

Youth and America's Great Outdoors

What We Heard from America's Young People

The Special Role of Young People

On April 16, 2010, President Obama launched the America's Great Outdoors Initiative (AGO). The President called upon the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the White House Council on Environmental Quality to lead the effort of developing an agenda for 21st-century conservation and for reconnecting Americans to our nation's lands and waters.⁴¹ Senior representatives from these agencies and others convened public meetings across the nation that brought together farmers, ranchers, sporting enthusiasts, conservationists, business owners, tribal, state and local government representatives, parents, young people, teachers and others to share their insights about conservation and about both the challenges facing our lands and waters and innovative, community-based approaches to tackle them.

From the start, President Obama recognized the importance of young people. He directed that "special attention... be given to bringing young Americans into the conversation" and worried about the fact that young people today spend about half as much time outdoors as their parents did. To honor and capture the youth voice, the America's Great Outdoors team launched a series of listening sessions aimed to hear from you—America's young people. We wanted to know how you relate to the outdoors and why it is special to you. We also asked you why the American people are losing touch with the natural world, to identify the obstacles that keep you from spending more time outdoors, and we challenged you to give us your ideas about how they might be

⁴¹ President Obama asked that the following agencies work with the AGO leads to identify existing resources and align policies and programs to achieve its goals: Departments of Defense, Commerce, Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Labor, Transportation, and Education; and the Office of Management and Budget.

overcome. After hearing from you at 21 youth listening sessions—and through hundreds of comments you submitted online—we have a broader understanding of your passion, commitment, experiences, opinions, and expectations—and some great ideas to help us move forward together.

What Went Into this Report: Listening to You

We organized our first AGO youth listening session in Missoula, Montana, on June 2, 2010, with the help of local youth leaders. The enthusiasm and energy from that meeting led us to host 21 youth listening sessions in over a dozen cities and towns, from Los Angeles, California, to Minneapolis, Minnesota, to Lawrence, Kansas, where we met with students at Haskell Indian Nations University. For each session, we worked with local host committees comprised of local youth leaders, student groups, Job Corps participants and others to help organize the public sessions and to send out public meeting notices aimed at participants between the ages of 16 to 25.

Each of the listening sessions followed a similar framework. A representative from the AGO team began by introducing the America's Great Outdoors initiative and linking our efforts to your town or community. We then divided to breakout rooms, where you joined a facilitated discussion and collectively come up with a set of recommendations that you presented to the whole group at the end of the session. In certain locations, we organized our sessions around specific themes, like historic preservation, recreation, environmental justice, health, and native youth. We have incorporated what we heard in those conversations into this special youth report and into the report to the President, *America's Great Outdoors: A Promise to Future Generations*.⁴²

Your comments coalesced around four themes that describe, or define, your relationship to the outdoors: relevance, access, employment and service, and education. At listening sessions across the country, you described the challenges you face in each of these areas, and proposed thoughtful ideas for how to overcome them. The purpose of this report is to recognize and organize your comments into a youth agenda for America's great outdoors. We wrote this to be a “living document”—one that provides a foundation and impetus for change without prescribing a process. Throughout this process, we have made every effort to preserve the original intent and spirit of your comments. We hope this document captures what you shared and inspires you to keep the conversation going.

⁴² The final report, *America's Great Outdoors: A Promise to Future Generations*, can be found at www.doi.gov/AmericasGreatOutdoors.

Exploring the Special Relationship Between Young People and the Outdoors

To better understand your relationship with the outdoors, we began each listening session by asking *“Where do you go when you are not indoors? What do you like to do there?”*

“I do pretty much anything and everything in the outdoors. My family has a farm—we hike a lot in the backcountry. I sketch outdoors, do whatever else I can get into.” —Hyde Park, NY

“I like to do normal, day-to-day activities outside, in city parks—sports, reading, etc.” —Asheville, NC

Through remarks, discussion, jokes, stories, and even a song—you showed us how much people your age care about, and yearn to connect more meaningfully with the outdoors. You listed several reasons for spending time outdoors: from relaxation, and inspiration, team sports, recreation, and exercise, to discovering historical and cultural sites, to family vacations and school trips. You made it clear that the “great outdoors” means something different to everyone, and that your views of and experiences in the natural world depend in large part upon the circumstances of your childhood and your proximity to outdoor places. For some of you, going outdoors means traveling to remote places like the majestic vistas of the Grand Canyon, the hardwood forests of the northeast, the warm beaches of the Gulf Coast, or the choppy waters of the Puget Sound. Others of you defined the outdoors as any space beyond your front doorstep, including local parks and playgrounds, your school’s sports fields, or a greenway that links one part of your city to another. Many of you who grew up in more rural settings viewed the outdoors through the perspective of your family’s farm or ranch, conveying a deep understanding of—and appreciation for—the streams, trails, and fields that had been core to your identity since childhood. Similarly, the range of what you do in the outdoors ranges from walking your dog and playing games like capture the flag, to organized team sports, to more extreme activities, such as rock climbing, snowmobiling, mountain biking, and motocross. Many of you were devoted campers and hikers, and spoke of your skills in fishing, hunting, and archery. In general, though, you appeared more likely to visit places close to home, often accompanied by friends or family.

The diversity of your responses demonstrates that young people view the outdoors through multiple lenses and that each of your relationships with the natural world is deeply personal and is a product of complex factors, including geographic location and proximity to outdoor places,



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE PHOTO / LEWIS AND CLARK NATIONAL AND STATE HISTORICAL PARK, OREGON AND WASHINGTON

family background, education, and personal interests. You showed us that there is truly no “one-size-fits-all” approach for making America’s Great Outdoors more relevant to today’s youth.

After speaking to you about your relationship with the outdoors, we wanted to learn more about what you do to take care of it. Our second question was *“What do you do personally to protect the environment? What do you see others around you doing?”*

*“It’s important to focus on the little things you can do in your everyday life—changing light bulbs, showering efficiently, and recycling.”
—Annapolis, MD*

“I started a climate action group at high school. We need young people to set an example and take the lead.” —Annapolis, MD

Several of you expressed your concern for the environment and described yourselves as leading sustainable, “green” lifestyles. From recycling and buying reusable products to turning off the lights and air conditioning, many of you are taking meaningful steps to reduce your impact on the environment. Some of you volunteer in community gardens or co-ops, helping to revitalize and protect the nature in your neighborhoods. Many of you have volunteered for ecosystem restoration projects to improve and enhance local lands and waters. Others of you compost and carpool whenever possible. We also heard about young people who participate in environmental fairs, join or establish student environmental clubs, and undertake other creative efforts to “green” your homes, schools and communities. Several of you expressed a desire to convert your passion for the outdoors into a career— aspiring to jobs in forestry, forest firefighting, conservation, farming, outdoor education, engineering, and cultural preservation. On the other hand, some of you shared a belief that “going green” is a personal decision, and is not something to proclaim or impose upon others. You explained how a rigid or self-righteous stance might offend your peers or family. In the end, most of you agreed on the paramount importance of environmental education to illuminate the multiple meanings and intrinsic value of nature—and to explain the responsibility we share to protect it.

A Youth Agenda for America's Great Outdoors

Through your participation in listening sessions and the comments you submitted online, you explained why you want to connect with the outdoors and described the challenges you face in doing so. You proposed constructive suggestions for breaking down these barriers, and discovered a shared purpose along the way. Together—based on your priorities, abilities, and aspirations—we have begun to shape an agenda for connecting youth to America's great outdoors in the 21st century. This agenda encompasses four key goals:

- A. Make the outdoors *relevant* to today's young people: make it inviting, exciting, and fun;
- B. Ensure that all young people have *access* to outdoor places that are safe, clean, and close to home;
- C. Empower and enable youth to *work and volunteer* in the outdoors;
- D. Build upon a base of *environmental and outdoor education*, both formal and informal.

A. Make the outdoors relevant to youth—make it inviting, exciting and fun.

Although many of you have had extraordinary experiences—and are deeply invested—in the outdoors, you observed a growing detachment from nature among your peers. Studies show that today's youth are spending half as much time outside as your parents did—and over seven hours per day in front of a screen.⁴³ As a result, your mental and physical health is at risk. A decline in physical activity has contributed to soaring obesity rates among America's young people. In the past thirty years, childhood obesity rates have tripled, and now one third of American children are overweight or obese, and therefore more susceptible to heart disease, asthma, cancer, and other health conditions.⁴⁴ Recreation in the outdoors is an antidote to many of these health risks, and research indicates that regular exposure to nature lowers stress, cultivates creativity, and builds self-confidence among young people. Conversely, it has been suggested that excessive “screen time” detracts from social development and concentration, and foster a dependency on overstimulation.⁴⁵

⁴³ Rideout, V. J., Foehr, U., & Roberts, D. F. (2010). *Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds*. Menlo Park: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.

⁴⁴ Daniels, S. R., Jacobson, M. S., McCrindle, B. W., Eckel, R. H., & McHugh Sanner, B. (2009). American Heart Association Childhood Obesity Research Summit Executive Summary. *Circulation*, 2224.

⁴⁵ Richtel, M. (2010, November 21). *The New York Times*. Retrieved December 13, 2010, from “Growing up Digital, Wired for Distraction”: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/21/technology/21brain.html?_r=1&scp=1&csq=growing%20up%20digital&st=cse.

Many of you are aware of this nexus between health and the outdoors, and you understand the importance of regular activity to your overall wellbeing. At the same time, you mentioned several reasons why the outdoors is not always relevant, fun, and inviting for today's young people. These include: changing social values, lack of parental interest or familiarity with the outdoors, the inaccessibility of information about destinations both near and far, and about what young people can do when they get there. In addition, many of you admitted that the lure of technology and electronic media often keeps you indoors.

Challenges You Identified

Changing Social Values: “A lot of parents just don’t care. I just took a 15-year-old friend who’d never been camping in her life. I have friends who have never seen snow or gone skiing. It all depends on your family. If they don’t care, you will never get the chance.”
—Philadelphia, PA

Throughout the listening sessions, we observed evidence of a generational shift in the way young people think about and experience nature. Most of the adults we engaged in the general listening sessions told stories of childhoods spent outdoors: farming, hunting, fishing, horseback and bike riding, exploring the woods, and sleeping under the stars. Now, only some of you could personally relate to those experiences. Many more of you describe the outdoors as remote, mysterious, and sometimes, scary. Likewise, several of you told us that you do not have the “skills” necessary to participate in activities like camping, hiking, and mountain biking. More importantly, you said that nobody ever took you outside. Indeed, those of you who had spent a lot of time outside attributed your familiarity with—and appreciation for—nature to the parents, caregivers, teachers, mentors, or camp instructors who had instilled these values in you as young children.

Access to Information: “It’s not just about getting people out there, but how to use it once they are there. Some people see a mountain as a place to ski, some want to hike up it, others just think it’s pretty. You have to show people all of the options to enjoy it.” —Annapolis, MD

In listening sessions across the country, we heard you say that you want to experience and understand the great outdoors, but you need help figuring out where to go, what to do, and how to get there. You complained that government websites are neither user-friendly, nor engaging, and do not answer these questions in a way that makes sense to young people. To communicate with younger generations and help them enjoy the great outdoors, you said, the government must use modern technology and social media tools.

***The Influence of Media and Technology:** “Now that there is more and more technology available, parents have even more challenges to get their kids outdoors. They need to take responsibility and take their kids outdoors.” —Minneapolis, MN*

From Facebook and YouTube to texting, and electronic games, the temptation to spend time in front of a screen has a grip on you. In the absence of technological toys, you said, the outdoors can seem kind of... boring. But, it doesn't have to be that way, we heard. Several of you remarked on the liberation you felt when you left your electronic devices at home—once freed from your phone, you admitted to focusing better on your friends and the world around you. You shared your ideas for how to bring technology into the outdoors through phone applications, online games or contests, and interactive mapping tools. Social networking is an excellent way to coordinate an impromptu snowball fight or game of hide and seek, you told us. These tools will be necessary to make our parks and open spaces more accessible and exciting for people your age.

Your ideas for making the outdoors relevant to youth:

- Bridge the gap between technology and the outdoors by developing innovative tools, like nature-based mobile phone applications, GPS devices, and online challenges.
- Launch a national outdoor youth campaign to raise awareness of the importance of the outdoors to health and our nation's history and economy, including concerts, rallies, and youth summits.
- Keep the conversation going by continuing to hold regional listening sessions for youth.
- Create a user-friendly web portal that shows young people where to go and what to do in the great outdoors.
- Host free events to introduce youth and their families to outdoor activities they can enjoy for a lifetime.
- Help native youth reconnect with their heritage by enabling them to practice traditional outdoor activities, like hunting, fishing and archery

B. Ensure that all young people have access to outdoor places that are safe, clean, and close to home.

Many of you talked about the importance of having safe, easy access to quality outdoor places and experiences. You identified five main challenges related to transportation, cost, safety, time, environmental health, and the quality and cleanliness of public facilities. You explained that these

barriers often make visiting any sort of outdoor space - from national wildlife refuges to city parks—difficult, or unappealing.

Challenges You Identified

***Transportation:** “City transportation and general transportation is lacking. We need better public transportation to get around to different areas in the city, and we need shuttles that take people to outdoor spaces further away.” —Albuquerque, NM*

In communities across the country, we learned about the shortage of green space close to home and the resulting dependence on parents or public transportation to reach outdoor destinations. This challenge is particularly acute for the 80 percent of you who live in or near urban areas, where you told us that traffic, fragmented development, limited trail or sidewalk connectors, and minimal mass transit can prevent people from enjoying the parks and open spaces even within their communities. In general, your comments revealed how challenging it can be for families, schools groups, and young people to enjoy the parks, trails, farms, and rivers both close to home and farther away.

***Cost:** “It’s expensive to visit—I can’t afford fees, transportation, or programs.” —Philadelphia, PA*

The real or perceived costs of visiting parks and other places discourage many of you from going out to enjoy them. The cost of transportation, the fees, passes and permits and outdoor gear (skis, kayaks, boots, waders, etc.) that may be required present a real obstacle for young people, families and youth groups. Although you recognize that revenue from these sources are essential to the protection and upkeep of our public lands, for some they make visiting such places less feasible.

***Safety:** “Urban areas, gang violence—lots of parents don’t have time to go out with their children and refuse to let them out on their own.” —Asheville, NC*

Fear is stopping some of you from spending time outdoors. Some of you are dissuaded by a “fear of the unknown”—listing bad weather, creepy insects, and strange animals as reasons why you prefer to stay indoors. More than a few of you shared eyewitness accounts of muggings, gang violence, and drug use in parks and open spaces near you. You also described the deteriorating infrastructure in these places, citing broken streetlights, overflowing garbage bins, and graffiti-cloaked restrooms, as contributing to an environment of neglect and danger. In addition, you spoke of the lack of safe routes to parks and open spaces. Crime, traffic, and a lack



U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS PHOTO / ANACOSTIA RIVER, WASHINGTON, D.C.

of connected sidewalks and pathways impair your ability to access the outdoor places near you. You told us that your parents share these fears, and sometimes exacerbate them. Safety concerns were especially prevalent among native youth, many of whom viewed vacant lots and empty spaces as havens of illegal activity. There is no doubt that safety-related concerns—from violent crime to broken bones—prevent some of you from viewing local parks as places to gather, relax, and recreate.

Limited Free Time: *“School and social time takes up so much time that there isn’t free time for [young people] to spend outside, and schools have stopped taking them outside for coursework.”*
—Minneapolis, MN

Some of you cited a packed schedule as your primary reason for not spending more time outdoors. With school, sports, jobs, community service and other responsibilities consuming your waking hours, you have minimal free time. And you told us, when you do have a break, getting outdoors is not as easy or exciting as staying in and watching TV or playing a video game.

Environmental Health: *“Pollution prevents us from doing certain activities, like swimming in Lake Washington.”* —Seattle, WA

Many of you expressed concern for the quality of your local environment. Air and water pollution were listed as reasons for not spending time outdoors, particularly in urban and industrial areas. In some communities, you linked pollution to public health, listing asthma and cancer as byproducts of a toxic environment. These conversations were particularly charged among native youth, many of whom complained of a lack of clean drinking water and contamination on their reservations. Many of you noted the prevalence of garbage and illegal dumping of things from old cars to toxic waste in and around public lands and on reservations.

Quality of the Built Environment: *“If a place is dirty, you would rather stay inside. If you are from the city and not used to being in nature in the first place, this will not be a good experience.”*
—Minneapolis, MN

Poorly maintained or outdated infrastructure, including degrading trails and other recreational infrastructure, camp sites, restroom facilities, and visitor centers was another factor that discouraged some of you from visiting parks and outdoor places. We heard that ready access to—and proper signage of—trails is critical to your enjoyment of parks and open spaces. Several of you mentioned that many public lands and facilities are not

sufficiently equipped for people with special needs, and those for whom English is not their first language. Oftentimes the failure to manage the environment and pollution of ecosystems on and off the reservation directly impacts Native populations. The failure to realize and understand the cultural values and the substance needs of Native populations has resulted in a sense of helplessness and a lack of ownership and stewardship of the environment for native populations.

Your ideas for ensuring that all young people have access to safe clean, and close to home outdoor places:

- Create more parks near and in communities, including networks of connected trails, bike paths, and greenways, and urban gardens and community “pocket parks.”
- Improve access to open spaces, both within cities and beyond their limits, by expanding options for public transportation and linking sidewalks and pathways to create safe routes to parks,
- Reduce barriers to using parks by lowering entry fees for young people and families.
- Make outdoor recreation more affordable through innovative concepts like “gear libraries” or other low-cost options for sharing recreational and safety equipment.
- Make parks more welcoming, safe, and usable by cleaning up garbage, and taking better care of existing facilities like trails, signage, and restrooms.
- Work with individual communities to reduce crime and gang activity in neighborhood parks and open spaces, and on native lands

C. Empower and enable youth to work and volunteer in the outdoors.

In cities and towns across the country, you expressed a powerful desire to increase jobs opportunities in America’s great outdoors. You worried because unemployment rates are highest among youth and you face particular difficulties breaking into the job market. According to the Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics, the percentage of young people employed in July 2010 was 48.9 percent, the lowest July record for the series, which began in 1948. You shared your particular frustration with the application and hiring processes at federal agencies, and in some cases admitted to giving up on a government job entirely. You asked us repeatedly to streamline hiring systems and to do a better job of coordinating within the government and with partners. Volunteering was another area where you said the government should improve outreach to engage young people who want to make a difference in conservation.

Jobs and Training: “Expand and fund what we already have. Provide jobs for more youth leaders like MCC [Montana Conservation Corps]. We need people with ideas about what we already have in place. Get the Forest Service or BLM into these organizations speaking, and giving slideshows. Get kids excited about this!”
—Missoula, MT

We heard again and again how tough it is to get a job in the federal government. Some of you shared the perception that there are few jobs and internships available through federal agencies. Others of you were aware that such opportunities existed, but did not know where to go to find them. You told us that the time and tedium of the application process often discouraged you from seeking work with the federal government. Those of you who had experiences with the federal Job Corps, spoke very highly of your experiences, and recommended better coordination and support for the efforts of individual conservation corps programs. You also identified a need for increased training and clearer career pathways at land management agencies. In addition, your comments reflected a need to recruit more diverse youth to work on public lands. The more inclusive our agencies, you told us, the more effective and relevant we will be.

Volunteer Opportunities: “Provide training for volunteers and find funds for people to get certifications for their projects and training to learn to lead service projects.” —Hyde Park, NY

“Service learning addresses a lot of issues both indoors and outdoors. [It] provides the opportunity to learn about chemicals, connects with other classes, and affect mindsets.” —Asheville, NC

Another meaningful way that many of you have gained experience in the outdoors is through service-learning, through your schools, religious institutions, hunting and fishing clubs, scouts, young farmer organizations, conservation corps and other programs. Many of you have participated or have friends who joined various youth service organizations, which you unanimously called to expand. You spoke very highly of your volunteer experiences, and articulated a need to coordinate and support organizations like these, which cultivate outdoor skills and build a stewardship ethic.

At the same time, you cited a lack of coordination at the national, state, and local level as a key barrier to engaging volunteers in conservation activities on public and private lands and waters. You said that the federal government must work better with partners to increase opportunities for outdoor service, and train and help manage a robust, multi-generational volunteer corps. Expanding public-private partnerships for service, you said, will improve the quality of our lands and waters, enhance local

economies, bring communities together, and promote greater appreciation of the great outdoors. To build capacity for these projects at the local level, you called upon experienced youth leaders, adults, and seniors to act as mentors and ambassadors to other youth to help build positive relationships with and experiences in the outdoors.

***Working Lands:** “We need to support outdoor environmental areas, including farms and ranches. These areas are open space, wildlife habitat. We need to maintain private lands because they serve multiple purposes. There needs to be more support for farmers and ranchers.”
—Albuquerque, NM*

Some of your comments reflected a deep, personal appreciation of the importance of private working lands to the fabric of our nation, both because of the food and fiber they provide, and also because of the history and culture and wildlife habitat they support. You spoke of how working and volunteering on farms, ranches, and private forest land serves as an important and valuable outdoor experience. You championed the importance of these lands as open space and habitat for wildlife, calling for programs that would support the multiple uses of land and help small farmers and ranchers incorporate sustainable practices to keep their working lands working. You called for programs that show landowners how to support ecosystem functions and wildlife habitat on their property and provide incentive programs that encourage habitat maintenance.

Your ideas for empowering and enabling youth to work and volunteer in the outdoors:

- Increase interest in and access to careers in land and resource management through mentoring, training, and internships for young farmers, ranchers, and conservationists.
- Raise awareness of job and service opportunities on public lands and streamline the application process through better and easier access to information online.
- Build a modern Youth Conservation Corps to engage America’s young people, veterans, and underserved populations in the stewardship and conservation of our lands and waters.
- Bring communities together for environmental cleanups and restoration projects, including work on native reservations, urban gardens, brownfields, and vacant lots.
- Promote inclusion and diversity in outdoor recreation, education, and in conservation related jobs and volunteer opportunities

D. Build upon a base of environmental and outdoor education, both formal and informal.

Many of you spoke with great passion about outdoor education programs you have participated in. From summer camp in the mountains, to overnight stays at a residential learning center, to outdoor retreats with your church group, to adventures on a YMCA ropes course, these experiences had a deep and ongoing impact on you. Yet, you made it clear that these opportunities are not available to everyone. Today's youth spend most of their time at school or in formal afterschool programs, and increasingly less and less of it is spent outdoors. Although you had outdoor recess during elementary school, by high school, you are often in closed campuses. You expressed a hunger for environmental education and a desire to learn about our country's cultural and historic resources, like the national battlefields and monuments that you told us, "bring history alive."

***Environmental Education in Schools:** "We need more outdoor classrooms—trips to parks, zoos, and nature in our classes."
—Asheville, NC*

"Things that take place in the outside world are things that really exist. Things that take place inside the classroom exist in a textbook. We need to be able to connect... Being outside is a real experience as opposed to textbooks in classrooms."—Hyde Park, NY

For most of you, school dominates your lives. One of your most common complaints was the lack of environmental education built into school curriculum and the cutbacks in field trips to the outdoors. For many, the only nature you see during the school day is in the images of your textbooks or the window of your school bus. From what you told us, these trends are worse in tribal schools, where there are virtually no resources for field trips, and little enthusiasm to make outdoor education a part of the curriculum.

***Cultural and Historical Literacy:** "These places are different from "parks and recreation" outdoor spaces. Historical sites don't force you to learn, but provide a place to learn and social space—a place to communicate, connect, and be social."—Philadelphia, PA*

In addition to wanting to learn more about our country's natural resources, you expressed a desire to connect with our cultural and historic resources. Some of you shared stories of visiting historic sites with your school, and you said that experiencing these places in person makes the lessons you learn every day more real and meaningful. Our listening session in Philadelphia focused on historic preservation. There, we heard



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE - WATERS PHOTO / FORT DUPONT PARK, WASHINGTON, D.C.

from people who live in walking distance of some of America's most iconic historic sites, yet had never seen them in person (or, if they had often they were unaware of their historical significance). Meanwhile, those of you who had explored places like Valley Forge or Independence Hall spoke to the great power of these places to inspire, and educate you in a whole new way.

Outdoor Education Beyond the Classroom: “Get kids out and educate them on the ground, at farms. More focus should be on hands-on education, not on test scores.” —Hyde Park, NY

You shared examples of programs that provide meaningful outdoor experiences beyond the school day, but that are becoming less common with resource constraints. Many of you spoke of after school programs that kept you active and healthy as young kids, and about experiences at summer camps and residential learning centers, which created a deep connection to—and comfort in—the outdoors. Unfortunately, these programs are not available everywhere. They often lack sufficient funding, are not seen as a priority in the larger scheme of things, and are unaffordable for many families. And, given the stringency of statewide testing and evaluation requirements, many teachers may not have the time or incentives to incorporate outdoor education into their lesson plans. Even in areas where these programs do exist and thrive, a large share of the population may not be aware of them.

Mentoring and Leadership: “Teaching kids—you don’t need a huge organization or have to take them way out of the city. We can do this in our own neighborhoods.” —Minneapolis, MN

“I would like to gain new skills in outdoor recreation (pitching a tent, starting a fire, identifying plants and animals, etc.), but I am not sure how.” —Hyde Park, NY

Many of you—especially those in high school or younger—want to connect with the outdoors, but do not have anyone to show you the way. Aware of your parents’ busy schedules or their indifference to the outdoors, and hindered by inadequate access to open space, some of you confessed to not knowing where, or how, to have an outdoor experience. You seek mentors and peer leaders to open the world of the outdoors to you, but you don’t know how or where to find them. Native youth expressed a need for mentorship on many levels—calling for support in school, at home, and in their communities.

***Native Youth and Culture:** “We need to get more involved in the old ways—what we did in the past, like hunting, fishing, putting up teepees, maybe doing archery... to help us get back to our roots and preserve our culture.” —Anandarko, OK*

We observed the environmental education gap most profoundly among native youth, who have a keen desire to rediscover their traditional cultures through the land, via recreation and education. At listening sessions in Kansas and New Mexico, you asked for a more diversified and culturally enriched approach to curriculum and instruction, and suggested that sacred sites in your community could be used to help you understand and take pride in your heritage. Likewise, you expressed a desire to be coached in traditional outdoor activities, such as archery, fishing, canoeing, and hunting. At the same time, many of you appeared skeptical that these changes would ever be implemented. You described several barriers to outdoor education, including decrepit facilities, outdated technology, and an overall lack of resources at your schools. In addition, you cited the disorganization and apathy of adults within and outside of your native communities as a primary reason why nothing was changing.

Your ideas for building upon a base of environmental and outdoor education, both formal and informal:

- Expand outdoor education programs to engage more young people in hands-on, place-based learning experiences.
- Provide more opportunities for kids to get outside during the school day, through curriculum-based activities, service-learning projects, and outdoor recess and P.E.
- Link outdoor professionals, including park and forest rangers, to local school districts to educate teachers and students on the significance of their natural and cultural surroundings, and inspire them to get out and explore the outdoors.
- Increase cultural literacy and cultivate civic pride by helping families and school groups visit historic sites and landscapes.
- Leverage grants and other existing resources to make it easier and more affordable for school groups to access public and private lands.
- Use mentor and ambassador programs to bring young people outdoors and teach them the skills necessary to connect with and enjoy nature.
- Increase outdoor learning experiences in native schools, and incorporate more lessons about sacred sites and practices.

Conclusion

When we kicked off our AGO listening tour in Missoula last June, we had little idea where this initiative would take us, who we would meet, or what we would learn. All we knew was that our nation's lands and waters are in trouble, and we were concerned that people our age do not seem to care enough or spend much time enjoying them. After hearing from over 2,000 of you at 21 public youth listening sessions and thousands of online comments, we are grateful for—and truly inspired by—your commitment, passion, energy, and creativity. We have a much deeper understanding of the significant barriers between America's young people and the natural world. From the cost and availability of transportation to the lack of information, from the scarcity of environmental education to the complexity of the federal hiring process, there are many reasons why youth are less engaged in the outdoors than ever before. At the same time, we witnessed a tremendous level of creativity, collaboration, and leadership in each of the places we visited. In cities and towns across the country, you are breaking down social divides, linking non-traditional partners, and taking advantage of cool, new technologies to make your voices heard. The problems we face are real, but the energy and hope you give us is greater.

This report, your report, contains your ideas of why young people today do and should care about our natural and cultural heritage, the key obstacles that keep you from connecting to the outdoors, as well as your best ideas for how to move forward. Thanks to your energy and dedication, the challenges and solutions you raised are helping to frame the national debate on how to make the outdoors relevant and accessible to all Americans.

The report to the President marks the beginning of what we believe will be a long and transformative dialogue and partnership between the federal government and the people we serve. As we begin to implement the recommendations in the report, we will seek new ways of doing business, looking to replicate and expand successful models we witnessed at the local level. We will collaborate with groups in the public and private sectors, and we will pledge to be a better partner by stepping up transparency, efficiency, and coordination. We will continue to engage with people we met over the summer, and will reach out to new audiences as we seek to advance the President's agenda on America's Great Outdoors. We hope you will join us.



LOS ANGELES CONSERVATION CORPS PHOTO / AGO LISTENING SESSION, RIO DE LOS ANGELES STATE PARK, CALIFORNIA

Next Steps

What we will do:

Young Americans spoke, and we listened. Your comments and insights helped shape the report to the President, *America's Great Outdoors: A Promise to Future Generations*, and established a permanent place for youth in the conversation on America's great outdoors. We, as the federal government, want to work with you to make the outdoors more relevant, accessible, and fun for young people today, and in the future. Over the next several years, we will be working with a range of partners to implement the recommendations in the main report. We need you to continue to be a part of this effort. Please stay in touch through the America's Great Outdoors website and Facebook page.



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