



Recreation and Conservation Office

# OUTDOOR RECREATION EQUITY GRANT PROGRAM

2021-2023 Budget Request: \$5 Million

Washington has an abundance of natural beauty and a rich tradition of outdoor recreation. Participating in outdoor recreation improves our health and well-being and builds stronger communities. The COVID-19 pandemic and recent political outcries across the nation have simultaneously shined a spotlight on the high value people place on outdoor spaces as well as the inequities that exist.

RCO is proposing a new outdoor recreation grant program to begin correcting inequities in where parks are built. The grant program will build capacity in communities across the state to provide recreation opportunities for all their residents.



## Now is the Time

A recent national survey<sup>1</sup> found that 70 percent of city-dwelling Americans agree that parks are critical to preserving an individual's physical and mental health amid today's challenges. And the national uprising over systematic racism has encouraged us to look at

what we do through an equity lens to ensure our programs and policies distribute funds equitably.

Even before these current events, in recent years, the public health community has found that parks and open spaces can address some of our most pervasive and expensive health crises, especially in historically underserved communities, leading to national efforts such as the Healthiest Next Generation, ParkRx, and Nature Play.

## Barriers to Outdoor Recreation

- **Recreation Deserts:** Across Washington, in both rural and urban communities, “deserts” exist where diverse recreation opportunities are lacking.<sup>2</sup> If green spaces are too far away, people are less likely to use them.<sup>3</sup>
- **Too Small:** Facilities may be too small to meet the full need, especially in communities of color and low-income neighborhoods. One report<sup>4</sup> finds parks serving primarily non-white residents are half the size of parks serving majority white populations and nearly five times more crowded. Additionally, parks serving low-income households are, on average, four times smaller and nearly four times more crowded than parks serving high-income households.
- **Not Welcoming:** Research shows that discrimination impedes nature contact for people from culturally diverse backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> Perceived discrimination may take many forms, such as a lack of park information in other languages or culturally diverse park staff.



A recent RCO report in Washington suggests that the health benefits of contact with nature are particularly impactful for the 12.2 percent of people who have incomes below the poverty level.<sup>6</sup>

Research has shown that these populations may be especially vulnerable to the cascade of poor health outcomes that stem from chronic psychological stress, living near sources of pollution, and other environmental predictors of health. The report recommends developing programs that focus on connecting underserved populations to nature. RCO is proposing a new grant program to do exactly that.



### Outdoor Recreation Equity Grant Program

In developing this request, RCO looked at other solutions, such as

revising current grant programs to better address the needs of underserved communities. To direct funding to underserved communities in existing grant programs could require many statutory changes in eligibility, evaluation criteria, and funding allocation. For example, the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program<sup>7</sup> has been designed to prioritize big projects that serve large populations. This grant program does not allow nonprofit community groups to apply in the outdoor recreation categories and does not allow planning or pre-design costs.

These limitations may well need to be addressed, but first we need to ensure that we have a thorough understanding of the problem. To that end, we are requesting funding to allow local jurisdictions and nonprofit organizations to join forces and develop and build outdoor recreation projects that serve those communities currently left behind. After many conversations with service providers and nonprofit organizations across the state, there is a great deal of

### Desired Outcomes

- Creating a diverse group of advisors to help RCO develop the program and use Department of Health income and health data to establish criteria for targeting the places and communities with the highest needs.
- Funding the community engagement process, design, and construction of 10-20 outdoor recreation projects across the state that serve those most in need.
- Removing barriers to the outdoors and providing more places for outdoor recreation that are most relevant to and reflective of the communities they serve.
- Increasing in the number of communities employing a community-centered approach to identify, prioritize, design, and implement outdoor recreation projects.





excitement about this new program. These organizations are strongly encouraging this new program to be different and, if funded, asking RCO to provide funding for community-led pre-design and local engagement, to eliminate any match requirement, and to require partnerships among local jurisdictions, neighborhood advocacy groups, community health organizations, and affordable housing providers.



Once we determine the best path forward, we then would begin discussions on how to adjust existing statutes to reduce the systemic barriers that may exist in our other grant programs.

The Outdoor Recreation Equity Program would be the first step towards bringing focused investments in outdoor recreation to the underserved parts of the state and beginning to increase equity, improve health, and energize communities for all people.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>10 Minute Walk, *10 Minute Walk: Improving Access to Parks + Green Spaces*, <https://10minutewalk.org/#Our-research>, accessed on November 13, 2020

<sup>2</sup>*Recreational Assets of Statewide Significance in Washington State*, Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office, Olympia WA, September 30, 2019, p. 3

<sup>3</sup>Sara Perrins and Dr. Gregory Bratman, *Health Benefits Of Contact With Nature*, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, 2019, p. 26

<sup>4</sup>*The Heat is On*, Trust for Public Land, 2020, p. 2

<sup>5</sup>Sara Perrins and Dr. Gregory Bratman, *Health Benefits Of Contact With Nature*, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, 2019, pp. 27-28

<sup>6</sup>Sara Perrins and Dr. Gregory Bratman, *Health Benefits Of Contact With Nature*, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, 2019, pp. 14-15

<sup>7</sup>Revised Code of Washington 79A.15



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