

Researchers say park systems should engage schools to bring children to parks at an early age

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Recent studies have shown that visitors to U.S. national and state parks are disproportionately white, with low numbers of ethnic minorities, especially African Americans. Now, a University of Missouri researcher has identified several reasons why African Americans choose not to patronize public parks in greater numbers, including a racist history that curtailed African Americans' access to parks, on-going racial conflict within communities near parks, and a lack of African American heritage at parks.

"The benefits of national and state parks for American society are numerous, including great observed health benefits," lead researcher KangJae "Jerry" Lee said. "Because these parks are such a valuable resource, it is concerning that many racial and ethnic minorities are not taking advantage of the public spaces, which they help fund through tax dollars."

For the study, Lee, an assistant teaching professor of parks, recreation and tourism in the MU College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources, interviewed African American residents in the community of Cedar Hill, Texas. The community is predominately middle-class, African American and located close to Cedar Hill State Park. Despite the proximity, Lee found that very few African Americans visit the park. During in-depth interviews with members of the community, Lee found that most African Americans had no interest in park visitation or chose

to avoid the park due to a history of racial discrimination in the area and concerns about how they would be treated if they visited the park.

"Many of the adults I spoke with were raised by parents who experienced discriminatory Jim Crow laws which prevented or discouraged African Americans from visiting public parks," Lee said. "Park attendance in America is culturally embedded, meaning children who are raised going to parks will grow up to take their children. Many African Americans do not go to parks because their parents and grandparents could not take their children. In other words, many African Americans' lack of interest in parks or outdoor recreation is a cultural disposition shaped by centuries of racial oppression. While Cedar Hill is a unique community, these issues are prevalent around the country and applicable to many national and state parks."

Lee says that Cedar Hill State Park was once a large plantation run by a family who owned slaves. The historical sites at the park make no mention of this history, which Lee says adds to the resentment from the black community.

"Researchers have documented that the omission of African American history is quite common at public parks and recreation areas," Lee said. "So the question is: whose story needs to be told to the public and future generations? African Americans I interviewed firmly believed that African American history needs to be told at these parks."

Lee suggests that public officials partner with schools and youth development organizations to encourage children to visit parks at early ages. He suggests hosting field trips and picnic days. He says exposing younger generations to parks will help them develop an interest in the outdoors, leading black children to revisit the parks when they grow up.

The study "Bourdieu and African Americans' Park Visitation: The Case

of Cedar Hill State Park in Texas," was published in *Leisure Sciences*.

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