

Who Gets To Enjoy American Nature?

On March 1, 1872, President Ulysess S. Grant signed into law the Yellowstone National Park Protection Act. This act set aside two million acres of land for the public and created the world's first national park, leading to the creation of sixty-three parks in total over the next 154 years (“Measuring America”). The establishment of these parks was crucial for preservation efforts, and they provided an affordable way for Americans to experience nature in an increasingly urban country. However, not all Americans get to participate in this experience equally.

From the 1870s on six million Black Americans migrated from the rural South to Northern cities like Pittsburgh, New York, and Detroit. This movement reflected the need to escape Southern Jim Crow laws and racial terror; and it was spurred by World War I labor shortages. But even in the Northern cities Black Americans were often confined to segregated neighborhoods as discriminatory housing practices, including restrictive housing covenants, prevented them from living in many white communities.¹ Due to redlining, Black neighborhoods were frequently considered too dangerous for financial investment, leading to the underfunding of many services, including parks and other green spaces.² Similarly, many of the National Parks which were created to offer access to nature for everyone, forced Black Americans to use separate poorly maintained campgrounds and bathrooms.³ The effects of these policies can still be felt today.

A 2025 study found that on average, Americans spend more than ninety percent of their time indoors.⁴ Screens and car commutes occupy hours that may have otherwise been spent outside. As modern life draws people away from the outdoors, it simultaneously becomes clearer that green spaces are essential for mental and physical wellbeing. Access to nature, though, remains unequal in different communities. The historical lack of investment in parks and community gardens has led to 55% of all Black Americans living in communities that experience nature loss,

¹ Library of Congress, “The Segregation Era (1900–1939),” *The Civil Rights Act of 1964: A Long Struggle for Freedom*, accessed September 29, 2026, .

² Sam Zeno, Mariam Rashid, Jenny Rowland-Shea, Kim Bailey, and Rena Payan, “The Nature Gap: Communities of Color and Those With Low Incomes Are Bearing the Brunt of America’s Nature Loss,” *Center for American Progress*, February 23, 2026

³ Kurt Repanshek, “How The National Park Service Grappled With Segregation During The 20th Century,” *National Parks Traveler*, August 18, 2019.

⁴ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, “Factsheet: What Is Indoor Air Quality?” July 2025, <https://www.epa.gov/indoor-air-quality-iaq/factsheet-what-indoor-air-quality>

a phenomenon in which neighborhoods are subject to environmental degradation. This limited access to nature has tangible health effects, as it can lead to stress, anxiety, and obesity.⁵ Additionally, those living in nature-deprived areas are more likely to develop respiratory issues, especially when power plants or other polluting industries take the place of public parks.⁶ Addressing the reduced quality of life highlighted by these statistics requires rebuilding nature in Black communities, a key step towards restoring a historic connection to the natural world and all its benefits.

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⁵ HealthPartners, “Nature Deficit Disorder: Can the Outdoors Help Us Feel Better?,” *HealthPartners Blog*, accessed September 14, 2026

⁶ Ahad Shahid, “People of Color Have Been Left Out of Nature. Equitable Transit Can Help,” *The Wilderness Society*, August 23, 2022, <https://www.wilderness.org/articles/blog/people-color-have-been-left-out-nature-equitable-transit-can-help>