

Toronto's low-income and racialized communities have fewer trees, researchers say

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An afternoon walk along the Harbourfront was the genesis of Jacqueline Scott's U of T doctoral thesis.

"I saw a sign for a camping trip and out of sheer boredom decided to give it a go," she says. That weekend in the woods changed her life. "Something clicked in my soul," she remembers.

Scott started spending every spare minute outdoors, camping, hiking, biking, skiing and snowshoeing as a member of multiple outdoor clubs. Over time, she earned the certifications to lead the trips herself.

As her skills grew, though, so did the questions. "Ninety-nine percent of the time I'm the only Black person in the group. Why? Why are there [white people](#) in the woods and not Black? What's going on in that space?"

Her questions led her to the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, where she's been pursuing her Ph.D. in social justice education since 2016. The subject of her thesis? How to make environmentalism more welcoming for Black people.

When it comes to outdoor recreation, the conservation industry, even the climate change movement, "there are barriers based in the legacies of history," she explains. "We don't see ourselves advertised. They don't have Black people on staff. It sends a clear message that if you're Black, this isn't your space."

Scott was recently invited to share some of her research in "Urban Forests in a Changing Climate," the latest in a series of reports from the Greenbelt Foundation exploring the impact of climate change on people's daily lives.

She joined University of Toronto Mississauga environmental geography professor Tenley Conway in discussing the role trees play in helping communities in the Greater Golden Horseshoe mitigate and adapt to climate change, and how race shapes where trees are planted, who

benefits from them and who takes part in their planting.

"It's surprising to some that nature exists outside of formal protected parks in our backyards and along our streetscapes," offers Conway. In the Greater Toronto Area, the urban forest includes an estimated 34.2 million trees representing more than 100 species. About one-quarter of the region is under the cover of trees, which, Conway writes, play an important role in reducing the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, regulating temperature, decreasing flooding and protecting local biodiversity.

She calls on local municipalities to include [urban forests](#) in their long-term management plans. Homeowners and rural landowners can also help by protecting existing trees, planting new ones and watering young trees during droughts.

Top of mind for all, she says, is planting a diversity of tree species in a diversity of spaces.

In the City of Mississauga, for example, 43 percent of the current tree canopy cover is located on residential property, but there are still opportunities to plant additional ones. The "city-wide canopy cover could increase by 12 to 19 percent if all available spaces on residential land were planted with trees."

Scott argues that there's another, even bigger gap that demands attention. "Research shows that poor and racialized communities have less access to green space in the city. The absence of trees is another layer of inequality in lives shaped by oppression," she writes in the report.

She points to her own neighborhood, Regent Park. While undergoing a revitalization, the area is historically home to one of Canada's largest and oldest social housing developments. In 2016, 70 percent of residents

identified as visible minorities. There are also noticeably fewer trees in Regent Park, Scott observes, compared to nearby Rosedale, where just 18 percent are visible minorities.

"The whiter the neighborhood, the more trees and birds," Scott says. Her research shows that tree planting is more likely to occur in rich white areas than poor Black ones. What's more, tree planting groups often include a preponderance of white volunteers and staff.

"Within the field of urban forestry, there's widespread recognition that in most North American cities, trees are unevenly distributed relative to the income and racial characteristics of neighborhoods," Conway agrees. "It's concerning when recognizing that [trees](#) contribute to climate change mitigation and to our physical and emotional well-being."

Both researchers say the time is right to raise awareness of the issue and to advocate for change.

"The global pandemic has highlighted the important mental health benefits of getting outside and accessing the urban forest and being able to do so close to home," says Conway.

Scott agrees. "Prior to COVID, most of the Black people I saw in Toronto's ravines were people I brought there. COVID has changed that. It's opened the door to a new opportunity to invite people of color to engage in the outdoors."

Whether they continue to do so or not will depend on the ability of our environmental leaders and organizations to acknowledge that race is an issue, she says. They must also build strong relationships with the Black community and hire more Black staff.

"If a diverse photo op is your only step, nothing has changed."

More information: Urban Forests in a Changing Climate:
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Provided by University of Toronto Mississauga

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