

Report shows barriers to outdoors for Black Washingtonians

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Cape Disappointment State Park in Ilwaco.

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Trina Baker didn't grow up hiking, camping or adventuring in the snow. However, as soon as she began walking outdoors with Girl-Trek, a program designed to get Black women outdoors, Baker said she fell in love with nature.

"Hiking has been my spiritual place," Baker said at a Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission work session on Wednesday in Ilwaco, Washington, near Cape Disappointment State Park.

Now, Baker has made part of her mission to get other Black Washingtonians to head outdoors.

A recent survey by the Black Washingtonians Workgroup on Outdoor Recreation found fewer than 1.5% of state parks visitors are Black.

Some barriers included safety concerns, a lack of access to transportation, and access to outdoor equipment, which can be expensive.

The 12-member workgroup surveyed Black Washingtonians about these barriers to participating in outdoor recreation. In addition, the group presented potential solutions to lower those barriers.

Reco Bemby, the workgroup's facilitator, said learning more about these barriers is a critical conversation. However, he said, this discussion should be only the beginning.

"It's a very critical conversation to have about ways to create greater humanity for our citizens, and I think outdoor recreation serves to do that a lot," Bemby said.

The workgroup reviewed at least 76 scholarly articles, he said.

Talking to Black community members, the group found at least 57 barriers to getting outdoors. The biggest concern, Bemby said, is safety, especially for par-

ents taking children outside.

"Outdoor recreating while Black, in Washington, is a modern-day safety hazard," Bemby said.

To help with potential hazards, a Black couple, Anthony and Marlie Love, created a travel show that rates how safe and comfortable they feel while traveling around the Pacific Northwest, similar to the green book that guided travelers across the country.

The Black community has faced more than 100 years of barriers to recreate in state parks, which were created through systematic racism and white supremacy, he said.

"Parks were set up specifically for people that don't look like me," Bemby said. "When parks and recreation as a whole was set up, it was a place for white citizens to get away from this diversity in the urban settings."

In addition, he said, laws and norms have led to the oppression of Black, Indigenous and people of color in the outdoors.

Now, parks have changed, Bemby said, which is something he's noticed after spending around six decades outside.

"I also can still feel the

'YOU'RE EFFECTIVELY ASKING FOR FREE LABOR FROM PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN DENIED THE ABILITY TO BUILD GENERATIONAL WEALTH.'

Sophia Danenberg | the only Black member of the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission

barriers that exist," he said.

However, Bemby said the racist system that set up parks is changing slowly.

"It's like turning a cruise ship. It takes time," he said.

In addition, adequate transportation can become a major barrier to getting people outside, as well as discretionary money for entrance fees, gas and outdoor clothing, Bemby said.

To help with some of those struggles, Bemby and Baker recently held two outdoor events for Black Washingtonians, with transportation, food and entrance fees covered by Black Washingtonian groups and businesses.

Meeting up at a specific location to travel together can reduce transportation issues, Bemby said. In addition, communicating plans in-depth beforehand helps people understand what to expect, he said.

just need to learn."

A little bit of help from more experienced people can go a long way, he said.

Experienced community members can also help Black people overcome generations of what Bemby called historical trauma, which leads to a fear of nature, Bemby said. He said he still remembers his grandmother telling him not to go into the woods at night.

"A lot of folks are overcoming that fear," he said. "It takes one, two or three trips for folks to really get over that completely. The risk and reward function kicks in about the second or third trip."

In addition, equipment costs can create a hardship for people first looking to head outdoors, Bemby said.

For example, he said, hiking boots can cost \$200 to \$300.

For her part, Commissioner Sophia Danenberg, the only Black member of the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission, said it's also hard to know where to buy equipment when first heading outdoors. She purchased her first outdoor equipment from Goodwill, including an external-framed backpack formerly used by the Boy

Scouts.

Moreover, Washington State Parks needs more inclusivity in its own hiring, volunteer development, and vendor partnerships, said Chevon Powell, a member of the workgroup who owns the outdoor event company Golden Brick Events.

Earlier in the meeting, Valerie Roberts, the state parks volunteer program manager, said the volunteer program is building relationships with new volunteers from many communities in Washington.

Danenberg said state parks isn't diverse in its employment or volunteers. At an event in Goldendale last week, she said she saw one other person of color.

"I've got to say, I saw one Black woman, and just as I was about to be like, 'Hey Girl!' when I realized that she was part of Gov. Inslee's security detail," Danenberg said.

To increase diversity, equity and inclusion when dealing with the public, she suggested increasing diversity training and the diversity of camp hosts at state parks.

To make camp hosting easier, Commissioner Mike Latimer said state parks could look at creating camp host positions in places with yurts or cabins so that hosts don't have to buy their own RVs.

However, Danenberg said, it's difficult to bring in more diverse volunteers.

"You're effectively asking for free labor from people who have been denied the ability to build generational wealth," Danenberg said.

Next, Bemby said, the state needs to study more deeply how Black Washingtonians recreate outdoors, including focus groups and a more extensive survey of people who don't already visit state parks.

"Reconnecting with nature is an inalienable right," Bemby said.

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