

ACCESS TO THE OUTDOORS

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WHY IT MATTERS

In 1948, African American lawyer Maceo Conrad Martin attempted to enter Staunton River State Park. Mr. Martin was refused entry, as he suspected he would be. He then filed suit against the Virginia Conservation Commission. Following the infamous “Separate but Equal” doctrine 50 years prior, the Board of Conservation and Development ruled that the Commission provide “comparable facilities for the Negroes,” leading the Commonwealth to open Prince Edward State Park for Negroes. Prince Edward was the only park in Virginia accessible to Black folks until the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Resistance to integration mounted to the point where the Board of Conservation considered closing the park system altogether.¹

Access to the outdoors is strongly linked to improved mental and physical health outcomes, especially for children and the elderly. Spending time outside improves cognitive and emotional well-being, reduces anxiety and depression, and fosters a deeper appreciation for nature. Many communities also use outdoor spaces to build and sustain community through gatherings like family picnics, outdoor exercise classes, live music, volunteer groups, and hobby groups like bird watchers or cycling clubs.^{2,3}

All Virginians should have access to the outdoors and its benefits regardless of race, physical abilities, or income. Yet, historic patterns of inequitable public access to green space persist in both urban and rural areas, particularly in areas that are traditionally communities of color. Many of these same communities are also the ones that bear the brunt of environmental impacts from pollution and the effects of climate change.⁴ James Baldwin said, “History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us.” The Commonwealth, localities, and the conservation community have taken steps to address the legacy of exclusion from nature; however, many of the programs tasked with addressing this legacy remain underfunded.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Public access to the outdoors is an issue across geographic areas, although it may manifest in different ways. Rural areas are defined by vast open spaces; however, many substantial tracts of land are privately held or inaccessible to the public, leading to a landscape marked by no-trespassing signs.⁵ This makes it hard for non-landowning residents and visitors to access the outdoors, whether fishing in a river or stream or hiking or hunting in the woods. State and federal-owned public lands like parks, wildlife management areas, and public boat launches

help address this need, but there are still significant geographic gaps. In addition, many need additional investment in infrastructure and programming to make them feel like safe and welcoming spaces for all Virginians.

Urban areas, particularly those resulting from rapid development and sprawl, also present access issues due to a lack of greenspace within safe walking distance of neighborhoods. In Richmond, 81% of residents are estimated to live within a 10-minute walk of a park, but in Portsmouth, only 50% do, and in Abingdon, only 28%.⁶ In many instances, this lack of access is due to historic discriminatory practices like redlining, dividing of communities with major roadways, lack of investment in public or active transportation infrastructure, and even forced migration of communities to areas further from natural areas.³

Local governments are the main entity responsible for acquiring, developing, and maintaining green space for residents. They often lack the capacity and resources to meet access needs, and are limited in how much money they can generate through funding mechanisms like proffers and impact fees. Localities in the Greater Richmond Region are notably excluded in Virginia Code from funding the creation of parks, outdoor space, and related facilities through the use of impact fees.⁷

OPPORTUNITIES

Addressing current and historic inequities in access to the outdoors requires a multifaceted and multi-level approach shared by state and local government and community partners. The Virginia Land Conservancy Foundation (VLCF) grant program is a key vehicle for establishing and expanding new open space. Increased and dedicated funding for VLCF would increase funding for localities to increase the quantity and quality of open space available to residents.

Until last year, the Virginia Outdoors Foundation also ran the Get Outdoors Fund (GOF). GOF provided flexible, competitive grant funding for projects that address barriers to accessing the outdoors, including diverse approaches such as building ADA accessible trails, developing multilingual materials to address information barriers, creating outdoor camps and programming for children, and providing transportation to outdoor spaces. Despite high demand and impact, this program was indefinitely suspended due to a lack of funding.

Increasing youth access to the outdoors is especially beneficial for developing curiosity, confidence, prob-

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lem-solving, and appreciation for nature. The Virginia State Parks Youth Conservation Corps program is a two-week, residential program consisting of work projects during weekdays and environmental education and adventure opportunities on weeknights and weekends.⁸ Many community-based organizations have also stepped into the gap to provide outdoor experiences for Virginians with physical and learning needs, from low-wealth communities, and non-English speakers. The outdoors can and should be for everybody, but not all Virginians have access to the outdoor spaces, facilities, and information that make it possible for them to safely and comfortably get outside

ENDNOTES

1. *History of a Pre-Civil Rights Era State Park*. (2019). Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/state-parks/blog/black-history-month-prince-edward-state-park-for-negroes-a-refuge-for>
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4. *Climate Change and the Health of Socially Vulnerable People*. (2022, March 21). United States Environmental Protection Agency. <https://www.epa.gov/climateimpacts/climate-change-and-health-socially-vulnerable-people>
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6. *Which city is best for parks?* (2019). The Trust for Public Land. <https://www.tpl.org/parkscore>
7. Imposition of impact fees, § 15.2-2329 (2007). <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title15.2/chapter22/section15.2-2329/>
8. *Youth Conservation Corps*. (2025). Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/state-parks/youth-conservation-corps>

TOP TAKEAWAYS

Access to the outdoors is strongly linked to improved mental and physical health outcomes. The outdoors can build and sustain communities.

Systemic efforts to exclude groups from the outdoors based on racial, economic, and physical barriers still impact how Virginians interact with the outdoors.

The Get Outdoors Fund was a successful program, but is indefinitely paused due to lack of funding.