

Black to nature: Various groups reclaim the outdoors

By Chris Rauber

Racist attitudes and laws, including segregation, kept Black people and other people of color away from national and regional parks for generations. Now they're teaching themselves the joys of savoring nature.

When Debbie Njai was growing up in Edwardsville, Illinois, just outside of St. Louis, she was “definitely a tomboy” who loved to hang out in nature.

There was a small lake and a creek nearby in their private subdivision, and Njai and her siblings and friends used to bike, play capture the flag and “create our own trails in the woods.”

But as a Black grownup, while working in the corporate world, she lost track of that part of her personality — until she started playing golf.

That led to a first adult hike with a childhood friend and his wife — an exploration of Missouri’s Castlewood State Park — that reopened Njai’s eyes to the joys of being unplugged from technology and immersed in the splendors of the natural world.

“It was the best feeling ever,” she recalls.

Inspired to do more, in September 2019 she started [Black People Who Hike](#) after discovering that when seeking Black friends or family members to hike with, many people blew her off. They didn’t “get” hiking, didn’t see it as something Black people did, she said.



From left, Alex (Aly) James, Carla Harris and Christina Harris. Members of GirlTrek walk through Stone Mountain Park in Georgia in April 2021. (Photo courtesy of GirlTrek)

What could be more natural than for humans of any ethnicity or gender to enjoy the natural world and take advantage of the opportunities it offers for recreation and renewal: Hiking, camping, boating, fishing, climbing, or just plain walking, to name a few?

Unfortunately, we don't live in an equitable nation or world. Many Black people, other people of color and other groups marginalized by our society, have long lived in urban areas far from state and national parks, effectively cut off from wilderness or anything akin to it.

And many haven't felt safe, or welcome, in such environments.

Historically, the relationship between Black people and the outdoors has been rooted in slavery and other forms of forced labor, "not leisure," explains Jewel Bush, chief of external affairs at [GirlTrek](#), which encourages Black women and girls to walk, hike, explore nature and learn more about their own history.

America's history of exclusion has promoted the notion that "enjoying the outdoors is only for certain people," Bush said. But a host of groups, including Black People Who Hike and GirlTrek, is working to challenge that racist notion — and reclaim the outdoors for everyone.

As recently as the 1950s and 1960s, many regional, state and national parks were off limits to Black Americans and other people of color. Jim Crow laws, social pressure and other institutional forms of prejudice built formidable walls around nature.

Even environmental heroes like John Muir, a conservationist largely credited with the development of Yosemite and Sequoia national parks, and President Theodore Roosevelt, an avid outdoorsman, saw nature as a preserve for America's white majority, not a heritage open to all.

And even when official rules changed, attitudes didn't immediately follow.

"Systemic exclusion goes so far back, so many generations, that we almost have to start from scratch," Njai said.

Due to inexperience and unfamiliarity, "there's definitely a lack of knowledge," she said. "Even I was very unfamiliar with (hiking basics): What do I wear, how do I find trails?"

But Njai kept at it, learning the ropes and sharing her knowledge with the broader community.

Ultimately, starting on Instagram and later Facebook, she attracted thousands of online contacts, and she now has more than 500 official members in Black People Who Hike. Prior to the Covid-19 lockdown, the group organized several day hikes, some as short as three miles or so, one as long as 14 miles — "a bit strenuous" for a day trip, Njai admits.

Simply seeing photos of the group's members online is good for the soul. "They capture the Black joy," she said.

Njai's group and GirlTrek are far from alone.



From left, Alex (Aly) James, Christina Harris, Carla Harris and Andrea MacEachern, all members of GirlTrek, hike through Stone Mountain Park in Georgia in April 2021. At GirlTrek alone, more than 1 million Black women have been inspired to walk regularly — both for exercise and to connect with nature and with friends and community members — since the group was founded in 2010. (Photo courtesy of GirlTrek)

A variety of groups representing Black people, Latinos and other people of color, and LGBTQ community members have similar goals: Making parks and wilderness areas [safe, welcoming and appealing to people of all backgrounds](#) and orientations. Other organizations include Pride Outside, Every Kid Outdoors, Community Nature Connection, Brown People Camping, Camp Yoshi, Paddle Like A Girl, and Indigenous Women Hike.

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GirlTrek, which calls itself a public health nonprofit, “encourages women to use walking as a practical first step to inspire healthy living, families, and communities,” according to its mission statement. It also helps Black women mobilize to lead advocacy efforts, “protect and reclaim green spaces,” and participate in what it calls a civil rights-inspired health movement.

“Hiking is not only an opportunity to challenge yourself to do something new, but also to find peace in the sanctuary of nature,” bush said. “We want all of our women to know that they do, indeed, belong (in the natural world).”

Last year, despite the Covid pandemic, 50,000 new members a month pledged to walk the walk with GirlTrek.

But with this burst of new interest, what else can be done to make things better overall, so that Black people and others who have been marginalized by American society feel truly comfortable, welcome and safe in parks and other outdoor venues?

“To be honest, the biggest part is that (the country needs) to stop whitewashing its history,” Njai said.

It’s not enough to talk about the Lewis and Clark expedition, the early-1800s exploration of the Louisiana Purchase and the Pacific Northwest, she suggests, without also referencing the long history of racism, exclusion and violence that kept many Americans locked out of their own natural heritage.

Our national and regional parks need to start incorporating other cultures, and show that they’re “not some exclusive space” for white Americans,” Njai said. “It’s about being intentional, about wanting people of all ethnicities and races enjoying the parks.”

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