

A review of the impacts of inequitable access and use of U.S. national parks on BIPOC communities: can we reduce the adventure gap?

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Abstract

Objective: To analyze scientific research articles relating to BIPOC access and use of U.S. public parks and discrimination in outdoor recreation.

Methods: A literature review including North Carolina State University's Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management's inaccessibility and diversity research, as well as recent interviews with BIPOC individuals in the outdoor recreation industry regarding the pandemic's impact on a lack of visitation to National Park Service sites by people of color.

Results: Several diversity in parks and park and well-being correlation research publications were identified for use in this study. Based on these publications, the following factors were indicated as potential causes for continued inequitable access to and lack of BIPOC use of U.S. national parks: disproportionate financial and well-being effects of the pandemic on BIPOC communities, historical discrimination in public parks, a lack of generational use of public parks by BIPOC individuals, and underrepresentation of people of color in the NPS workforce.

Conclusion: This study identified the factors contributing to the continued inequitable access and use of U.S. national parks and determined a need for further research in BIPOC community relations to the outdoor recreation industry.

Introduction

Socially vulnerable populations, including large BIPOC communities and individuals of low socioeconomic status, have historically been underrepresented in visitation statistics for National Park Service (NPS) sites since the inception of the NPS in 1916 [22]. The restricted access and use of NPS sites for socially vulnerable communities has become more prevalent following the COVID-19 pandemic. There are a few suspected reasons for this, including a history of exclusion and discrimination in U.S. public parks, adverse effects of COVID-19 on community health and economies, as well as a lack of generational participation in outdoor recreation. Identifying COVID-19's impact on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) visitation to public and national parks is vastly important for both the health and well-being of minority communities, as well as for the future of the NPS and its sites.

History of racism in national parks

The NPS has facilitated exclusive travel and recreation to their sites since their inception in 1916. NPS sites were not spared from the impact of Jim Crow Laws which endured in the nation until the 1960's and prompted the segregation of all public spaces and facilities [6]. After about a decade of service, the NPS made the decision to defer to local and state laws for guides of racial discrimination policies in their parks [6]. Therefore, in states in which segregation of recreational facilities was legal, such as the former Confederate states, the NPS promoted and facilitated these laws by building exclusionary campgrounds, visitor centers, restrooms, and picnic grounds [6]. The best example of segregated areas in national parks can be found in Shenandoah National Park in Virginia; the park maps and signage directed BIPOC visitors away from White-only designated space [6]. Park administration and rangers sought to create separate experiences for White and non-White visitors, keeping Black guests from disturbing the park's original intended purpose of creating a natural sanctuary for affluent White individuals [6].

No matter the location of the NPS site, whether they are located in notoriously intolerant or progressive areas, America's parks were never designed to be inclusive environments built for the equal enjoyment of the diverse population of the country. National parks were the brain-child of wealthy White communities who sought to create sites that would provide the nation lucrative tourist destinations, as well as exclusively White spaces that provided refuge from the bustling cities during America's industrialization [6]. However, industrialization did not only cause the urbanization of much of the nation's land, but it also brought minority communities into the cities due to discriminatory federal housing and increased labor opportunities. Therefore, escaping the city also equated to providing White individuals segregated havens from minorities inhabiting urban areas.

Other goals of the parks included preserving historically and culturally important sites to maintain impressive human works [22]; however, these sites are discriminatory as well, predominantly focusing on the celebration of White history and culture. The histories and cultures of Indigenous individuals or people of color are often underrepresented at these sites or left out altogether [6]. These historic sites were believed to provide a source of national identity and provoke patriotism for White Americans, much like the castles and formidable architecture in Europe contribute to European cultural pride [6]. However, for communities who are not represented in the history of NPS sites, such as Black Americans and Indigenous populations, our national parks may be inspiring the very opposite perception of the nation.

Though racial discrimination has historically played a role in the visitation and management of NPS sites, the exclusive nature of national parks only increased during and after the pandemic. COVID-19 resulted in restricted access to parks, again making it a space predominantly for affluent White Americans who sought to vacation following the end of state-wide quarantines and lockdowns. BIPOC individuals and those of low socioeconomic status were not as likely to reap the benefits of travel to national parks due to disproportionate economic and health effects from the pandemic, as well as growing racial tension amidst a battle against systemic racism and police brutality in 2020. All of these factors affected the ability and desire of BIPOC individuals to visit national parks following their reopening after the pandemic.

History of exclusion in outdoor recreation and tourism

In addition to COVID-19's impact on diversity in national parks, a long-standing history of distributive injustices in parks has contributed to the lack of BIPOC representation in public greenspaces. This history of restricted access to outdoor spaces has developed misguided cultural perceptions of Black Americans in the outdoors. As of 2013, 70% of outdoor recreationalist identified as White [7]. In 2014, the Outdoor Foundation found that merely 4% of campers identified as Black [13]. These statistics produce doubts within minority communities of whether or not BIPOC individuals belong in parks.

Alongside this doubt of whether Black communities are welcomed in such spaces, recreating in the outdoors is not a part of many cultures associated with Black Americans due to a lack of generational access to outdoor recreation. In a study by KangJae Lee of North Carolina State University, residents of Cedar Hill, Texas, a town with a majority Black population, were interviewed regarding the lack of local park usage. When discussing the reasons as to why Black community members do not frequent their public parks, one interviewee claimed that it has less to do with cost and affordability, and more to do with exposure [11]. The interviewee claimed that outdoor recreational activities, such as swimming, was not something that many Black

individuals did growing up; instead, the interviewee explains that “we had a basketball court, football field. That’s what we had...You did what you have to do” [11]. Other interviewees in Lee’s study agreed with this lack of generational exposure, confirming that the historical inability to access outdoor recreational activities lead to common perceptions within Black culture, including the ideas that Black people don’t participate in activities such as climbing, hiking, or camping [11]. This cultural perception of their exclusion from outdoor recreation explains much of the troubling data observed regarding diversity in park visitation.

BIPOC and minority influence in national parks

As previously discussed, NPS sites, especially the service’s historic sites, maintain the majority of their thematic focus on White history and achievement. This emphasis on White culture and works can still be seen in many of the educational programs and literature in parks today; Mount Rushmore National Historic site is a perfect example of this problematic White-washing of the nation’s history. The monument showcases a patriotic sculpture of former U.S. presidents on one of the most sacred Lakota cultural and spiritual sites [16]. This controversial park is just one of the many NPS sites that has been the scene of Indigenous protests in recent years.

Indigenous people were largely affected by the history of national parks as they were forcibly removed from their lands in order for the NPS to gain ownership of these sites. However, this removal of Native Americans in order to make room for White-dominated parks began before the inception of the NPS and was facilitated by the U.S. Army [4]. In an effort to continue westward expansion, a segregated regiment of Black soldiers, known as the Buffalo soldiers, were tasked with battling Native Americans for their land and then establishing protected parks in which they would serve as the nation’s first park rangers [4]. The regiment built up much of the park infrastructure that laid the groundwork for the trails and roads used today [4].

While the removal of Indigenous people from their land is glossed over in the historical resources offered at most NPS sites, their history is still predominantly told from White perspectives. In addition, much of the historical literature found in these parks fails to mention the BIPOC influence on the creation and maintenance of the parks. Of the over 145 NPS historic parks and sites, only 40 are designated as “African American experience sites” [3]. This lack of historical representation is one of the many ways in which BIPOC Americans continue to be left out of the narrative surrounding parks and outdoor recreation.

Who is going to U.S. national parks after COVID-19?

With the onset of the pandemic in the United States in the spring of 2020, the NPS shut down their sites, resulting in a short-lived reduction in visitation. However, with the reopening of NPS sites in 2021, U.S. national parks experienced record-breaking

overcrowding with 44 parks setting new records for annual recreation visits [21]. In addition, statistics from the year's report also indicated that 11 sites had surpassed 5 million visitors [21].

However, overcrowding in national parks was not a new phenomenon for the NPS. Park overcrowding has been occurring for nearly a decade, resulting in deteriorated infrastructure within parks and safety management concerns for park staff. The NPS has struggled with visitation management since the 100 year anniversary of the park service in 2016 which inspired the campaign "Find Your Park." This campaign aimed to reintroduce the nation's parks to previous visitors, as well as promote engagement with a new, diverse generation of potential visitors [20]. Despite the intentions of the 2016 campaign to inspire visitation from BIPOC communities, diversity in national parks continues to be scarce in both visitor and employee demographics. According to the 2021 visitation statistics for the NPS, non-White visitation to parks has decreased since the pandemic with less than 2% of all NPS visitors identifying as Black [8]. This lack of BIPOC representation in visitation is especially concerning when comparing the NPS statistics to those of the United States; in 2021, Black Americans comprised nearly 13% of the American population, ranking as the third largest racial group in the nation [23]. Though all minorities were largely underrepresented in the NPS visitation statistics for 2021, Black Americans reported the least number of visitors, falling below Native Americans and Hispanic individuals [23].

In a study conducted by the NPS, a survey was sent to random U.S. households, aiming to determine facts about NPS visitor retention and visitation from minority communities. The survey found that Black, Hispanic, and lower-income residents represented the majority of those respondents who categorized themselves as "non-visitors," or people who have never visited an NPS site [23]. These same groups reported representing a small fraction of recent park visitors with less than 33% of Black, Hispanic, and lower-income respondents reporting a visit to an NPS site in the past two years [23]. These survey results are alarming and exemplify the need to commit further research to the potential reasons, in addition to the pandemic, that diversity continues to be a prominent issue for the NPS.

Although low rates of public and national park visitation have been reported in BIPOC communities long before the onset of the pandemic, COVID-19 seems to have exacerbated this discrepancy in visitor diversity [8]. Specific negative effects of COVID-19 on the BIPOC community that may have impacted the group's visitation to NPS sites will be discussed in the section: [How did COVID-19 impact visitor demographics in national parks?](#).

Who works for the NPS?

This inequality in racial representation in the NPS extends further than the demographics of the visitors; it is also prevalent in the racial identities of full-time NPS

employees. Only 7% of full-time employees identify as Black, while Hispanics and Asian Americans make up 5.3% and 2.3% of the NPS workforce respectively [14]. These statistics reiterate the concern that NPS sites are White dominated spaces, being visited and managed almost exclusively by affluent White Americans.

How did COVID-19 impact visitor demographics in national parks?

There is substantial evidence to support that the disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on communities with many BIPOC and low socioeconomic status residents furthered the issues surrounding accessibility to public and national parks for these socially vulnerable populations. In surveys conducted by North Carolina State University's Park, Recreation, and Tourism Management research department, BIPOC respondents in Raleigh and Charlotte, North Carolina were less likely than White respondents to indicate that their park usage increased during the pandemic [8]. In addition, surveys found that public park visitation increased most during the pandemic for past visitors, who identified predominantly as White, and declines for BIPOC individuals following 2020 [8].

One of the potential reasons for this discrepancy in visitation to public parks is the reduction in travel as a result of the pandemic. Traveling during and after the pandemic for socially vulnerable populations became more challenging due financial hardships and an increase in concern for safety and well-being. With Black Americans representing the majority of hospitalizations due to COVID-19, many BIPOC communities reported higher levels of fear than their White counterparts when considering what risks were presented by travel [2]. Black Americans were also disproportionately subjected to stark rises in unemployment and reduced wages as a result of the pandemic's impact on the American economy [5]. These unequal socioeconomic and health effects of COVID-19 posed an obstacle to traveling to national parks for socially vulnerable communities.

As noted by the American Psychological Association, or the APA, the pandemic was not only an epidemiological crisis, but also a psychological crisis in American households [2]. Some of the wide-spread distress characteristic to the quarantine era of the pandemic included an increase in concern for the health of oneself and their loved ones, as well as a concern for the loss of leisure activities that were typical prior to the onset of the pandemic [2]. These psychological changes altered society's perception of those around them, causing the further alienation of certain communities, most notably those who are considered socially vulnerable. The concern for the health of society seemed to be centered around middle to upper class White Americans, prioritizing their loss of daily activities and recreation—this narrative induced further strategic marketing of parks and public lands specifically to affluent White Americans, yet again excluding Black Americans from visitation to parks and from outdoor recreation [5].

Responses from BIPOC individuals in the outdoor recreation industry

Today, there are many leaders and organizations who are striving to diversify outdoor recreation and encourage travel to national parks. One of these leaders, James Mills, author of *The Adventure Gap*, considers the reasons behind the lack of BIPOC community interest in NPS sites: “the twin threats of prejudice and pandemic are causing travelers of color to wonder whether our national parks are safe and welcoming places for everyone” [12]. This prejudice, which has been an everlasting part of American society, has grown since 2020 with the rising political and racial tension. Therefore, traveling to a space that is both almost exclusively operated and visited by White individuals can be fear-invoking and cause a great deal of concern for criminalization and racial profiling.

Criminalization of BIPOC individuals in the nation’s public parks, especially of young Black males, has persisted in American society for decades. These occurrences, which are mostly prevalent in urban public parks, have resulted in the increased surveillance, suspicion, and harassment of BIPOC park visitors [17]. These common experiences for BIPOC individuals in parks has resulted in a reduction in park use by minority communities. Within the parks, there is also a lack of trust amongst BIPOC communities in their protection and treatment by the NPS workforce—not only do most park rangers identify as White, like most of the park visitors, but their uniforms also closely resemble those of American law enforcement agencies [1].

Joel Pannell, associate director of the [Sierra Club](#), reminds Americans that “the outdoors and public lands suffer from the same systemic racism that the rest of our society does,” and will continue to as long as “parks, campgrounds, and forest lands” remain “stubborn bastions of self-segregation” [1].

What is the impact of park visitation and greenspace access on community health and well-being?

According to a study from the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management at North Carolina State University, access to public parks is linked to improvements in physical and mental health [8]. The study suggests that regular visitation to public parks encourages an active lifestyle and an increase in physical activity, reducing the risks for cardiovascular conditions later in life [8]. In addition, interacting with outdoor spaces, or greenspaces, is known to promote improvements in cognitive function, attention and focus, emotional well-being, and reduce stress [8]. These positive impacts associated with contact to greenspaces and park use are attributed to all community types; however, nature-based experiences are shown to have a particularly strong influence on the overall well-being of BIPOC communities [8]. Though there are numerous health advantages attributed to park use, pre-existing systematic disparities in socially vulnerable communities have exacerbated inequitable access to parks, restricting BIPOC communities from reaping these benefits [8]. This

inequitable access to park use has decreased recreation and leisure opportunities for these populations and amplified negative health outcomes specifically in BIPOC individuals [8].

What are the projected issues surrounding future NPS visitation demographics and climate change?

Inequitable access to parks for Black Americans, in particular, poses a threat not only to BIPOC community health, but also to the health of the parks themselves. As noted by the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2042 the nation's population will be mostly comprised of Hispanic and Black-identifying individuals, reducing the nation's White population to a minority status [18]. Jeremy Barnum, the spokesperson for the NPS in 2016, acknowledged the need to “attract more diverse visitors” and inspire the future generations of NPS site visitors, employees, and environmental activists; he continued, recognizing that the parks' future lies in the hands of a generation that will “look different than before” [14].

Conclusion and Future Directions

Inequitable access and use of U.S. national parks has plagued our nation for decades, but its prevalence has only increased since the onset of the pandemic. For BIPOC individuals, a visit to a national park is a complex consideration between the historical discrimination in the outdoors, a lack of representation in narratives surrounding outdoor recreation, continued park management and visitation predominantly by affluent White populations, and the disproportionate financial and health effects of COVID-19. All of these factors have facilitated both the decrease in ability and desire of BIPOC individuals to visit outdoor spaces in the United States. A lack of diversity in outdoor spaces is a major cause for concern for both the future of the health and well-being of the nation's BIPOC and low socioeconomic communities, as well as for the preservation of the natural and cultural resources protected by the NPS. There are a formidable amount of issues to attempt to address in the coming years as the nation shifts to a majority BIPOC population. The outdoor recreation industry, along with its major companies, such as Patagonia, REI, and Northface, must continue their efforts to market their products and education programs to more diverse individuals. In addition, literature and news coverage of outdoor recreation must ditch the common narrative of White-dominance in the field and aim to cover more stories relating to the successes and achievements of people of color in sports such as climbing, kayaking, and mountain biking, among other popular recreational activities.

The NPS must continue its diversification work as well, focusing on marketing their sites, both national parks and historic sites, toward people of color in order to attract both visitors and employees identifying as BIPOC individuals. The NPS must continue to expand its historical themes utilized to categorize their current operating

sites; most of the current themes relate to White American history, however there are many opportunities to include minority historic sites. In historic spaces and parks, the NPS must do a better job of addressing the site's full history, including the influence of BIPOC populations rather than maintaining the focus on White achievements. For example, spaces such as Yellowstone and Yosemite National Parks, must reflect their diverse history, including the influence of Buffalo Soldiers, in their education programs, signage, and products [6]. By promoting more inclusive forms of education and addressing their discriminatory past, the NPS may encourage increased visitation from BIPOC individuals in the near future.

Following the financial and health impacts of the pandemic on BIPOC communities, the NPS must work to create and encourage outreach efforts to potential future visitors. The NPS currently has specific programs to reduce or eliminate the cost of entrance into its sites, including passes for Veterans and Gold Star families, disabled individuals, and the annual 4th grade pass [19]. These passes could be expanded to include reduced costs for socially vulnerable communities and those identifying as a people of color. Other marketing efforts specifically targeting BIPOC communities must also be achieved in order to recruit a more diverse generation of national park visitors. After the onset of the pandemic, the nation experienced a rise in awareness of police brutality against Black Americans, which has led to both political and racial tension. In order to mitigate the concerns of BIPOC individuals when considering travel to a White-dominated space such as national parks, the NPS needs to address specific alterations in workforce demographics and appearance. Some of the changes can be as simple as instating a new uniform for park rangers and law enforcement that is less similar to those of American police officers [1]. The NPS must also work to attract a more diverse workforce, increasing its recruitment of future generations of park rangers in BIPOC communities.

These systematic changes in the NPS and in the outdoor recreation industry, among others that require further research in this field, may facilitate a rise in BIPOC visitation to NPS sites in the coming years. If these complex issues are not addressed and “we don’t see how these [concerns] are interrelated, then we’re at risk for losing everything,” Pannell explains [1]. Pannell continues to describe the magnitude of the need for BIPOC representation in outdoor spaces, acknowledging that without taking these necessary measures, “you’re not going to have public lands to enjoy” [1]. Ambreem Tariq, director of the [“Brown People Camping”](#) social media platform, shares her concern for the future of environmental activism, recognizing that “we need everyone to experience and love the land so that they will stay and fight” [1]. Without the support of the NPS from more diverse populations, the future of the NPS and its important natural and cultural sites are at a great risk of extinction.

With the overwhelmingly adverse physical and psychological impact of the pandemic on the BIPOC community, creating a safe and inclusive outdoor space is

vitality important for reducing negative health outcomes for socially vulnerable individuals [8]. Facilitating such spaces is also necessary for improving recreation and leisure opportunities for these communities that extend beyond urban sports, thereby encouraging more physical activity. Increasing physical activity through regular park usage by BIPOC communities can help decrease instances of cardiovascular issues, chronic illnesses, and mental health conditions in these populations [8]. However, more research must be done to unveil the discrepancies in the rates of chronic conditions and diseases between White and BIPOC communities, especially after the pandemic, in order to educate affected individuals on how they may take preventative measures against the development of these conditions. In addition, further research must occur to determine more specific explanations for how spending time in parks positively reinforces physical and mental health and specifically how BIPOC communities can benefit from nature experiences.

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