

How racialized trauma functions as a barrier to enjoying nature

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The closure of a gate at a national wildlife refuge in Denver about a decade ago ensured protection for bison, bald eagles and other wildlife inside, but also created a physical and metaphorical barrier for people

living in diverse communities just outside the fence.

The case of the fence and closed gate surfaced during public meetings researchers held at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge during the early 2010s to understand barriers that affected residents' access to national wildlife refuges in urban settings nationwide. During focus groups discussing such issues as transportation and signage, a deeper theme emerged: The history of systemic racism in the United States casts a pall over marginalized people's attempts to enjoy nature-based leisure activities.

A new analysis of the data from the focus groups, led by Ohio State University researchers, shows that historical trauma—and the transgressions people engaged in to overcome barriers to outdoor recreation—shape many Black and Indigenous Americans' views about using public lands for leisure, as well as their proposed solutions to address inequalities experienced in those nature-based spaces.

For example, focus group participants noted that other Black and Hispanic residents living near the Arsenal believed the closed gate represented a governmental effort to keep them out. But those residents, who had also spent time in that space as kids before it became a refuge, also made a suggestion: Use refuge tour buses to shuttle community residents to the protected land.

"People are not just visitors to these lands that are protected by management agencies—people are deeply invested in the outcomes of these federal lands that we all share," said Alia Dietsch, assistant professor of parks, protected areas and natural resources management at The Ohio State University and lead author of the new study.

"The goal of sharing this information is to recognize these uncomfortable truths that happened and continue to exist, and make sure

we don't perpetuate them," Dietsch said. "We should listen to people outside of our circles and actually act in accordance with their suggestions—even when those suggestions stretch our own imaginations."

The research is published online in the journal *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*.

The original data came from a series of workshops in communities surrounding seven urban national wildlife refuges to understand the beliefs about and experiences with nature-based leisure of diverse peoples living in those areas. Participants included residents and representatives of faith-based groups and organizations associated with parks and education in communities of color and urban development in underserved areas, among others.

For this new analysis, the researchers focused on how historical trauma experienced by racial and ethnic minority populations in the United States, particularly African Americans and Native Americans, has influenced present-day perceptions of outdoor recreation. For example, one workshop participant noted that a video produced by staff at one recreation area did not include a single person of color. The "video says you're not welcome," the participant said.

Dietsch and colleagues also emphasized acts of transgression—marginalized peoples' embracing of nature despite feeling unwelcome or even unsafe. One Black focus group participant, for example, noted that white kids were skeptical of his interest in hunting. "They don't expect Black people to be doing these things," he said.

"The idea of 'transgression' can be perceived as negative, but in this context, it's incredibly important to underscore that these are groups of

people who are showing such a strong commitment to nature that they'll continue to engage with it and with public lands management even when they feel left out of the conversation or the physical space," Dietsch said.

For example, attending the focus groups felt like an act of transgression for some participants who said they had been ignored by authorities in public settings in the past—but their interest in public lands and in voicing their connections to nature-based leisure opportunities led them to continue to show up. Other participants described soaking up the serenity of the outdoors to escape from social pressures of everyday urban life or spending time in campgrounds and parks despite being labeled as outsiders based on what they wore, how they looked and what kind of recreational equipment they used.

"For decades, land managers at the federal level have been posing this question of, "How do we make our parks more inclusive or wildlife refuges more welcoming, and honor various populations' history?" We wanted to research barriers that are often overlooked in management conversations at the federal level," said Everly Jazi, who co-authored the study as a graduate student in Ohio State's School of Environment and Natural Resources and is now pursuing a Ph.D. in forestry at the University of British Columbia.

"By diversifying the approach taken in addressing barriers, through increased input and leadership from voices who have historically been excluded from discussions, innovation can flourish without the current blind spots of privilege," Jazi said. "Increased conversations around social and racial justice in 2020 prompted park management agencies to recognize the need to be innovative in changing their approaches to serve our nation's diverse population."

The research was funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which developed an Urban Wildlife Conservation Program in 2015 to connect

urban audiences to urban lands and engage diverse constituencies in community-led conservation efforts. Federal land-management agencies have also made strides in diversifying their own workforces in the past few decades, the researchers noted.

The findings are particularly salient in light of how the outdoors was perceived as one of the safest places to be, by infectious disease standards, during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, sparking a renewed appreciation for nature-based public spaces like refuges and local metroparks. Studies conducted before and during the pandemic have shown that spending time in nature is beneficial to human health and promotes resilience.

"If we truly value resilience," Dietsch said, "we should look to people who have been resilient against all odds and continue to engage in the American experiment to say, "We can do this better, but we have to do it together.""

More information: Alia M. Dietsch et al, Trauma and Transgression in Nature-Based Leisure, *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living* (2021). [DOI: 10.3389/fspor.2021.735024](https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2021.735024)

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