shift. He said the shift lasted from 7 or 8 at night until 3 or 4 in the morning, when the work was done. The young man talked about his daily schedule: work at night, then usually just staying up and going to school when it's time, then homework right after school for a while, and then sleeping for a few hours until time to go to work again. He said he would probably be heading to work after the in-park event.

In such cases, time entails an allocation of priorities. When young people face other demands, the "cost" of spending time in parks becomes very "expensive." Poor transportation, long distance to parks, an encounter with racial bias, or lack of experience with culturally competent programming – any of them can reduce the payoff.

A lack of awareness of the benefits of park visitation makes regional parks a lower value for time spent. Without an opportunity to learn skills or without the ability to swim, visiting nature-based resources becomes less appealing. Park safety can be another factor. When parks are perceived to be unsafe, the incentive to visit them understandably declines. Parents are likely to

make park visitation a low priority if they think their youth will get in trouble or miss out on more important opportunities. Ways to increase the perceived value of time spent in the outdoors is discussed in the next section.

Strategies to Foster Park Visitation

> *Everybody is busy in their life. Going to the park could be a fun day for them to take a day off from a busy work life and just to have fun, to not stress about work.*
>
> > – Invitation to visit Battle Creek Regional Park by members of Celestial Paladins Dance Troop/Asian Media Access

When young people and their families get out to the parks, the experience can help to shift time priorities. Like the Celestial Paladins girls, who advocate for parks as a way to break from their busy life, youth who attended the in-park experiences repeatedly said that it was time well-spent. After experiencing the park first-hand, they, in turn, became advocates for visiting the parks.

Adults from YSOs said they would promote park visitation to others in their community, after they had time spent in parks and got to know the park staff. Connections to the park through high-quality programming increased the perceived value of time spent in parks.

Thus, strategic efforts at programming and raising awareness can help to make time in the outdoors become a higher priority for youth and their families. The strategies include ways to shift perceptions about time investment in park and reducing the factors that exacerbate time obstacles.

Members of communities with specific scheduling needs to accommodate recreation are more able to invest time if park programming accommodates those needs. Constituent-led organizations are in a position to help park staff understand specific time constraints of people within the various communities. For example, Outdoor Latino Minnesota programming happens only on Sunday afternoons, "because this is a time when families in our community have free time and are wanting to get out and do something." When scheduling their in-park event, members of the Organization of Liberians of Minnesota also preferred Sundays because "youth in our community have chores to do Saturday morning, so we can't go to the park during that time."

Adults in Outdoor Latino, Organization of Liberians, and Asian Media Access advocated for programming that would provide activities for teens while parents were at work. "We need events to drop kids off all day [for park activities]. Of course, we want our kids to not sit at home all day, but we need all-day options." Activities where they could drop off and pick up would benefit minority families, explained one family.

The youth of Celestial Paladins emphasized the need for flexible park hours. When asked to choose a picture that represented her desires for park visits, one youth chose what she called a "dark picture," explaining:

> *I want a program mainly for people who don't have a lot of free time. Programs [that are] open 24/7 for those who don't have a lot of free time to do these fun things.*

Parents said they wanted park opportunities for their children. Youth reported that parents want them to spend their time in ways that offered learning, employment, safety, and health. One Urban Roots youth mentioned that her parents would never let her go to the park on her own, just for "no reason." "They do support me completely when it's for work or for volunteering. Then they support me all the way. But they are not going to want me to go someplace just for fun or where I'm going to get in trouble."

Figure 10. Youth present on Battle Creek Regional Park amenities

Organization of Liberians in Minnesota adult leaders requested that the Council research team tell youth how their research and presentations with our team could be described on college applications. Three Rivers Park District's teen council offered leadership opportunities, a structured time commitment, and peer interactions to align park use with other youth priorities. The new experiences in parks would contribute to youth's school performance, explained an OLM leader:

> Going to educational activities in parks helps them. They will do better in school and learn other things about life they can take to school. If they go to the parks, they have something to write about. They can gather information they can use in reports.

Parents said that their youth prioritize electronics, which can reduce time spent in outdoors. A Troop 100 parent told us, "More time outdoors means less time on electronics. That keeps them disconnected from nature." Academic research supports this observation that less time in the outdoors corresponds to increased screen time.

A father in Outdoor Latino explained it this way:

> When my son is outside, he's entertained all day, period. And all of a sudden, he's like, 'Where did the time go?' When you're outside, time just flies by. Inside, not so much. Definitely, things are better when he gets time outside.

When supportive adults saw their youth in the outdoors, they themselves advocate for prioritizing outdoor time. A Troop 100 father who frequently took his children out camping noted:

> Kids in nature have a lot of confidence. A lot of comfort in their own skin. A lot of it is that exploring aspect. You are willing to touch bugs ... It allows curiosity to build. And they know how to do things. I know how to pitch a tent, build a fire. I can identify trees and bugs and things like that. That adds to confidence in other areas like school, is what I've seen.

Messaging can encourage teens and adults to prioritize youth park visitation. Messages to align with teen and adult priorities include health, educational benefits, possibly later employment opportunities, and reduced screen time. "There are health risks like diabetes that are happening because we spend more time at McDonald's than we do in the outdoors," one father said.

Like other obstacles, lack of time is both a true scarcity and a prioritization issue. The Council and Implementing Agency staff have the opportunity to learn more from families and youth about how different communities think about allocating time for youth activities. Can schedules be made more accommodating in response to community needs? Can connections be made with schools to more closely integrate learning with nature-based recreation? How can challenges with proximity (transportation and park access) be better understood to reduce the required time investment? Collaboration and creativity are resources that can lower this obstacle.

Economic hardship

Financial circumstances influence all other obstacles. One study in the Pacific Northwest found that the survey respondents with the lowest incomes were 60% less likely to have participated in outdoor recreation compared with the highest income respondents. In the Twin Cities metropolitan area, 40% of youth live in households within 250% of poverty line, with income of less than $65,000 per year. Youth described economic hardship as a contributor to transportation obstacles, where gas money for parks might be seen as extravagant and travel hindered by limited public transportation to parks. Programming and entrance fees might also seem a barrier, although these issues were less mentioned.

At the writing of this report, an increased number of families were experiencing hardship due to Covid-19. Lack of money and the need to prioritize spending contributed to lack of opportunity to learn skills, time constraints, and transportation constraints. Strategies for addressing all of the obstacles in this section included consideration of financial constraints, paying attention to solutions that were most available to The Council and Implementing Agencies. For example, Carver County, a regional park implementing agency in the western metropolitan region, eliminated park entrance fees in recognition of the universal health benefits offered by park access.[38]

Chapter 3 | Creating the Best Park Experience for Youth: Findings and Recommendations

Not surprisingly, quality staff and the natural beauty of parks combine to create for youth feelings of well-being. When staff prioritize responding to youth questions, ideas, and preferences, youth have great park experiences. This chapter focuses on four primary findings:

- Spending time in the outdoors generates feelings of health and well-being for youth.
- Programming and outreach staff remove obstacles to park visitation and enjoyment.
- Youth recommendations about activities and programming can create a great day in the park.

Time spent in parks generates feelings of well-being

> I felt cool and adventurous being in the woods.
> – Youth researcher, Celestial Paladins/Asian Media Access

Adolescents can experience significant levels of stress, depression, and anxiety.[39] Efforts to connect young people to spaces that create feelings of well-being are a public health investment.

Poor health conditions are prevented or reduced when young people have the opportunity to experience feelings such as mindfulness, positive emotions, life satisfaction, and lowered perceived stress.[40] During the in-park experience, youth participants expressed these aspects of well-being.

Figure 11. A Troop 100 member chose meditation on arrival at the St. Croix River

Time in nature-based activities can contribute to young people's emotional well-being. Awareness and attentiveness to the outdoor experience in the moment (mindfulness), life-satisfaction, positive emotions (such as feeling alert, enthusiastic, determined, interested, and inspired), calmness, and self-efficacy are all parts of emotional well-being.[41] During their time spent in the regional parks, the youth expressed these emotional and mental states in both implicit and explicit ways.

Across all five park experiences, time in parks generated immediate, spontaneously expressed feelings of well-being while walking and talking in the park. Youth described openness and enjoyment of new adventures, as well as a sense of self-empowerment (self-efficacy)[42], attentiveness to surroundings (mindfulness), having fun (life satisfaction), and relaxation (calm, lower perceived stress). Each of these health-generating emotions are noted in Table 2, next page.

Even though they may not have spent much prior time in the outdoors, youth demonstrated positive emotions and well-being, indicating that the new or uncertain circumstances did not create an obstacle to accessing these good feelings. Youth enthusiastically participated in new activities and in learning new concepts about the natural world. The only negative feelings expressed were irritability about the cold and about mud on nice shoes. Rainy days seemed to prompt more negative feelings, as well as cooler temperatures.

One exercise led by Asian Media Access specifically asked about emotions. After youth carefully examined a series of curated photos, they chose three that answered, "How did being in nature today make you feel?" The top expressions included *relaxed*, *happy*, *peaceful*, *cozy*, *surprising*, *disgusted* (at seeing dead bugs), *joy*, *appreciate*, and *adventurous*.

Time in the outdoors can often be deemphasized because, for some households, it may seem less important than other activities. These findings about the mental health benefits of outdoor time can support organizations, schools, park staff of the Implementing Agencies, and the Council in continued prioritization of youth access to the outdoors as *a key element to create healthy communities*, a goal of the Council's regional Thrive MSP 2040 plan to enhance livability.

Table 6. Youth reactions and emotional responses

Well-Being Factor	Examples	Groups (out of 5)
New adventures, success at trying new things (self-efficacy)	The youngest boy (age 14) remarked that the field challenge was "totally worth it" and all his siblings agreed. When asked about why he felt that way, he said he saw an eagle and other wildlife he doesn't usually get to see and that the river view was something new and exciting for him. Another youth said, "I felt cool and adventurous being in the woods." (Asian Media Access)	5
Attentiveness to surroundings (mindfulness)	A number of girls and adults, on reflection, continued to express wonder. "The water is so clear here." "It is so peaceful." (Asian Media Access) "I remember being in my habitat. The grass was so straight. It felt perfect. It was the prairie." (Urban Roots youth, after visiting one of four habitats in Pine Point Regional Park.) "The sound and touch of the wind breeze also contributes to the feeling of relaxation for [the youth]." (Troop 100)	4
Having fun (life satisfaction)	"I feel like I've seen half the world. You can see so much. I felt like I was in a movie." (Urban Roots youth) "Parks are really fun, [especially] when you're with other people trying to make friends with them." (Asian Media Access youth)	5
Relaxation (lower perceived stress)	"I was really stressed out before I came here. Now I feel calm." (Urban Roots youth) One of the girls said she likes being up there because there is no sound. Even though there are busy roads nearby, she can't hear anything, and that is relaxing. (Outdoor Latino MN)	5

Youth recommendations for preferred activities

What makes a great day in the outdoors? Part of the answer lies in the right activities and programming. This section examines three aspects of youth preferences: desired park amenities, activities enjoyed during the in-park experience, and activities youth wanted to try. A detailed description of how the researchers learned these recommendations can be found in Appendix A (Methodology).

Desired Park Amenities

Park planners and designers have the opportunity to design in ways that support youth visitors. Youth want places they can go and be outside of adult judgment. "Parks are a good place to go with friends because you can spend time with your friends and you can talk privately without anyone hearing you because you're on public property, not private property," concluded one youth researcher from Urban Roots.

Unfortunately, there's often a tendency to view young people's presence in public spaces with suspicion or hostility. Because teenagers participate in different types of park activities than adults, they are often seen as threatening or vulnerable.[43] Sometimes park caretakers focus more on policing young people than inviting them into public space.[44] This is even more true for youth of color.

In general, young people lack spaces to be together with people their own age, independent of programs and facilities sponsored by adult institutions. In preparing this report, researchers overheard adults in the Twin Cities complaining about too many young people congregating around a dock and about being too loud in the park. Young people in parks have been treated harshly by police and sheriffs when their presence is seen as a problem. Park design would look different if the problem were defined as the lack of space for young people to be together, instead of how to avoid the presence of young people congregating in parks.

Park amenities are built or naturally occurring features of the park. Youth preferences can contribute to advice in park master planning processes that design or highlight such attributes. Youth enjoyed natural, resource-based amenities located close to spaces for games, food, and hanging out with friends. For example, youth delighted at sighting wild muskrats swimming around a den as they walked trails that enabled close access to a wetland area in Battle Creek Regional Park. They took photos and were careful not to disturb the animals.

This interaction was possible because the trail's location was both close to the wetland area and easily accessible from the trailhead recreation center building. A 17-year-old, who reported coming to the research event "only because my parents made me," reported that the visit to Spring Lake Park Reserve was "totally worth it" because they were able to spot an eagle.

The desired amenities are summarized in Table 3, next page.

Table 6. Park amenities desired by youth

Amenity	Why Youth Liked This Amenity
Bridges and docks that enable observation of the water	Could float natural objects down the river, watch the water, be meditative. Railings provide safe, close observation of water for those who couldn't swim.
Built environments that can double as "play areas," such as a dock, a post, a stone fishing pier	Enjoyed the challenge of balancing up on a wooden pole, walking on the wobbly dock.
Charging outlets	Could have phone to feel safe and stay connected.
Exploring taxidermic animals inside a visitor center	Opportunity to see animal fur and feathers close up and have questions answered by a naturalist.
Fire pit with benches	Enjoyed bonfire, s'mores, connecting with own community, telling important and fun stories by youth and adults.
First aid kits, emergency signal buttons	Safety, security.
Fishing dock/canoe launches	Fun to get close to water, space for play, like to fish with family.
Information boards	Learn more about nature, history, activities without having to ask for help or follow a schedule. Satisfy curiosity, feel more in control with more information.
Natural surface trails	Physical challenge, feeling of being in nature, sense of adventure.
Natural trails detouring from paved trails that go closer to water or into the woods	Could see the water close up, look at animal tracks on the water, explore natural setting while having an easy return to lower-risk pavement.
Open fields with mobile equipment to borrow for soccer	Play ball sports, impromptu play, chasing games, just hang around with friends during free time. "In our community, soccer is life," as one adult said.
Pavilion with picnic tables, gazebo	Easy to find so individual youth can rejoin the group after exploration, safe place to leave things with one person in charge, place for group to convene for rituals, place to sit protected by elements.
Places to hang out with friends away from other age groups (identified in master planning conversations with Pine Point Regional Park staff)	Ability to socialize, "Just be yourself." (Note: Gives youth an opportunity to learn autonomy and manage risk. Can't learn to gauge risk unless offered a chance to do so.)

Table 6. Park amenities desired by youth (cont.)

Amenity	Why Youth Liked This Amenity
Playgrounds	A setting for making videos on a popular short-video platform, space to play tag with multiple levels for different abilities.
Spaces to enjoy cultural touchstone activities like listening to music.	Supportive adults requested that parks consider times and spaces where groups could use amplified music. Music in the parks was a cultural touchstone. A parent from the Organization of Liberians of Minnesota commented, "The local parks do not want any music in the park. People have the event, and that is one of our community concerns, of music."
Trails that pass close to habitats	Opportunity to see wildlife and habitats close up.
Visitor centers that allow for easy movement between the indoors and outdoors	Could come inside and warm up/cool down/meet physical needs, then head back outside. Enjoyment of outdoor observation without having to go outside.
Wide paved trails	Safety, security.
Wildlife viewing through the windows of a visitor center	Opportunity to see wildlife, enjoyment of outdoor observation without having to go outside.

Planning for Youth Visitors

Park planners can visualize facilities and amenities to solve the problems young people face in finding a sense of place for themselves, leisure-time activities, and space for independence and play. Park planning is an opportunity to examine conditions that may be less than welcoming because of park design. Initiatives such as providing opportunities to rent directional speakers, providing low-barrier access to picnic pavilions, and creating other youth-inviting spaces can reduce conflict with other park uses, while serving the visitation needs of young people. One youth researcher explained, "Maybe you don't have a place to meet up with people, so you can use the park to meet up with them." For example, the Pine Point Master Plan incorporated Urban Roots input to create spaces for young people to dream, relax, and socialize through star-gazing mounds and places to sit outside of the main picnic area.

Communication Strategies

After asking over 100 research participants how to communicate to build awareness, the Council staff recognized the challenge for Implementing Agencies to determine the best ways to reach out to youth and their families, particularly in households with lower awareness of the Regional Park System. There is no "one size fits all" regarding best ways to reach youth. Youth researchers spoke and read English fluently but noted that multilingual signs made it easier for their families to enjoy the parks. Information in other languages can relieve youth of having to serve as translators for older family members.

Relationships and context are as important to consider as particular tools and platforms. The next section includes findings about messaging, dissemination methods, and the influence of relationships and context.

Messaging

After the park visit, youth created posters and made presentations about the messages that their families and communities needed to hear to get them to the park. Key suggestions included:

- Parks offer stress relief and fun.
- Parks offer a chance to see animals.
- Parks help us breathe and protect the environment.
- Parks help families to build time together and make special experiences with friends.
- Visiting parks is an adventure. (*"Go outside, Bro'!"*)

The value that youth put on photography is a potential communication strategy. As Implementing Agencies work to build awareness of photo opportunities, they might offer sites that are good locations for prom pictures, social media posts, and other elements that invite youth to enjoy photography in the outdoors.

Information platforms

No one platform dominates the information-seeking efforts of youth and their supportive adults. Recommended sources of information include distributing information in schools, putting up signs, Facebook posts in multiple languages, "tabling" at local events, and working with community organizations to disseminate information through their social media channels.

Peer-to-peer strategies

Messages from trusted audiences are another strategy revealed in this research for how organizations and participants communicated about the parks. Organizations used Facebook Live to stream events while they were happening in the parks. Organizations livestreamed both the validity conversations and in-park experiences. One organization posted to their Facebook page and another to their Instagram account about the in-park experiences. At least one youth made a TikTok video during the in-park experience. These peer-to-peer strategies created awareness of the parks beyond official efforts of park outreach and marketing.

Fun Things to Do in the Park

Youth participation in nature-based recreation can be different from the experience of previous generations in terms of enthusiasm toward various park amenities and constraints to recreation participation . Some documented differences include that youth feel[45, 46]:

- Heightened concern about climate change.
- The sense that park use is a connection to nature, rather than merely a use of leisure time.
- A need to express their identity through social media posts, a need for individuality, and a desire for pursuit of new experiences.

While some aspects of outdoor enjoyment endure across generations, others may shift as these new motivations for visitation emerge among youth.

Prior Activity Experience

This section explores what youth said about previous activity experiences, activities they enjoyed with this project, and activities they would like to try.

Each youth researcher and youth from the Three Rivers Park District Teen Council were given a list of activities that people enjoy in regional parks. They were asked, "Which activities have you done before?" and "Which activities would you like to try?"

All youth research participants had spent time in the outdoors, but their activities varied. Activities that most teens in the group had done previously are listed in Table 4.

Figure 11. Looking for birds at Spring Lake Park Reserve

Teens from outdoor-focused organizations had previously done a wider variety of activities. For example, teens from the TRPD Youth Board had tried nearly every listed activity to do in summer and winter.

In contrast, Troop 100 had done many summer outdoor recreation activities related to camping and environmental activities, but reported a lack of opportunity to learn to ski or snowmobile. Troop 100 included youth who enjoyed swimming and those who hadn't an opportunity to learn to swim.

Youth from organizations not focused on the outdoors nonetheless reported having spent time outdoors through time with family and friends, walking, and other outdoor exercise.

Table 4, next page, shows the favorite activities of youth from the six participating organizations.

Table 7. Favorite activities previously done by youth

TRPD Teen Council	Urban Roots	Troop 100	Asian Media Access/Celestial Paladins*	Outdoor Latino MN	Organization of Liberians in MN
Celebrate with family in the park	Celebrate with family in the park	Celebrate with family in the park	Celebrate with family in the park	Celebrate with family in the park	Celebrate with family in the park
Archery	Animal, wildlife or bird watching	Camping	Cooking outside/grilling	Concert outdoors	Concert outdoors
Camping	Camping	Canoeing	Walking	Cooking outside/grilling	Cooking outside/grilling
Cross-Country Skiing	Cooking outside/grilling	Cooking outside/grilling		Dog walking	Going to the beach
Dog Walking	Dog Walking	Fishing		Educational farming	Hang out with friends/relax
Fishing	Fishing	Going to the beach		Fishing	Picnicking
Going to the Beach	Going to the beach	Hang out with friends/relax		Going to the beach	Running/jogging
Hang Out with Friends/Just Relax	Hang out with friends/relax	Help take care of the parks		Hang out with friends/relax	
Help take care of parks	Help take care of the parks	Hiking		Hiking	
Kayaking	Kayaking	Leaning about animals and nature with a teacher or naturalist		Learning about animals and nature with a teacher or naturalist	
Snow-boarding	Running/jogging	Running/jogging		Running/jogging	
Swimming	Scootering	Sledding		Swimming in a lake	
Tubing	Swimming in a lake	Swimming in a lake			

*AMA youth did not complete the activity-list check sheet. Instead, these preferences are based on information offered by youth in the photo expression activity and in informal conversation.

What Youth Enjoyed Doing in Parks

Council staff designed in-park experiences after talking to YSO staff and youth to find out what kinds of activities they would enjoy. The intent was to offer activities new to most of the youth in the group while also allowing time for things teens already enjoyed such as hikes and sports (Troop 100), nature education (Urban Roots), or hanging out with friends (all groups). Each in-park experience created a fun visit for youth participants, invited youth to parks they had not visited before, took advantage of amenities and park staff strengths, and/or created authentic engagement for park master planning. Each experience had separate activities.

Youth saw programming through a different lens than commonly used in recreation and park planning literature. Young researchers did not analyze activities using traditional oppositional concepts such as "active/passive" or "educational/recreational." Instead, "boring/fun" and "wanting/not wanting to do" were classification schemes they used to evaluate activities. This section presents activities as they were named by youth researchers but includes data generated by all the sources – youth, supportive adults, Council staff, and Implementing Agencies. Table 5 summarizes all the activities that youth generated and analyzed for this research project.

Table 8. Activities enjoyed at in-park events

Urban Roots	Troop 100	Asian Media Access/Celestial Paladins	Outdoor Latino MN	Organization of Liberians in MN
Hiking	Pick-up ball games on an open field	Cyanotype art	Nature walk with environmental education	Photography class/photo challenge
Learning cultural history	Environmental education	Environmental education	Bonfire with s'mores	Bonfire with storytelling
Free time/free play	Free time/free play	Nature Walk	Field research challenge	Exploring nature center
Field research challenge	Tag and other group games	Bonfire with s'mores		Free play/free time
	Field research challenge			Walk near the park's nature center

Council research staff observed and participated with youth to see how activities were experienced by teen visitors. Youth researchers reflected on these activities afterwards in validity conversations. Youth enjoyed a variety of activities. Photography, cultural history, and connection with their own community were important and often underappreciated activities that programming staff can consider when they plan programming to welcome youth into the park.

Culturally inclusive programming

Cultural competency is the ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures, values, beliefs, and traditions. Youth and adults requested that programming reflect diverse cultures to

a greater degree. Adults noticed when park promotional materials or historical information did not reflect their background. Noted one parent from Organization of Liberians in Minnesota:

> *Parks do not have us or our history in them. When children go, they see only white history. They do not see black history. How are the parks related to Africa? Are there animals that are here and in Africa? The children see only white history and they think, "oh, this is what white people do? Can the parks list countries of all the people who visit?*

She said this could be accomplished if the diversity of the Twin Cities were included into exhibits found in park visitor centers.

> *There needs to be a cultural room and an art room – artists from around the world, from every type of culture. They could give the history of the bird and how the bird is found in other places. This kind of event would give others more reasons to visit. We need to feel that we are part of a society who appreciates us.*

Another parent agreed, suggesting that naturalist education could identify connections between Minnesota and other locations, as well as shared names.

> *I know lots of species – peeper bird, tin tin bird. I'd like to learn the scientific names. There are plants in both places like the sunflower, the tulip. We would like to know the scientific names and what others call it.*

The National Park System created a youth curriculum showing commonality between raptor and human migration. This curriculum focuses on parallels between the human and non-human animal worlds, as well as connections among human cultures. Signs can identify species such as the cattle egret or long-eared owl that live on different continents or species such as the Monarch butterfly that migrates through many countries.

Photography on mobile phones

Photography and filming using phones was a consistent and frequent activity for youth when they visited parks. Youth researchers identified several benefits of taking photos in parks:

- Photography in the park helps to "really see stuff. "

- Taking pictures helps make a good day in the park.

- You can share your day in the park with other people.

Youth enjoyed composing pictures with their friends in it, capturing new, beautiful or unusual scenes, identifying elements assigned in nature education, photographing animals, and marking "chapters" or sections of the day. Additionally, videos offered the chance for sharing special moments of the day or being creative in enticing spaces.

These activities seemed to work best when youth are invited to do activities in ways that align with the image they have of themselves. Youth researches soundly rejected activities that asked them to post pictures from the park activities to Instagram. When asked why, one boy explained, "It doesn't fit what I usually post." On the other hand, when offered a chance to freely explore,

youth took pictures and posted to video-sharing platforms. They were frustrated when poor cell phone reception kept them from doing these activities.

Youth researchers recommended that parks highlight particularly appealing sites for photographs, considering that youth often look for ways to mark prom, birthdays, or other special occasions. Also valued was time set aside in programming to take pictures, as well as youth-only opportunities to learn about photography. After a day of learning photography at Elm Creek, one boy, age 16, commented to a Council research staff member that, because it was fun, he would voluntarily return to do the activity.

Learning about park history

At Pine Point Regional Park, youth researchers were fascinated by the opportunity to learn more about how people once lived and worked on a "poor farm" in the park, typically a county-run operation where able-bodied impoverished people were sent to live and required to work as a social welfare system. Youth were enthusiastic to learn about the social artifacts on the property, particularly the cemetery.

On the same tour, a brief mention of Indigenous history was made. Youth wanted more:

- "We need more photos to tell the history."
- "We should paint railroad tracks on the trail to share the history of the place."
- "You could have people dressed up from a certain time period, and you could even have a historical scavenger hunt where the reenactors can work at. If you do that, it'd be a famous park."

Troop 100 alumni in their 20's expressed a need for more Indigenous history. Some comments: Parks need to be thought about differently. Why are there white people running the land? Where is the history? Why isn't Indigenous history a bigger part of the parks?

Community: 'I want to see people gather'

Parents and youth together enjoyed sharing time involving community and culture. Gathering around a bonfire provided an opportunity to do so. Youth were excited when told they would go to a bonfire. One youth commented, "I wanna have a bonfire! I've never been to one. I've just never had the chance." As the bonfire got started, one youth shouted, "C'mon, guys! Let's hang out!" As the bonfire activity began, the park staff educator introduced the activity.

Each person around the circle was invited to tell a memorable story about a previous experience in nature. The educator instructed everyone to pause and not respond right away. He emphasized that everyone to take some time to share without being interrupted and that all should listen carefully. Anyone could pass for their turn if they preferred not to share.

Figure 13. Enjoying time around the bonfire

As he began, adults with the Organization of Liberians in Minnesota joined in and started singing. One of the girls had remarked earlier that she wanted to sing around the campfire

because it seemed fitting, so she was excited to hear the adults singing. A few others joined in and one person danced. OLM streamed the entire event on Facebook Live, bringing the connections felt during the event to a larger audience.

Parents in Outdoor Latino agreed that bonfires are an excellent programming choice:

> *With the kids socializing outdoors, you see a change. They are happier. They get back to the house different people, with more energy. They get out of the household routine. So I think that a bonfire in the cold is a great idea.*

A young adult from Troop 100 advocated for having music in outdoor family gatherings:

> *We want to do karaoke outdoors at family gatherings. This is a competition that clans like to do at picnics. Every clan does a picnic. The whole clan will go together.*

Youth researchers generated additional recommendations of ways to connect with their communities in the parks:

- *It would be fun to gather people around and grow things in the park like food or flowers.*

- *Let people come here and sell foods from their cultures so everyone can learn about new regions or cultures.*

Migration stories, bonfire programming, gardening in parks, and cultural festivals with food offer opportunities to increase cultural inclusivity in the parks and identify commonalities among communities in the region.

Environmental awareness

The youth connected their park experience with protecting the environment and with climate change.[47] An Urban Roots researcher mentioned, "I go to Battle Creek and see trash on the ground and in the lake, and I'm like 'Bro', why are you treating the Earth like that? We live here!'" This was reflected in youth comments about how to build community in the parks:

- The park could organize a competition to see who could pick up the most trash. The person who picked up the most could win a prize.

- Host opportunities for volunteers to come and clean the park and other ways to "take care of the Earth."

- Host activities for volunteers to remove invasive species from the parks.

Activities Youth Would Like to Try

Table 6, next page, summarizes the top activities that youth said they'd like to try but hadn't done before. Most popular answers were camping, archery, horseback riding, and winter activities (snowmobiling, tubing, and snowboarding).

Table 9. Top activities youth said they would like to try

TRPD Teen Council	Urban Roots	Troop 100	Asian Media Access/Celestial Paladins[48]	Outdoor Latino MN	Organization of Liberians in MN
Animal, wildlife or bird watching	Archery	Help take care of parks	Camping/ "glamping," sleeping time	Archery	Archery
Archery	Canoeing	Horseback riding	Learning to swim	Geocaching	Camping
Art in the outdoors	Concert outdoors	Kayaking	Special nature walks – fairy trail, tree maze	Horseback Riding	Concert Outdoors
Cooking outside/ grilling out	Geocaching	Snowboarding	Walking	Snowmobiling	Going to the beach
Geocaching	Horseback riding	Snowmobiling		Tubing on the snow	Horseback Riding
Hammocking	Kayaking				Learning about animals and nature with a teacher
Hang out with friends/just relax	Learning about history				Snowboarding
Help take care of parks	Tubing on the snow				

Youth-Planned Events

Youth researchers recommended programming that they themselves had a chance to design, implement, and enjoy. For example, youth of the Organization of Liberians in Minnesota wanted to help create "Park in the Dark," an evening for teens where they can meet other teens and play laser tag as teams and roast marshmallows. Celestial Paladins offered a dance-festival idea in which they would come and perform at the park.

Creative ideas were offered that could be implemented with leadership opportunities for young people to plan and help deliver. They wanted to develop confidence in their outdoor skills, "I want to actually do some of the ideas we came up with, like learning how to make a fire and putting up a tent," explained one youth researcher. Activities that involved physical challenges were appealing, such as ropes to climb trees or a climbing wall, and setting up a zip line in the park.

Design of park programming and its implementation offer unique opportunities to provide potential employment, leadership development, and confidence-building for young people. Paid employment of high school students in the summer can create potential opportunities to turn their creative ideas into park events.[49]

Free Time

The Teen Council of the Three Rivers Park District and in-park YSO groups, by contrast, identified time constraints as the greatest obstacle. They had previously tried a wide array of winter activities, camping, and educational experiences. They wanted to have more free time in the outdoors. The desired activities listed in Table 6 for TRPD Teen Council members showed a preference for more time with their community members and for contemplation. Youth expressed interest in art and relaxation for in-park activities in the validity conversation between young adult Council researchers and TRPD Teen Council. This confirms that being in the park to connect with people and nature has merit in itself, not merely serving as a gateway to "true" outdoor adventure.

Camping and Camping Training Initiatives

I would like to have a sleeping time! That would great if this program had a sleeping anything. I would like cozy camping, glamping and cabins.
> – Youth from Celestial Paladins

Is there a way to organize several families to go together camping? We could all go to the water. We could tell people that there are bathrooms, there are facilities, so they can know and be secure. More information is needed.
> – Parent from Outdoor Latino Minnesota

Camping is the second most popular outdoor activity among youth nationally.[50] Additionally, camping and outdoor experience as a teen are highly predictive of doing these activities as an adult.[51] However, the special aspects of camping call for additional proactive efforts by park agencies to remove obstacles.

First, the financial barriers to camping warrant consideration. Nonprofit and individual efforts have recently focused on directing funds toward providing camping gear, particularly for communities of color.[52,] Second, youth are concerned about safety. A fear of "strangers," "homeless people" and "animals" were all mentioned in specific relation to camping. Second, new campers need assistance with the obstacles of awareness (where to camp, rules about camping), and economic barriers (opportunities to try out equipment). The opportunity to learn skills is necessary to make camping possible for youth. Third, just being a youth is an obstacle because young people cannot access camping without adult permission. Guardians who wanted youth to camp expressed skepticism about safety going with school friends or others whose safety standards were unknown. One mother explained:

> *There was no way I was going to let my girl go and camp with this family that I didn't know very well. At 8 years old, there was no way I was going to let them take my kid overnight.*

Three Rivers Park District, Anoka County, and Minnesota DNR have initiative programs to address these obstacles through programs to borrow gear and learn to camp. TRPD partners with organizations rather than with individual families for camping education, a strategy supported by the data from this research.[53] Community Engagement Supervisor Amanda Fong noted that camping skill development programs can connect youth serving organizations to camping skills and equipment. These programs offer training to organization leaders who want to introduce members to camping. They offer staff support, a trailer of equipment, and skills

learning. In Three Rivers Park District, organizations completing the training can borrow the equipment trailer to camp. This process introduces youth to camping through a trusted organization, increasing the likelihood that guardians will give permission to go. This will be discussed later under recommendations.

One group of youth who may not find camping to be the right activity fit are those who have experienced homelessness. Three Rivers Park District educator Kaja Vang noted that these youth may experience camping as a form of hardship or even traumatizing. Their observations provide two important findings. First, staff who understand youth context can use this awareness to design inclusive programming. Second, listening to specific youth populations will provide additional insights to support the equity, public health, and park sustainability goals inherent in connecting youth with the outdoors.

In conclusion, youth from all five organizations had either enjoyed camping or wanted to try it. Investments in introducing youth to camping would remove obstacles and build a future population of adult recreational campers.

Strategies and Planning

Youth require special consideration for planning and offering desired activities. On one hand, youth preferences align with adult ones. For example, youth reported that they enjoyed spending time with family in the park through fishing, picnicking, and socializing. On the other hand, they did not report an interest in walking dogs or walking on their own, activities that were highlighted in earlier Council research on park use among communities of color.

The Teen Council, whose members reported that that they were busy with academic demands and who had tried many outdoor activities, listed hammocking, being with friends, and nature viewing as top desired activities. The outdoors can be a space to *be* and *connect* as well as to do.

Youth audiences need focused engagement for park and trail planning as well as programming. Youth researchers reported that desired activities were not just a question of which activities but also in what kind of context, such as "Would I be able to do it with friends?" "Will there be other people like me in terms of identity and experience with the activity?"

This section is not meant to be a list of absolute recommendations, but rather an invitation for park staff to reflect on the unique needs of youth from different contexts, as well as the needs of youth to be heard and invited to the park as their authentic, whole selves.

Chapter 4 | A New Understanding of 'Prior Experience'

All youth approach their park visit in the context of prior personal, family, community and cultural experience. This context can shape what youth expect to see when they visit, what they anticipate being fun or interesting, and even whether their parents give them permission to visit a park at all. The youth may have had varying opportunities for outdoor recreation activities, but all had some previous park experience. This included overnight and day trips from school, time with family in outdoor recreation and leisure, science education, employment, and exploring with friends. Popular culture, community trauma, and family and community stories shaped youth understandings of their in-park visits.

Prior formal education experiences

At the in-park experiences, youth referred back to school and environmental education as they made sense of new information in park programming. Within the first 10 minutes of each in-park experience with Asian Media Access and Organization of Liberians of Minnesota, a youth visitor commented to Council researchers that they had been to a similar setting before on a school field trip, indicating the value of these prior experiences as users navigated a new outdoor space. School field trips continue to be an opportunity to build enthusiasm for exploring the outdoors.[54] Council staff and park Implementing Agencies can work to create shared resources for these foundational activities through shared brainstorming and collaborative evaluation research.

Popular culture

Popular culture experiences created context for youth outdoor engagement. This included YouTube videos and Japanese card games popular with youth. The guide on one in-park nature walk used the *Trees of Minnesota Field Guide.* Youth flipped through the Oak section to identify a leaf based on features such as lobes and sinuses. They placed a sample leaf in the Pin Oak section of the book. When a Council staff researcher asked what book they were using, they readily and enthusiastically explained that the book was useful for identifying plants and natural species "This book of trees is like a Pokédex. You have to catch them all!"

He was referring to the game Pokémon, a popular anime, manga, and card game series. The game includes an electronic device (the Pokédex) designed to catalogue and provide information regarding the various invented creatures of Pokémon. The boys in the group understood the exercise of tree identification using the analogy of the classification system required in the Pokémon game. The naturalist allowed time for open conversation about the comparison among the youth hikers. Comparing Pokédex to tree classification was an accurate, useful analogy that helped other youth understand what they were trying to accomplish on the hike.

In another example, youth were excited about seeing racoons because they had learned about them in a YouTube video. The naturalist noticed raccoon tracks in the mud. Everyone listened closely as he explained that raccoons like to wash their food before eating. One of the adults referenced the popular video of raccoons washing cotton candy. The girls were very excited to see the raccoon tracks and interested to learn about raccoon habits, including their eating habits. For the Asian American youth participating in the activity, the video harkened back to their cultural world and prior experience, spurring excitement about sighting the tracks.

Adults often divide the world into online and offline, the "good" of the outdoors versus the "bad" of the electronic world. Although youth sometimes do this as well, the Pokémon and racoon video examples indicate that youth did not separate these worlds. Their excitement in the outdoors was bolstered by their prior "virtual" experiences with online and televised entertainment to add fun and insight to their park visit. Exploring how integrating the virtual and the nonvirtual worlds may be worthwhile to better connect young people to the outdoors,

Community understandings of human/nature relationship

Community understandings of the human/nature relationship are collective experiences that influence how youth access to the outdoors. Parks and park systems were created using one set of these understandings when founded in the late 19th and early 20th century.[55] Members of the U.S. dominant culture who share these understandings often lack opportunity to examine how their own cultural beliefs shape their relationship to the outdoors. This section describes how all youth drew from their community beliefs about human/nature relationship as a lens for their own park experience. Additionally, this section examines the ways adults' beliefs influence how and if they permit youth to access the outdoors. For park professionals, awareness of these aspects can enhance work with youth.

Community beliefs about human/nature relationship are one lens youth use to interpret their own park experience. Beliefs about characteristics of specific animals or plants are embedded in culture. Youth talked to staff about the meanings of flora and fauna in their community (see Appendix B for resources). Youth enjoyed sharing these stories and learning about each other's experiences. Outdoor Latino Minnesota participants joked that they would take the mushrooms to make *pozole,* a type of Mexican soup. Rather than "leaving these stories at the door," park programming and park information sources could invite youth to bring their own culture and cultural experiences to their time in parks. Park staff showed their own self-awareness regarding their own cultural beliefs and created space for youth to share cultural histories of the outdoors. Expressing these prior experiences helped youth see themselves in the outdoors.

Youth associated specific outdoor activities with their communities. When Council staff walked with Troop 100 Scouts to the St. Croix River, many commented that their families would think that it was a good spot to fish. "Fishing is a Hmong thing," a boy told a Council researcher. "We go with my dad and uncles. They like to fish but I just go there to hang out and be with our family." Another boy commented that the location was beautiful. "This would be a good fishing spot. It looks like there would be a lot of fish here," he said.

Elders' perspectives have direct impact on park access for teens. Parents and grandparents sometimes perceive the outdoors as dangerous. One Troop 100 father explained:

> *Growing up, everything gets kind of lumped up together as the same, whether it's a park or just the wilderness. A lot of it is generational. Growing up, my grandma would say, "We don't want you breaking your arm or leg. Don't climb a tree, don't jump, don't stay after school for programs. Your uncle broke his leg playing soccer, so you're not going to break your leg."*

Psychologists have documented broader parental beliefs involving biophobia, an anxiety or fear of the outdoors.[56] A white father described his family's fear of "turning our kid loose to go outside." His partner was afraid of dangerous strangers hurting their son if he went outdoors on

his own. This concern demonstrates how "cultural pieces play a role sometimes," as one father explained. Hmong parents and youth described fears as also having a spiritual side. Hmong spiritual-cultural beliefs were mentioned in all three of the events where Hmong residents participated. A list of reading resources on this topic is included in Appendix B.

Hmong parents and teens emphasized that elders' beliefs were highly influential in connecting youth with the outdoors. Parents and guardians advocated that park programming work to include elders as a way to increase youth access to parks. Intentional engagement with Hmong adult day care centers was encouraged to build elder confidence for their grandchildren to access the park. One supportive adult laid out a complete plan of action of how parks could incorporate Hmong elder experiences to enhance youth access to parks:

> *Reach out to Hmong elders at elder buildings [adult day care]. They love walks and nature. They [elder programs] have transportation and can get them there. They [elders] like to work out every day. If you have a Hmong translator [for park events], they will be more likely to bring children. Then the children can bring the grandchildren, this generation of youth. When the older generation [parents/guardians] come, the elderly come. You have to listen to older generations. We have a thing of hierarchy. We listen more to elders. We listen to them more and give them advice more.*

A second parent agreed, adding:

> *The parks need to win the confidence of the elders. I suggest you go to Hmong day cares with the elders. Tell them about the parks. Take them to the parks They have the respect in the family. Having Hmong working in the parks is also important. Grandparents will be saying "you can't go [to parks], I don't know anyone there." When they find out that Hmong work there, they say, "Oh, they're hiring Hmong? Ok, we'll give it a try."*

In summary, experiences of community elders shape youth access to parks. This finding was particularly emphasized by adults in Hmong focus groups. They recommended:

- Recognizing that adults in the Hmong community draw from experiences that include past injuries, community experiences with racism and cultural beliefs about the human/nature relationship

- Providing accessible language and translation as a way for past experiences to fit into current park programming

- Building confidence through inclusive, equitable hiring

- Recognizing that connecting elders to parks helps win confidence for youth access to parks

Community Trauma: Racism, Immigration, and Park Cultural Climate

Prior unpleasant or traumatic experiences shaped how youth and supportive adults assessed the potential risks of visiting parks. The safety concerns expressed in Chapter 1 are experiences that youth visitors reference as they consider risks in the current in-park experience.
For example, when Council staff discussed with one group of Troop 100 youth about winter sports, one of the boys talked about a sledding accident that ended in a fractured leg. While we are unsure if he was talking about himself or a friend/family member, it was clear the threat of injury was of concern to him.

Parents of color specifically named experiences with racism as a deterrent to enjoying public spaces. This topic is worth revisiting to emphasize that prior experiences shape youth access and enjoyment of park visitation. As important experiences, these traumas did not have to have to the youth or the family personally. Nor did they have to happen every time. One racist incident in the outdoors became a collective experience that created discomfort, concern, or avoidance of youth park visitation. One incident in which a sheriff collaborated with immigration enforcement to improperly arrest an authorized Mexican immigrant led to Outdoor Latino Minnesota to avoid programming in the county where it happened.

Negative experiences with police in neighborhood parks led to skepticism about youth safety in regional parks. The adult or youth did not have to personally experience traumatic community events for them to be on the minds of parents considering time in the outdoors. After a focus group ended, one adult stopped the Council researcher and told her that a traumatic conflict between Hmong and white hunters in Wisconsin created a fear of being in the parks and being killed for not knowing the rules. Park agencies can respond through dialogue with communities, explicit efforts to create safety, and communications with parents about the safety of regional parks.

Youth's prior experiences are an important part of their outdoor context

Experiences Enhanced Enjoyment in the Parks

Even youth who have spent much time in the outdoors do not always want to use their park-related expertise as part of planning a fun day in the outdoors. Paying attention to experiences in context leads to increased understanding of youth needs at that particular time. For example, TRPD Teen Council youth reported higher levels of expertise in the outdoors relative to other groups. However, they drew from other, nontechnical experiences. When asked what they wanted to do in parks, they preferred connecting with friends and family and contemplating nature. Similarly, young adults in Troop 100 had extensive experience in outdoor recreation. However, they focused on the lack of ethnic diversity among park staff and wanting to try new winter sports, rather than drawing on their expertise in fishing, camping, and hiking outdoors.

Prior outdoors experience remains relevant to youth programming, as it did enhance enjoyment of in-park activities and connection with others in the group. For example, the Washington County natural resource manager took younger Troop 100 members on a hike, and making a connection with his tour theme, said they had also learned about erosion in school. Older Scouts talked about their prior experience with tree identification with a volunteer Scoutmaster. After seeing an Eastern white cedar at St. Croix River Regional Park, one teen announced that they had seen "a lot of those on the North Shore." When a guide pointed out buckthorn, the youths booed in unison, with one saying, "This is invasive!" The youth enthusiasm on the tour

indicated that prior outdoors expertise helped build on the understanding of the current experience. Other experiences can also be acknowledged and incorporated to welcome youth to the park setting.

Integrating experience creates stronger youth connection with the outdoors

Educational programming that builds on prior experience and knowledge is an effective tool to include youth. During in-park events, youth whose previous learning and concerns were acknowledged were more engaged. Even when it was a simple nod or an affirming word, the encouragement by programming staffing resulted in more enthusiastic answers to questions and trying new things. Through listening, bridging, and planning by park professionals, the prior experiences of youth can be welcomed into the Regional Park System.

Chapter 5 | Staff and Programming

A final important element for a great day in the outdoors is excellent staff. In a national review of research, over half of the proven strategies to connect youth to the outdoors draw on the skills of programming and outreach staff.[57] Youth cannot access parks and trails on their own as easily as adults. Furthermore, programming intended for younger children is not appropriate for this age group because teens seek activities that are more challenging, independent, and peer-focused. Knowledgeable staff can provide the developmentally appropriate access to information and activities, thereby nurturing the connections between youth and the outdoors.

> *Working with so many high school students, it is hard to see young people who are not sure if they will be able to actually GO to college because of COVID or are worried about what their future holds. There is a lot of depression right now among high schoolers, and I am doing my best to make sure that those that I am working with are able to feel connected to something bigger than themselves and feel like they are putting positive things out into the world.*
>
> – Seth Eberle, Three Rivers Park District staff member

Programming staff from the regional park Implementing Agencies of Three Rivers Park District, Dakota County, Ramsey County, and Washington County worked with youth in programming that was collaboratively designed by youth-serving organizations, Council staff, and park agency staff. Based on observations of the youth response to the staff and the programming, the contributions of park staff were excellent, considering how youth later talked about them at the validity conversation events.[58]

An important question is *why and how* staff achieved these positive outcomes. Across all facets of the research, staff were observed to engage youth through sharing knowledge, sharing a love of the outdoors, and creating a context of respect and welcome.

Professional excellence in sharing knowledge and love of the outdoors

> *Without a guide, they don't understand what it is they are seeing. They will walk past without noticing things. A tree is just a tree. But with someone you know, you see the connection between mushrooms and trees. You learn categories of trees. There's a maple tree, a birch tree. They just wanted to know more and more.*
> – Adult Leader, Celestial Paladins

Park professionals who collaborated in this research had various job titles: program specialist, community engagement supervisor or specialist, arts educator, naturalist, natural resources coordinator, planner, and parks manager. Their expertise included outreach, naturalist skills, planning, and youth education.

Staff knowledge and enthusiasm contributed to positive connections throughout the programming. They provided answers in a friendly, inviting, and casual manner. Park staff did not condescend to youth. Youth asked questions such as "Is the fur from a real animal?" "Are there any dangerous animals here?" and "How much money does a naturalist get paid?"

These questions were treated with consideration and respect. Staff demonstrated desire to give information as sought. They encouraged curiosity, supported youth in asking questions, and helped youth feel more confident in parks.

For example, Program Specialist Ken Pelto with Ramsey County led a group of youth through a nature walk in the woods on a regional trail. By a show of hands, fewer than one-third of participants reported prior hiking experience. He guided youth off the trail for a closer look at the landscape, animal tracks, or plants along the creek. This information helped youth feel a sense of belonging and enhanced ability to enjoy the park. He showed them how to do leaf races in the creek and where they crossed paths with racoons. Specialist Pelto told the group that his ancestors were Finnish, and they used tree bark to make baskets.

Figure 14. Ramsey County naturalist points out distinctive characteristics of a tree leaf

An Asian Media Access member said that they were Hmong, and that their people made baskets, too. He said it was nice to know you could make baskets from this tree. Pelto took the time to stop and listen to the Asian Media Access member's cultural stories. Much of the time, the onus of responsibility of building cultural connections rests on people of color. He provided a space for diverse people to feel safe and create a commonality across cultures.

During the walk, Pelto pointed out transit stops and mountain bike trails, providing information that youth could use for future visits. He shared knowledge as it became applicable to a specific point in the programming. When the group passed a creek, Pelto said that the creek emptied into the Mississippi and that if trash or pollutants went into the water there, it would flow into the Mississippi and pollute those waters. The group encountered a pile of walnuts, and Ken showed the girls how to crack one open with his shoe and explained the process of growing/harvesting them. He continued this anecdotal education strategy throughout the hike.

How much does a skilled staff member contribute to youth learning? Council field notes indicated that staff provided many kinds of education, nurturing, and welcoming during their time with youth.

During the Celestial Paladins nature walk, Pelto provided resources to youth over 30 times in the course of 90 minutes, described in Table 7, next page. The types of contributions are listed in the first column . The frequency of these contributions is listed in the second column. Examples of the contribution type from across all in-park experiences and all educators are provided in the third column.

Table 7. A program specialist's contributions to youth learning in 90 minutes

In a 90-minute walk, naturalist provided…	Number of times	Examples of contribution (across all five in-park experiences)
Nature education	17	Animal tracks and scat identification, water cycle, seed dispersal, species identification, animal adaptation, plant and fungi identification, bird migration.
Information about how to visit park	5	Transit access, activities available, cell phone charging and bathroom locations, how to apply for fee waivers, where to find bathrooms, clothing offered for inclement weather.
Games and new outdoor activities	4	Teaching how to do leaf races, photography composition, art collages, building fires, joining youth in open field pick-up games.
Cultural, historical, and social information	2	Social history of the park, how humans create things from natural materials, effects of pollution, information on possible park activities.
Personal connection about love of the outdoors	2	Storytelling about past outdoor experiences, sharing own personal first time of doing an outdoor activity.
Reassurance about safety	1	Animals typically seen in the park, dealing with burrs, explanation for sounds heard.
Answers to specific questions asked spontaneously by youth or adults	Youth questions throughout the day	Sample questions: How do people use this park? Does the creek freeze in winter? Are mushrooms edible? Is the pelt from a real squirrel?

Additional staff provided information on a variety of topics during all in-park activities, below.

Table 8. Additional park staff contributions to building a welcoming experience

Contribution	Examples Observed
Guidance/advice	Career possibilities in parks, offering to write letters of recommendation, offering transportation to teen board meetings.
Needed equipment	Ponchos, gloves, hats, cameras, binoculars.
Cultural inclusivity	Introducing flexible bonfire activity that groups could shape to their own cultural preferences. Adapting programming for youth who have experienced homelessness. Drawing on language fluency, empathy and personal experience to help youth feel at ease.
Acknowledgment of youth insights and knowledge	Youth opportunities to design programming, leadership structures that include youth. Teen Council-led programming. Listening and affirming stories told. Participating in gathering rituals designed by youth. Co-creating data analysis with youth. Affirming youth insights about park master planning. Affirming all efforts, even when the answer or outcome was unexpected, Use of "our" and "we" to refer to the staff member and the youth.

Youth connected with park staff across differences of age, race, ethnicity, immigration status, and gender. Staff were alert to the immediate context to gauge when and how to share expertise. Rather than moving through a pre-programmed list of activities, staff conducted pre-event planning but adapted the plans to specific contexts.

Youth were most responsive when there were no lecture-type presentations that did not seem to relate to the setting or to their concerns or interests When staff paid close attention to context, youth responded with eager engagement. For example, Troop 100 later recalled that Dan McSwain, Washington County's Natural Resource Coordinator, "helped make the park better by teaching about erosion." Dan demonstrated skill in working with a range of youth responses to his questions. Council research field notes recorded this effort:

> *Dan emphasized that there were no wrong answers. He specifically asked for all answers and that they would figure out the correct one together. He stated he wanted to know what everyone was thinking. This approach encouraged conversation, and Dan made a point to pick out positives from each answer and encourage more input. After hearing all responses Dan provided the dictionary definition for things but never referred to the correct or wrong answers. After the dictionary definition, Dan noted that "our definition was probably more accurate." This use of "our" identified himself with the group and validated what they had to say while also providing the textbook answer in a way that didn't negate their contributions.*

Naturalist McSwain responded with care when asked to explain his job and what his role and responsibilities were. Like Pelto at Battle Creek, personal involvement and sharing of personal perspectives and experience enhanced the bond. Parents and other supportive adults found this approach to be highly effective in teaching youth. One mother recounted the walk her daughter took with Dan:

> *We learned about erosion at the site where it is happening. I would like more nature education like this… I want her to have more knowledge about a lot of things… In the tour today, she was able to touch it, feel it, see it. It's one thing to learn about erosion in a classroom, but it's much better to see it here, to learn about it firsthand. She learned so much today. I learned so much today. Coming out and learning these things are so important.*

The mother indicated that the tour and this experience gave her daughter broader exposure to important knowledge. "I want her to know lots of things [like this] so she knows [what] she can do."

In summary, park staff gave attention to both building relationships and sharing information. In addition to teaching about the natural world while youth were experiencing it, staff spent time asking youth about their prior experiences, listening to youth answers, sharing food with youth, participating in youth-led opening rituals, and engaging in casual conversation and joking. This balance contributed to creating a context of respect and welcome, discussed in the next section.

Creating a context of respect and welcome

A first-time youth park visitor faces a challenging situation. In addition to navigating a new space, they are asked to take direction and learn from a naturalist or educator whom they do not know. They are expected to listen meet other youth, and navigate a new outdoors setting. In contrast, park staff are familiar with the setting, are considered figures of authority, and have charge of the program agenda.

Considering the point of view of youth visitors, this meet-up can seem an uneven encounter, whether the youth is a seasoned Scout or a never-before-in-the-woods teen. However, in their programming, park and research staff responded genuinely to the young people, avoiding preconceptions about age, their knowledge, or level of interest.

The high degree of adaptability and accommodation they afforded the youth made the encounters highly effective because park staff created a context of respect and welcome. By the end of each visit, it was evident that the youth felt respected and welcomed. Youth jumped in to answer questions, asked questions, tried new experiences, listened when staff spoke, shared stories, shifted easily between play and attentiveness, relayed concerns to staff, and enthusiastically participated in activities. Youth did not exhibit behaviors that would indicate they felt unwelcome or disrespected.

The youth-park staff interactions reflected a welcoming, safe environment, where youth felt valued, respected, encouraged, and supported. One research source describes this sense of well-being as occurring in an environment where youth can *"be themselves, express their own creativity, voice their opinions in decision-making processes, try out new skills…and have fun in the process."*[59]

Each of these elements of well-being were evident in the staff-youth experiences. First, staff demonstrated that the outdoors was a place where youth could be themselves and express their own creativity.

All in-park gatherings opened with a ritual that came from the respective organization itself. Research staff learned from organization members what gathering rituals they practiced, including how they typically start their meetings or outings.

Four of the five groups had regular gathering activities. At the beginning of the day's visit, organization youth led their ritual to create a context of reciprocity and mutual learning between youth and parks staff.

Figure 15. Celestial Paladins conducting their opening ritual

For example, Celestial Paladins (Asian Media Access) brought their dance-stretch gathering ritual to Battle Creek Regional Park. In a circle, each person (dance troop member, Council staff, and supportive adults) guided the group in a stretch, and members shared how they were feeling that day. Different rituals opened the in-park experience of other groups, including a Scout patrol check-in, question time, or sharing a favorite song. One group without an opening

ritual participated in a bilingual art activity in which youth were invited to draw a picture illustrating a story about themselves.

The opening rituals established a safe, respectful, and interactive space. With this activity, youth and adults began their park visit with a shared familiarity and mutual learning. It conveying to youth that their organizational culture was welcome, and they were incorporating the park and research "culture" into their experience. The opening activities signaled to youth that their individual and collective identities were not "checked" at the park entrance, but rather integrated into their outdoor experience.

Second, the day's programming reinforced the welcoming environment by inviting youth to voice their opinions. For example, Washington County parks planners explained the process of master planning and the key questions to be answered to successfully update the parks plan. After learning about the unique aspects of nature-based parks, youth contributed ideas and thoughts about specific aspects of the parks (preferred activities, most important features, needed amenities). Their opinions were asked for, treated with respect, and used to inform this research and park master planning processes.

Third, youth had an opportunity to try out new skills. For example, based on what the visiting organization wanted to learn, programming and outreach staff of Three Rivers Park District designed a day of photography and wildlife education. The youth group – Organization of Liberians in Minnesota – said that their young members valued competition, so activities incorporated a photo contest. As the youth learned techniques of photo composition, they practiced the skills, first in groups at indoor tables and then outside in small groups. Each group took a list for a photo scavenger hunt, the list providing opportunities to observe features of the park.

Youth explored Elm Creek Park Reserve with cameras in self-selected peer groups, accompanied by one researcher or park staff member to answer questions and address concerns. At the end of the event, youth shared their photos with staff of the Council and Three Rivers Park District. Groups won prizes for accomplishments, such as first-completed and best photo.

Figure 16. Youth learning to compose photos

The activity incorporated the norms and values of the youth organization (competition), expanded shared knowledge so youth felt more capable in the outdoors (photography), and increased connection by providing time to take pictures together with peers in a supportive environment.

New skills included species identification, explaining natural phenomena, civic engagement for park master planning, hiking, cyanotype printing (creating a negative image of natural objects by placing them in sunlight on specialized paper), hiking on a natural surface trail, balancing on a wooden post, reacting to horses on a trail, and trying unfamiliar foods (bánh mì, enchiladas).

As one of the nation's preeminent nature-based park systems, the metro area's regional parks and trails offer more than 20 activities to experience. The activities that were part of the research activities were intended to create confidence in youth to try new skills in the parks.

Finally, staff created a safe, positive environment in which youth could have fun. Youth explored the woods and talked to peers during unstructured time in the schedule. All programming was active, with little time for sitting and listening. (Four of the five in-park visits did not involve time for sitting and listening to adults.) Research staff ensured that program design included games and competitions but also allowed fun to emerge spontaneously.

Some programming reflected specific requests from youth organizations. For example, Organization of Liberians in Minnesota noted that playing music was essential for all forms of recreation, so this was included in the opening ritual. Council researchers prepared an online station to add music to a play list for listening during the day's activities. Troop 100 valued group games and ball sports, so their programmed day included those activities, with extra time added after lunch to enjoy sports at the open field.

The transition for youth from being "strangers" in the park to "belonging" in the park occurred because of the positive interactions created by park agency and Council staff planning, organizational support, and youth initiative. Respect and inviting outdoor programming had several characteristics.

The programming incorporated understanding of the unique aspects of youth development and saw young people as having agency and capable of growth. A sense of belonging for youth resulted from making a space in which youth could "be themselves," express their creativity, voice their opinions in decision-making processes, try new skills, and have fun in the process.[60]

Youth analysis of park staff and programming

The validity conversations with youth researchers confirmed the positive effects of the staff and park programming. Youth evaluated whether the finding that "park staff and programming matters" was true.

Through discussion groups and anonymous comments, the youth affirmed that staffing was very important to enjoying the park. There were no negative comments about the programming being boring, irrelevant, or uninteresting. More detailed results are described in Table 9, next page.

Table 9. Analysis of validity conversations by youth researchers

Query	Agree / Disagree	Comments		
Being out in a park is better if I go with someone who can give me guidance.	50% agreed 50% wanted to visit with just friends	"I agree because it will make me comfortable to come back and also bring someone with me."	"Agree, I believe having guidance in the park will give people a better piece of mind, of walking through the park."	Falso. "Puedes caminar y conocer y descansar." [False. "You can walk, get to know [the park] and rest/relax."]
I enjoy learning about nature and history from parks staff	75% agree 25% disagree	"It was fun and cool." "Shows different games." "Yes, I know a lot from Seth."	"I agree because they have more info and can give you fun facts." "Sometimes it'll be fun but over time it'll become boring and it isn't as entertaining as it was before."	"No, not at all, because this one park that I went to had no one to help guide me through the park at all." "Cierto porque ellos son los expertos." [Yes, because they are the experts.]
I enjoy learning more about nature while being in the park	75% agree 25% disagree	"It would be very cool to learn more things about nature while be in nature." "I get to see actually life living there and education."	"An example would be poison Ivy. If you don't know what it is and go into it and you don't know that it's ivy, you'll get very itchy"	"Not all the time because sometimes there is no staff to help."
Park staff teach me new ways to enjoy the park. (Troop 100 only)	100% agree	"Yes, because they can make a game that's fun."	"I agree because staff teach you and other people"	"Learning new things would help to know good and bad things."

Figure 17. Council staff and youth researcher discuss results in validity conversation
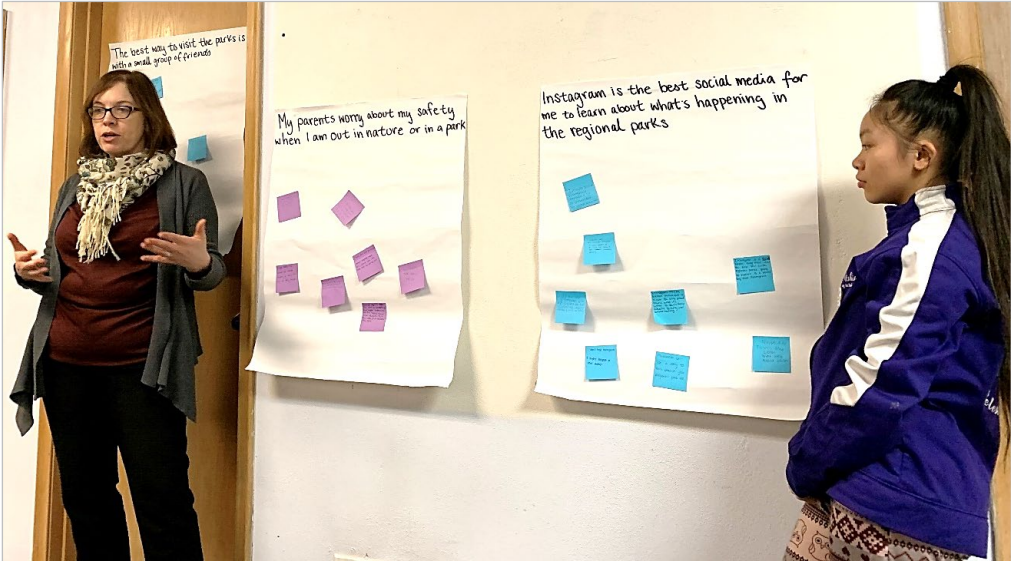

Figure 18. Urban Roots youth researchers analyze results from validity conversation

The impact of staff was the most memorable find

ing for youth researchers. They remembered and highlighted staff contributions and programming more than any other aspect of their park day. Significantly, youth took the ideas introduced by park staff and incorporated them into the context of their own communities and recommended the staff activities in their presentations during validity conversations. For example, Celestial Paladins youth enjoyed racing leaves on the creek's current, an activity that naturalist Ken Pelto introduced. Pelto built a connection with the youth by saying this was an activity he did with his child. He talked about what materials were allowed to be put in the creek. He answered questions honestly, telling the girls that he didn't know what size leaves would be faster but told them it would be fun to find out.

His response encouraged the girls to experiment for themselves. The girls then tried many leaves and reported the results of their experiments back to Pelto and other adults accompanying them that day. Three weeks later, the youth were asked to create a publicity poster for Battle Creek Regional Park and present it to the group of Council researchers and Asian Media Access staff. One team focused on the leaf battle. In the presentation, they describe how Pelto taught them to do leaf races and recommended competition with family and friends to "do battle" with leaves. The invitation, Figure 19, reads:

> *BATTLE CREEK*
> *Leaf racing at the Creek!*
>
> *A simple game can be a*
> *COMPETITION! with FAMILY and FRIENDS*
>
> *Get to know others through the BATTLE!*

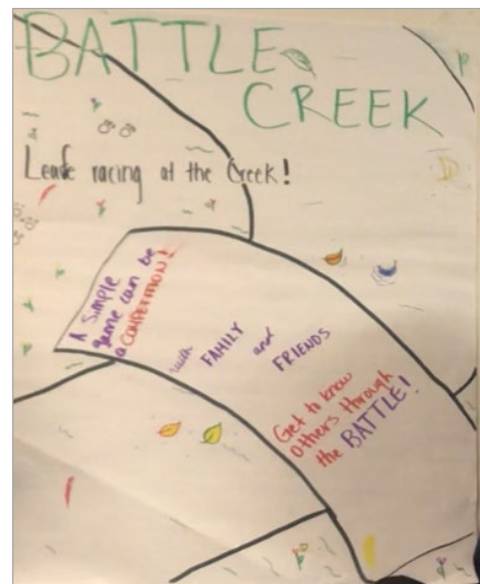**Figure 19. Youth-drawn poster inviting competitors to leaf-races**

The girls said later that the leaves were multicolored to mimic mango candies. They said that this was "natural resource-based" presentation.

When asked why they thought the invitation was for everyone, they said that everyone is busy with work but they need a break. "Everybody is busy in their life. This could be a fun activity and a fun day for them to take a day off from a busy work life and just have fun, to not stress about work and stuff like that." The youth presentation demonstrated that programming staff can have a lasting impact on connecting youth to the Regional Park System.

When an adult in the group commented, tongue in cheek, that throwing an object in the water was wrong, the girls corrected her, saying, "This is an activity in nature!." In remembering Pelto's instructions about leaves, youth understood what was meant by "nature-based activities," and they enjoyed brainstorming what it would be like to have nature-based activities in their lives. They recognized the connection of the nature-based features of the park to their own communities, themselves, and the enjoyment that being in the park could create.

Investment in high-quality programming connects youth and the outdoors. Through multiple skill sets and intentional creation of a welcoming environment, park staff can accomplish many

important outcomes. Youth researchers validated the findings that staff expertise leads youth to enjoy the outdoors, and staff can make the experience fun, inclusive, welcoming, and safe.

Chapter 6 | Additional Recommendations to Connect Youth and the Outdoors

Chapter 6 provides a summary of key recommendations to remove obstacles to the outdoors and create inviting park experiences for youth. The chapter focuses on investments of attention, time, and resources for three sectors of the Regional Park System: Implementing Agency administration (funding, policies, and planning), programming and outreach staff, and the Metropolitan Council (convening action, long-term planning approval, research).[61] The recommendations reach toward four outcomes:

- Develop partnerships with affinity groups and constituent-led organizations.
- Develop, adapt, and implement models that overcome obstacles to the youth-park connection.
- Invest in inclusivity through staffing, programming, research, capacity-building and dialogue.
- Develop, adapt, and implement programming and outreach models that value youth visitors' prior experiences.

Seek strategic partnerships with affinity groups and constituent-led organizations

Organizational Connections

The Met Council and Implementing Agencies can connect with youth not only individually but also through organizations. Most productive could be working with organizations focused on a shared identity (affinity group or constituent-led) and/or on shared activities (for example, outdoor recreation, arts, or environment). For this research, such groups were contracted as microconsultants, organizations that were paid a small consultant fee for contributing expertise and efforts at organizing youth to participate in the research. A sample memorandum of understanding (MOU) is included on the Council's Youth & Parks toolkit page. Various youth-serving organizations can offer advice regarding youth engagement, specific programming needs, and raising awareness about the parks and events.

An Organizational Collaborative Model

This model is effective because:

- It overcomes safety concerns. Parents and guardians trust the organizations where their youth spend time. Going in a group creates feelings of safety and safer conditions to try new things.
- It provides opportunity for learning skills. Organizations can help provide the structured environment to support park programming that teaches new skills. Organizations know their youth and their current interests and capacities. Some organizations have leadership staff who can teach outdoor skills in coordination with park staff.
- It provides protection from in-park racism and a source of support for youth. Organizations ensure that youth will not be alone in navigating hostile encounters, can communicate concerns to park staff, and provide a peer group so youth will less likely feel out of place or alone.

- It raises awareness. Youth-serving organizations, particularly constituent-led organizations, have deep networks in communities that care about youth well-being. Information disseminated through trusted networks is more likely to be heard.

- It reduces transportation and time-priority obstacles. Organizations have structured time with youth and often have vehicles or carpooling arrangements. Guardians and parents trust the priorities set by their organizations more than an unfamiliar government entity.

Figure 20. Troop 100 Scout bus brings visitors to St. Croix Bluffs Regional Park

- Organizations know youth and their background. They are familiar with youth prior experiences, prioritize youth leadership in their community, and can offer their insights when collaborating with outdoor initiatives.

What the collaboration could look like:

- One-on-one meetings with organization youth and supportive adults to find out what they seek from outdoors experiences. (See conversation guide in the toolkit.)

- Follow up and check in about their park experiences. For example, how did the event go? Are there recommendations for next time?

- Supporting the organization with resources, such as free equipment and fee waivers, staff time, stipends.

- Informing organizations of opportunities; grants-seeking with organizations as appropriate.

- Recognizing organizational expertise and compensating for this expertise when appropriate through microconsultancy grants.

- Recognition of how organizations contribute and listening to how an organization would like appreciation expressed (examples public acknowledgement, certificates of completion).

Recommendations for Implementing Agencies

Investments and Conversations

1. **Make programming and outreach staff a high budget priority.** When government agencies grapple with budget limitations, reductions to programming staff will disproportionately affect teens, particularly teens whose park access is impacted by multiple obstacles.[62] Park staff make the youth-park connection happen. As budget decisions are made, outreach, education, and engagement staff throughout the parks needs to be made. A lack of staffing in parks ("no one is around") contributed to feeling unsafe, uncertain, and unwelcomed. Programming creates structured activities for youth to visit parks. Innovative programs such as youth-designed options, cultural events, and conservation opportunities topped youth recommendations.

2. **Involve youth as leaders and decision-makers.** For the future support of the park system and the well-being of the region, teen voices can offer valuable collaboration in master planning, program development, and park ambassadorship. Youth in the study eagerly participated in opportunities to give feedback related to park planning. They gave presentations that demonstrated understanding of the regional park system and a desire to influence the future of the system. Teens enjoy activities that involve their peers, and they respond to leadership from their peers. Young people are more likely to respond to invitation from other teens to show-up and participate. At the same time, young people turn to the support and encouragement from adults to help remove obstacles through supportive multigenerational interaction.

Figure 21. Dakota County park educator pauses for youth to take photos

3. **Pursue locally appropriate initiatives.** The strategies recommended in this report related to obstacles to park access and the elements that make "a great day in the park." The strategies can serve as a springboard to productive conversations about design policies, facilities, and programming. Each Implementing Agency has a unique context in which to explore opportunities in relation to these findings. They can draw on their respective strengths and examine opportunities to develop new connections between youth and the outdoors.

4. **Commit to ongoing efforts to understand the context of youth concerns**. The youth in this research are part the broader community. How is the park system connected to larger contexts and youth lives and how does the range of youth experiences influence connections with the outdoors. How do community events and current issues affect how visitors think about and experience parks? What opportunities are available to engage in listening sessions with the Teen Council and other organizations partnering with youth? Take time to reflect with colleagues about what you're hearing from teens about school, popular culture, health concerns, community trauma, community successes.

Programming and Outreach Staff

1. **Encourage and trust staff innovation**. Staff reported the best outcomes happened when they were given the freedom to reach out to new audiences and figure out appropriate initiatives, even though they may not produce revenue in return. When staff time and budget are allocated to community outreach, success follows.

2. **Make space for staff to bring their authentic, whole selves to work**. Staff create connections when they acknowledge their own prior experiences. In doing so, they can create connections with the youth and adults who visiting the parks.

3. **Foster cultural competency**. Knowledge and understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds can promote a more equitable park system through education, interaction, and participation of individuals and groups from diverse communities. Staff who consider themselves members of those communities and staff who are composition that is diverse in

terms of race/ and ethnicity, gender, and ability create a welcoming context for all visitors. Staff with language and cultural competency skills created successful connections for youth in the park where they serve. When applicant pools lack these qualifications, increased efforts to recruit and build diverse staffing pipelines help send the message to youth that people like them belong in the park.

4. When staff showed a desire to connect and listen to youth, youth researchers responded with enthusiasm, sharing, and enjoyment. The "people person" abilities that staff demonstrated in connecting youth with the outdoors seemed partly talent and partly skills developed over time and experience. Park staff were able to assess how youth talked about a range of experiences, including environmental knowledge, family, community, prior outdoors experience, recent events, and cultural references.

Park and Trail Planning and Design

1. **New models to understand user experience**. Park engagement and planning professionals can work together to understand the youth relationships to parks and trails. All youth users bring experiences as they engage with parks, and they use these experiences to consider how to engage with the outdoors. Master planning processes learn about the prior experiences that inform what people want from their park system.

2. **Include youth in all master planning engagement processes**. Youth can provide planners with critical information to help envision what parks and trails could be in the future. Consultants and agency planners can use the tools provided in the Council's online tool kit as well as locally created and other tools to engage with youth.

3. **Draw on already existing engagement with youth**. Check-ins at the beginning of programming and listening during programming are great opportunities to learn about and acknowledge experiences that inform what users want from parks.

4. **Prioritize accurate and inclusive historical and cultural information**. Youth want expansive and more accurate telling of the region's history in the parks, as well as culturally specific programming. Youth and adults in the research expressed excitement in learning history and a desire for better, less ethnocentric historical narratives. This includes pre-settlement and immigration histories, artists from around the world, how species in Minnesota are the same or different from those other continents where youth may trace their community's origins.

Figure 22. Checking out fungi on a trail walk

Recommendations for the Metropolitan Council

As a regional policy-making body, planning agency, and provider of essential services for the Twin Cities metropolitan region, the Council can continue to emphasize that the connection of youth to parks is essential to achieving the Regional Park Policy Plan goals of strengthening equitable usage, conserving high-quality natural resources, and providing a comprehensive regional park and trail system. The system needs young people, even as young people need access to nature-based parks and trails. If young people feel welcomed in the parks, they are more likely to support the parks in the future. As the Council addresses issues related to regional park policies, plans, and grants, the research team offers the following recommendations.

Investments and Convening Efforts

1. Expand the commitment to youth-focused equity work through diversifying the Council's park staff and membership of the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission. of interns, urban scholars, and research associates (entry-level positions accessible to recent college graduates).

2. Investigate and pursue innovative ways to connect public transit to the Regional Park system. Prioritize investment by Metro Transit to connect residents to the park system.

3.   Identify ways that Council Members and staff unit of the Council can support the parks program in Community Development in connecting youth with parks (for example, connections with Environmental Services activities in parks, transit connections, attention to youth recreation needs in comprehensive planning).

4. Develop resources for consultants and staff of Implementing Agencies to enhance youth access to community engagement for planning as well as programming and outreach.

Outreach and Research

1. Invest in expanding research through engagement with youth-serving organizations that provide insight about outdoor access for youth who are African American, Indigenous, girls, LGBTQ+, gender nonconforming, disabled, and youth who live in rural areas, and youth experiencing homelessness or poverty.

2. Respond to youth researchers' calls for more inclusive historical accounts and cultural information.

3. Direct efforts of parks ambassadors toward youth-serving organizations, teens, and their families.

4. Collect and analyze youth data in upcoming visitor studies. Invest in research associates and interns to analyze these data. Provide funding for activities with youth-serving organizations for youth to analyze and evaluate the findings.

5. Develop accountability metrics to measure improved access of youth to the regional parks and trails.

Master Planning and Policy

1. Establish and implement a requirement for Implementing Agencies to conduct an equity analysis in their master plans.

2. Direct Legacy funding toward microconsultancies and noncompetitive grants that build community empowerment and support innovative collaboration between Implementing Agencies and communities.

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6. Develop resources to connect programming and outreach with master planning processes.

Appendix A. Methodology

Qualitative methods and data in this study focused on participants' personal accounts, in-depth observation, a careful research process, and intensive efforts at achieving research validity. High-quality analysis is systematic, captures nuance, and considers the power relationships that shape the process. It is an appropriate method when a topic is relatively understudied and new categories of ideas are needed to explain important issues.

Team formation: Organizational partners and collaborators

This section describes the three categories of organizational collaborators in the research project, how they were selected, and the roles each played in the project. They are presented in alphabetical order.

Metropolitan Council Researchers

Council researchers were responsible for the original research proposal, compiling all data, convening park and validity conversation activities, and coordinating the logistics for the park experiences. Team members were assembled for their expertise in equity matters, qualitative methods, youth engagement and participatory research, and outdoor recreation. This five-person, multidisciplinary research team consisted of a research sociologist on staff in the Council's Research Department, three project researchers who were undergraduate and graduate student interns, and one recent intern graduate. This team created all final products to disseminate the research.

Park Implementing Agencies

The Regional Park System of the seven-county metro area is managed by 10 Implementing Agencies that are responsible for operations, management, and programming for their respective parks. Four of the 10 agencies participated in this study. The agencies are responsible for parks located in the northern, eastern, east-central, and southern portions of the metropolitan area. Two of the agencies (Dakota County and Washington County) coordinated their community engagement for long-range planning efforts with this research process.

In two of the agencies, lead staff members had job roles associated with community outreach and engagement (Three Rivers Park District and Dakota County). In two others, primary staff participants were the natural resource coordinator (Washington County) and program specialist (Ramsey County). Park staff provided details about their agency's work with target-age youth, potential park activities, and availability of facilities. At all four agencies, excellence in programming was a significant factor in building the youth-park connection.

Youth-Serving Organizations

Five youth-serving organizations collaborated in the research design, data generation, and data analysis. After selection of the organizations, two meetings were held with each one to discuss their motivations for participation, desired outdoor activities, perceived barriers to participation, and general planning for the park experience. Selected organizations collaborated in the research design through two pre-park visit consultations, recruitment of youth participants, and, after the in-park experiences, evaluation of data validity. Their time included 10 hours with the Council research team, plus planning logistics for their youths' park experiences. They provided transportation to the parks for their youth, and convened the youth for post-park data analysis.

The organizations contributed significant social capital, including in-depth knowledge about their community and trusting relationships with youth and families. Youth researchers and youth participants were recruited from the five organizations.

Table A1. Partnerships

Youth-Serving Organization	Implementing Agency	Park Visited
Asian Media Access, Saint Paul	Ramsey County	Battle Creek Regional Park
Organization of Liberians in Minnesota, Brooklyn Park	Three Rivers Park District	Elm Creek Park Reserve, Eastman Nature Center
Outdoor Latino Minnesota, Greater Twin Cities	Dakota County	Spring Lake Park Reserve (long-range plan)
Troop 100, Greater Twin Cities	Washington County	St. Croix Bluffs Regional Park
Urban Roots, Saint Paul	Washington County	Pine Point Regional Park (long-range plan)
Three Rivers Park District Teen Council (validity conversation only)	Three Rivers Park District	Council research visited Teen Council

Note: Where youth advised Implementing Agencies as part of a long-term planning process, the parks are noted with "(long-range plan).*"* Organizations included youth from Hmong, Liberian, Latinx, African American, and additional Asian-American communities.

Steps in Research Method

Relationship-Building and In-Park Research Design

The research team conducted either one or two interviews with the staff of each participating park agency and a field-site visit to each park proposed for the study. Participating youth-serving organizations contributed valuable expert advice on removing obstacles for youth to access outdoor experiences.

To acknowledge this expertise, youth-serving organizations and their youth were recognized as microconsultants. The organizations received a stipend and their participating youth, a nominal dollar award, for their collaboration on research design and project logistics. The partnering organizations were selected through a low-barrier application process. It included a one-page application and a checklist (see toolkit).

Criteria for selecting organizations included geographic diversity, a preference for constituent-led organizations, and alignment of the organization with research priorities. Organizations were selected by an independent panel that included youth aged 15-22, community representatives, and non-research Council staff. Staff of youth-serving organizations and individual youth established relationships with Council research staff through meetings to formulate the research questions and in-park activities.

Activities were planned based on the preferences learned in these meetings. For example, activities for the Organization of Liberians of Minnesota were planned to be competitive (photography challenge) because OLM leaders discussed how important competition was to them. On the other hand, activities for Asian Media Access were more group-oriented and not competitive.

In-Park Experience

Council staff worked with staff of participating regional park Implementing Agencies to design in-park experiences that took greatest advantage of what each setting could uniquely offer, while, at the same time, considering the specific needs of the visiting youth group. All activities helped engage youth with their natural surroundings in the park.

The programming began with an opening "ice breaker" that adapted the rituals of the partnering youth-serving organization, followed by naturalist-guided activities, such as hiking, animal and plant identification, photography, cultural/historical education, bonfire storytelling, and making s'mores. Field experiences were specifically designed to allow the youth time for unstructured use of the space (spontaneous play) as well.

Five field experiences were conducted in the fall of 2019 (see Figure A-1). Research staff met the representatives of the community youth organizations at the park. The day was scheduled to allow time for building relationships through social "ice breakers" and then an introduction to the park presented by park staff. This introduction was generally held indoors in a park building but not always. At one event, the post-field experience was held indoors at a nearby location, and at another, under an outdoor pavilion. Every field experience included food provided to the youth based on preferences noted by the youth organization.

All park experiences involved some educational component designed by the park staff, a structured research activity designed by Council staff, and some open play time directed by the community youth organization, Including racing on the trails, arts and creativity, playing tag, photography, and hanging out. After the scheduled activities concluded, there was a formal interview process conducted by the youth or the Council staff with a set of reflection questions. The standard questions were designed to learn about the youths' perception of parks, park staff, and nature in general, both before and after their in-field experience.

Parent/Guardian Focus Groups

At every event, parents and guardians were asked to participate in a separate focus group using a standard set of questions adapted from the 2014 Council study on park use among communities of color. The purpose was to learn parent/guardian preferences, motivations, hopes, obstacles, and advice regarding connecting their children with nature-based outdoor activities. Parents were also provided an opportunity to rank desired activities. These focus groups were conducted while the youth were participating in their field experience.

Initial Data Analysis

After completing all the park experiences with the study's five community organizations, the Council research team transcribed their field notes, uploaded hundreds of pictures, and catalogued research materials produced by the youth. From these data, the Council team generated a list of preliminary findings and recommendations. These findings were converted to one-sentence summaries that were affirmed by all members of the Council team. From these findings, the team created a series of activities to complete with some or all of the youth-serving organizations. These activities were part of validity conversations held with all five organizations.

Visual Methodology Workshop

Members of the Urban Roots organization participated in a two-hour visual methodology

workshop, analyzing how photos can be coded as data and contribute to research. Youth

Members of the Urban Roots organization participated in a two-hour visual methodology workshop, analyzing how photos can be coded as data and contribute to research. Youth analyzed the in-park activities through studying the photos and described what was represented in the photo collection. In two groups, the youth categorized a selection of 45 photos from the in-park experiences into themes, such as calming the mind, sharing stories, and being themselves, expressing associated emotions with each grouping and photo. The groups then selected, curated, and captioned 10 of these photos into coloring book pages. The photos then influenced the creating of a coloring book and were posted on the Metropolitan Council social media channels following the workshop.

Photo Expression Activity by Asian Media Access

During the in-park analysis, Asian Media Access used this activity with Celestial Paladins, assisted by a Council researcher Sarah Gong. She printed 60 photos that included images of weather, furniture, activities to do in parks, people, animals and city life. The photos showed a variety of activities and objects. The people featured were racially and ethnically diverse and included disability representation. Ange Hwang guided the activity.

The girls took a few minutes to carefully examine each photo and remember how they felt at time the photo was taken. Then, the girls were given a sheet of paper with the questions on it. Each chose three photos that embodied the emotions and experiences corresponding to the questions. The girls had been given a sheet of paper with two questions: "How did being in nature today make you feel?" and "What kind of programs would you like to see in the parks?

Youth chose photos because:

> *The photo reminded me of being calm and relaxed.*
>
> *It seemed peaceful and it was, like, time to interact with each other.*
>
> *I chose because I want to see people to gather and enjoy planting and agricultural harvesting.*
>
> *I would like to have fun in fall. It is cold and fun… It's fun playing with snow. It is also dark in the picture, so I want a program mainly for people who don't have a lot of free time. Programs open 24/7 for those who don't have a lot of free time to do these fun things.*
>
> *I want to show that to earn a living, money isn't always easy. Planting, growing crops to sell. It's a way to show that earning money is hard and helps youth learn lessons about working hard.*
>
> *I want to get to see 'sea' life. I would like a boat program to help us learn about animals in the lake and aquatic life.*

Learning Youth-Preferred Park Amenities

The research team developed a series of activities to build trusting relationships with youth and youth-serving organizations, as shown in Table A-2, next page. The toolkit developed by the Council's project team provides all resources marked in the table with an asterisk (*) for those

who may be interested. These activities provided avenues to learn about and value what young people think about parks and the outdoors.

Table A-2. Determining Preferred Activities

Source of Data	When	Group in Research Team
Pre-experience conversations*	Before in-park experience	Council staff, YSO selected adults and youth
Field research challenge*	In park	YSO youth
Field observations of in-park experiences	In park	Council staff
Discussion groups with youth*	In park	Youth with limited Council facilitation
Adult focus groups*	In park	YSO Adults
Inventory of possible activities completed by youth and adults from YSOs*	In park, after park for youth who couldn't attend	YSO and TRPD Teen Council youth, YSO adults
Youth presentations on publicity, policy, and principles*	After park visit	YSO youth
Youth researchers worked with Council, and YSO staff to analyze what they enjoyed about the in-park experience.*	After park visit	YSO youth, adults; Council staff
Inventory of staff knowledge and published materials to understand what activities are available.	Various times	Implementing Agency staff

Validity Conversations

During a two-hour lunch or dinner workshop, youth completed several activities so that team staff could assess their in-park experience and evaluate Council research findings. First, the youth competed in a Kahoot quiz, a user-generated multiple-choice quiz accessible via a web browser about the in-park experience. Because three of the five organizations identified the value of competition to youth, this step provided a culturally specific and familiar activity to remind youth about their day in the park. Second, the youth prepared presentations on the in-park experience using one of three frameworks. The framework prompts on "most important takeaways" were:

1. Big thoughts – What do you want to say about the research activities and how would you answer the following research questions: What new things did you think about because of your park day? Why is the park important to you? How do you feel in nature? What do you like to do there?

2. Big recommendations – Imagine that you have been selected to give advice to the park system on behalf of youth in the Twin Cities. Write down your top three to five recommendations to deliver to the advisory committee.

3. Invitation – Think about the park you visited. What would an invitation to that park look like? What would be your tagline, motto, or brand be? Get creative! Youth researchers created a total of 12 presentations. Through this process, they generated advice and identified their most important findings. The presentations demonstrated that youth gained experience for

civic engagement by giving formal presentations to an adult audience with specific recommendations.

The third activity asked youth to evaluate Council findings. This activity introduced the concept of *social science research findings*. The Council team selected five findings for youth to evaluate. Each finding was evaluated by at least three groups. One additional youth-serving organization, the Three Rivers Park District Teen Council, completed the validity workshop without a prior in-park event. The validity conversations also included food and presentation of a certificate of completion.

Critical youth-empowerment theory advocates that youth assume increasing levels of meaningful participation and engagement. In this way, they practice important leadership and participatory skills. The validity conversations began with youth voicing either their agreement or disagreement about the research findings presented by Council staff. They then took control of the programming by preparing presentations to offer advice to Implementing Agencies and the Council about the themes of the research. They presented these presentations to Council staff and supportive adults, practicing their leadership and participatory skills of civic engagement. They were informed, where appropriate, of how their insights contributed to park planning processes. See Table A-3, below.

Table A-3. Data Analysis Decisions

Criteria for Choosing Finding	Additional Factors	
• Observed in the park	• Finding described how to overcome obstacles	
• Talked about by youth	• Adults mentioned value	
• "Sticky" (youth remembered later)		
• Mentioned in multiple groups		

Finalizing data analysis

The team worked with the themes validated by youth. All data (fieldnotes, interview transcripts, a sample of photos, poster presentations) were analyzed according to these themes. The team did this through group-coding conversations to identify themes, review of the data for themes by two researchers for each theme, and reconsideration of the themes. Council research team members wrote memos on selected themes.

Themes that were classified as important and used in developing recommendations were those that were observed by staff, talked about by youth, confirmed prior research, and/or noted across different youth groups. The process prioritized findings that were "sticky" – meaning that items or events from the field experience day were later recalled during validity conversations. Other factors that were considered important in determining findings were whether the item seemed important to overcoming identified obstacles or whether adults had identified an item as valuable.

Appendix B. Cultural Resources

This resource list includes specific cultural contexts for further reading to accompany Chapter 2 – "Obstacles to Youth Access to the Outdoors: Findings and Recommendations." Also available is an additional curated list of blogs by youth and perspectives of Black, Indigenous, and people of color on getting into the outdoors. Resources are related specifically to the Chapter 2 discussion of unwelcoming climate when visiting parks.

Liberian

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Hmong

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"Understanding Dragons: Spirit and Earth Bound Worlds." Shaman Memoirs, posted January 30, 2019. *Understanding the dragon at Lake Phalen.*

Hmong Cultural Guide: Building Capacity to Strengthen the Well-Being of Immigrant Families and Their Children

*"*10 things about Hmong culture, food and language you probably didn't know." 2015. Nancy Yang.

White/Dominant Culture

Overcoming Parental Fears of kids in nature and outdoors. 2019. Dr. Peter Gray.

Additional Resources

Voters of color deeply support protecting public lands. 2016 poll.

Appendix C. Acknowledgments

Asian Media Access/ Celestial Paladins	Organization of Liberians in Minnesota	Urban Roots
Arrly Her	Briella Binga	Zakaria Adji
Ange Hwang	Stephanie Binga	Chulu Ali
June Lee Mai	Moussa Cauliblny	Saba Andualem
Doua Lor	Raheim Cooper	Tanereika Celestine
Stephen Lu	Mohammed Dukuly	Jabyrie Earley
Kathy Moua	Georgette Gray	Ahmed Farah
Ariel Thao	Trishelle Hutchinson	Maria Garcia
KaoJee Thao	Jerome Jlopleh	Hamza Isahay
Jessica Vang	Haja Kamara	Aaron Kamara
Peter Vang	Sylvia Karneh	Cecilia Kamara
Mintshis Vang	Bindou Komara	Raymond Lessard
Joua Vue	Abrahim Komara	Magsuut Mohamed
Lee Xiong	Cleopatra Laleah	Ku Moo
Mina Xiong	Jairus Lavien	Estrella Nava
Patricia Xiong	Adline Mansaray	Essance Negarra
Jailia Yang	Noah Martin	Liliana Rodriguez
Lily Yang	Leila Mawlue	Abdul Sesay
Fang Yuan	Maxwell Musah	Osman Sesay
	Tennessee Musah-Vincent	Sadie Sounthala
	Lisa Nyenie-Ulea	Jesse Syndano
	Alfreda Rambal	Ger Thao
	Joel S. Reeves	May Vang
	Rector Reeves	Michael Vang
	Kalifa Sheriff	Moua Yang
	Emily Sillah	Stephanie Yang
	Tarlice Tarue	David Woods
	Cleopatra Weah	
	Paul Wilson	
	Princess Yanforh	

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Endnotes

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