



**House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
June 8, 2021**

**Written Testimony on the Environmental Justice in Recreation Permitting Act
Rue Mapp, Founder and CEO of Outdoor Afro**

Dear Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Westerman, Subcommittee Chair Neguse, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Outdoor Afro respectfully submits this testimony for inclusion in the public record regarding the House Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands, Legislative Hearing on H.R. 3687, the Environmental Justice in Recreation Permitting Act, to be held on June 8, 2021 in 1324 Longworth House Office Building and virtually.

Outdoor Afro is a 501(c)(3) national not for profit organization that provides nature-based recreational services and programming through a national network of over 100+ leaders who reconnect 40,000+ Black people to the outdoors. Outdoor Afro creates welcoming, culturally responsive, nature-based experiences that lift up Black history in nature, promote sustainable outdoor recreation, and support collective stewardship of our lands, wildlife, and waterways.

Our mission is simple – to celebrate and inspire Black connections and leadership in nature. Started by Rue Mapp as a blog about her passion for nature in 2009, Outdoor Afro has since grown into a cutting-edge nationwide network in 33 states and the District of Columbia, 56 cities in total. This proposed bill has significant implications to strengthening our capacity to better serve more Black people and communities in providing equitable access and agency while engaging in nature-based experiences by gathering the data needed to inform decision making.

Our volunteer leaders design and facilitate outdoor recreation experiences that are frequently hosted on public federal lands and require permitting to access the natural area including access to paddling expeditions, backpacking trips, and other events that require permits.

Recognizing the critical role that policy plays in our ability to reconnect Black people and communities to nature, Outdoor Afro anchors our work in the following policy priorities. These priorities have guided us since our founding and serve as our North Star towards a world where life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is available to all people and beings.

1. Priority 1: Connecting Black People to the Outdoors - Ensuring Black people have access, representation, meaningful participation, and quality experiences in nature as well as in its stewardship. This bill provides the data needed to identify current outdoor recreation users' and user' groups, specifically those who have been “underrepresented, communities of color, low-income communities, or Tribal 3 and Indigenous communities, that experiences, or is at risk of experiencing, higher or more adverse 5 human health or environmental effects than other communities.” Valid and reliable data is essential to identify and address the historical exclusion



and current disproportionate representation of Black Americans and many others in outdoor recreation as well as recreational service providers.

2. Priority 2: Reimagining Blackness in the Outdoors - Uncovering and amplifying the historical and ongoing contributions of Black people in the outdoors. The reports included in the bill will collect data needed to tell a more complete picture of the recreational landscape. This data collection can also shine a light on the ways that Black Americans are engaging in nature-based experiences. Black Americans have had a deep connection to nature since our arrival to this continent. This legacy must be included in our collective memory. This bill leverages a more inclusive approach to ensure that not only commercial recreational service providers are engaged in the data collection and reporting but also community-based nonprofit providers.
3. Priority 3: Protecting and Enhancing the Outdoors - Protecting and enhancing our lands, wildlife, and waterways for long term sustainability. Recreating on our public lands has an impact on our lands, wildlife, and waterways. This bill will help us learn more about user impacts to habitat and biodiversity. In addition, it provides an important data point to the Atlas proposed in the *Conserving and Protecting America the Beautiful Report*.

Outdoor Afro's mission has always been to create and inspire Black connections and leadership in nature. The historical and current barriers to access are well documented. While creating a more diverse and inclusive outdoor environment and industry is an outcome of what we do, it is not WHY we do what we do. Outdoor Afro was created to BUILD Black American community in nature and amplify the historical and ongoing contributions in recreating and stewarding our lands, wildlife, and waterways. Data is information that helps us tell a more accurate story. The more accurate the story, the more likely we can find our bearing and reach our shared goals.

Outdoor Afro believes this bill will be critical to forging new pathways in outdoor recreation and environmental justice by:

Disrupting the false perception that Black people have not and do not engage in outdoor recreation or provide recreational services. By focusing solely on commercial service providers, we risk amplifying the inequities by not including all pathways to nature-based outdoor experiences including community-based service providers. Outdoor Afro has been providing recreational services to Black people and communities for more than 10 years.

Though the earliest written record of surfing was documented off the coast of Africa in the 1640s,¹ research has consistently shown Black youth ages 5 to 19 drown in swimming pools at a rate more than 5x that of white children. This public health disparity is a result of prolonged segregation and exclusion from public pools and beaches. To combat this, in 2019, Outdoor Afro started the Making Waves program to teach the lifesaving, and nature embracing, skill of swimming. This year we have partnered with the YMCA to provide everyone within our sphere of influence has the opportunity to learn how to swim. This program intentionally lifts up Black leadership within our communities to serve as instructors. Because we know that when people have a positive relationship with water they are more apt to care about plastics in it and enjoy its many healthy benefits. As an intergenerational leadership program, Outdoor Afro also leverages these nature-based experiences to raise awareness of the economic opportunities to support Black people, families, and communities. Opportunities like these lead to more

¹ Dawson, Kevin. *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora*. 2018.



meaningful and extensive engagement with our natural resources. Rue Mapp hosts an annual rafting trip which requires permitting. Each year, we hope we are able to continue this meaningful tradition. To host a high-quality aquatic expedition that honors our ancestors and builds on their legacy is a heavy yet meaningful lift. Eliminating barriers to access and creating pathways to meaningful participation and leadership are essential to ensure that nature-based experiences are the norm for everyone, everywhere.

Shifting the representation of who can lead in and inform outdoor recreation and natural resource management.

“Environmental institutions have been working on diversity efforts for the better part of five decades.”
– Dr. Dorceta Taylor, Yale School of Forestry

In the 2014 report, *The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations*, Dr. Dorceta Taylor examined 191 conservation and preservation organizations, 74 government environmental agencies, and 28 environmental grantmaking foundations. Though the study found that the percentage of ethnic minorities working in environmental organizations had increased over time, the percentage of minorities on boards and general staff of environmental organizations did not exceed 16% which is well below the 38% of ethnic minorities and people of multi-racial backgrounds in the U.S. population.² The findings also indicate that once hired in environmental organizations, ethnic minorities are concentrated in the lower ranks.

In 2020, Green 2.0 released their *2020 NGO & Foundation Transparency Report Card*. The report, which builds on Dr. Taylor's initial report, reflects data from the 40 largest NGOs and 40 largest foundations. Though the data show positive trends in the number of People of Color, there are still significant disproportionalities at the senior staff and full-time staff levels. These disproportionate numbers are consistent across participating organizations. This bill could complement these findings by including outdoor recreation. Outdoor Afro is committed to dismantling barriers and forging new pathways where no group is at the bottom or underrepresented in the outdoors. We believe this bill will help tell a fuller story about the current state of outdoor recreation providers landscape, permitting practices, and recreational users/user groups.

Outdoor Afro is dedicated to doing our part to shift this representation throughout the outdoor industry and nature resource management. Rue Mapp, founder and CEO of Outdoor Afro, serves as the Chair of the California Parks Commission and also serves on the Outdoor Industry Association board of directors. Having Black American representation at the table where decisions are made about equity, diversity, and inclusion in relationship to the enjoyment and stewardship of our lands, wildlife, and waterways, is essential. This bill will help us understand the role that Black Americans have in outdoor recreation services. In addition to parks and outdoor industry, Outdoor Afro also sits on the NOAA National Marine Sanctuaries (NMS) Business Advisory Council where our policy director was voted as Vice Chair. In this role, Outdoor Afro supports the NMS in preserving the extraordinary scenic beauty, biodiversity, historical connections and economic productivity of our most precious underwater treasures. The NMS system is a network of underwater parks encompassing more than 600,000 square miles of marine and Great Lakes waters from Washington state to the Florida Keys, and from Lake Huron to American

² Taylor, Dorceta, Phd. *The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations*, p. 4. Source: <http://vaipl.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/ExecutiveSummary-Diverse-Green.pdf>.



Samoa. The network includes a system of 14 national marine sanctuaries and Papahānaumokuākea and Rose Atoll marine national monuments. NMS is also interested in learning more about their visitor usage. This bill allows this work to take place from an interagency perspective. Together, we can ensure the collection of meaningful and more accurate data points which can lead to more valid and relevant policies, practices, and protocols.

Through our leadership program, Outdoor Afro also provides civic and career exploration in outdoor recreation and natural resource management to support our leaders and networks entering the field regardless of entry point from internships to executive leadership positions. This bill can help build on the efforts of researchers like Dr. Dorecta Taylor and many others who have consistently shined a light on the racial and ethnic disproportionate representation in outdoor recreation.

Strengths and Growth Opportunities. This bill builds on the Simplifying Outdoor Access for Reaction Act (SOAR) Act by providing the needs sensing necessary to inform agency design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation as well as support interagency collaboration. For example, the reports generated from this bill could inform which groups receive temporary permits to help facilitate access for new users. In addition, the bill aligns with the other legislation like the Protecting America's Wilderness and Public Lands Act, the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership, and the Parks, Jobs, and Equity Act. Possible areas for continued consideration are listed below:

- Cultural Nature-based Experiences – consider adding culturally meaningful nature-based events to the list of acceptable activities.
- Gear Libraries – consider including gear libraries under the category of outdoor recreational service provides. Oftentimes, accessing permits and gear is a double hurdle. Many of the same community-based organizations that provide recreational services also offer gear libraries. Outdoor Afro has previously partnered with organizations like the Outdoors Empowered Network as well as the Bay Area Wilderness Training to address inequitable access to gear and permitting.

At Outdoor Afro, we appreciate all the outdoor partnerships and relationships we have formed throughout the years in the outdoor industry and believe these relationships to be mutually beneficial to expanding access and meaningful engagement on our public lands. We are all too familiar with the challenges ahead. Let us work in step to ensure equitable access, representation, meaningful participation, and quality outcomes/experiences in the outdoors for all.

We are nature,

Taishya Adams

Taishya Adams

Policy Director, Outdoor Afro



APPENDIX 1: OUTDOOR AFRO JUNETEENTH INVITATION

"So many of us have found in this experience of 'sheltering in place' is that nature never closes, that it is always at the ready, and that it is ready to heal and to teach."

- Rue Mapp

Join us in an outdoor reflection in commemoration of Juneteenth and share your thoughts with Outdoor Afro. The question we ask ourselves is "What does freedom mean to me in America?" Spend 2.5 hours in nature to reflect in honor of the 2.5 years freedom was delayed for 250,000 enslaved people of Galveston, TX until 1865. Let's go outdoors to remember, reflect, and honor their memory and their legacy.

Juneteenth is an annual recognition of the moment when 250,000 enslaved Black Americans in Galveston Texas were told they were free in the year 1865 – 2.5 years after the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect – January 1, 1863.

Many accounts of history appear to leave out the "how and why." Information and analysis are powerful levers to ensure life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all beings. On Juneteenth, join us as we remember, reflect, and honor the memory and legacy of those enslaved peoples who waited an additional 2.5 years for their freedom even though President Abraham Lincoln drafted and signed an executive order known as the Emancipation Proclamation abolishing slavery in September 1862.

We are sharing what freedom means to us. Now we would like to know what freedom in America means to you. Join thousands of people and become part of the Outdoor Afro community by registering at <https://outdoorafro.com/juneteenth2021/>.

APPENDIX 2: OUTDOOR AFRO MAKING WAVES

Outdoor Afro Making Waves



Outdoor Afro is the nation's leading, cutting-edge network that celebrates and inspires African American connections and leadership in nature. We help people take better care of themselves, our community, and our planet. We focus on all ages by hosting intergenerational nature events. As a national not-for-profit organization with 80 leadership networks in 30 states from around the country, we connect a network of more than 36,000 people to outdoor experiences that are changing the face of conservation. Over the past decade, we have built a community that trusts Outdoor Afro for news, inspiration, and advice. Our work has been featured in *The Washington Post*, *O Magazine*, *Blavity.com*, NPR, *The Tom Joyner Morning Show*, and many others.

We welcome everyone to come out in nature with us, or be a partner to help us grow our work to help lead the way for Black leadership in outdoor recreation, nature, and conservation!

Why Swimming?

Research has consistently shown Black youth ages 5 to 19 drown in swimming pools at a rate more than five times that of white children. This public health disparity is our North American legacy of decades of segregation and exclusion from public pools and beaches. As we celebrate our 10th anniversary this year, we have made it our priority to make sure every child and caregiver in our sphere of influence has the opportunity to learn how to swim as a social justice issue. We also see that learning to swim is not only life saving, but also nature embracing, opening the door to a wide variety and lifetime of outdoor engagement for youth and their families.

We want to meet the total needs of our community. We not only want to give people the opportunity to learn how to swim, we want them to feel good about it, too. And that means taking care of the whole person. From hair care and protection, to proper swim attire, and relevant skin care, we want to provide the tools our community needs to learn to swim and thrive in water. Through our swim pilot in Charleston, SC, we learned the importance of providing Swim Care Packages which include caps, suits, Black hair care and sunscreen, goggles, and more.

APPENDIX 3: OUTDOOR AFRO ENJOYING PUBLIC LANDS



Outdoor Afro Colorado



Outdoor Afro Delaware



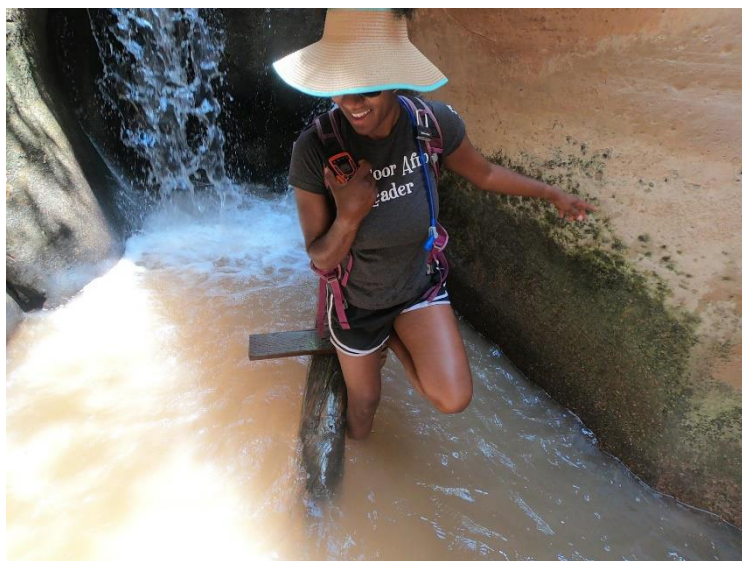
**Outdoor Afro District of Columbia,
Maryland, and Virginia**



Outdoor Afro Boston



Outdoor Afro Seattle



Outdoor Afro Nevada