



The Nature of Americans Disconnection and Recommendations for Reconnection

National Executive Summary Excerpt

Full report is available at NatureOfAmericans.org

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Executive Summary

The relationship of Americans and nature is changing. Adults and children alike spend evermore time indoors, participation in activities like hunting and fishing is stagnant or declining, and shifts in social expectations treat engagement with nature as a mere amenity. These trends pose a nationwide problem, since overwhelming evidence shows the physical, psychological, and social wellbeing of humans depends on contact with nature.

To monitor these trends and to reveal how to restore this relationship, social scientists conducted an unprecedented study of 11,817 adults, children, and parents across the United States in 2015–16. This study is a cornerstone of *The Nature of Americans*, a national initiative to understand and connect Americans and nature.

Three different methods were used in this study. Each was integrated with the others, using themes and questions in common or closely parallel wherever possible. The first method involved 15 focus groups with 119 adults conducted in major cities of the five most populous US states. The second method featured personal interviews with 771 children, 8–12 years old, along with an online survey of one parent of each of the participating children for additional insight. The third method was a nationwide online survey of 5,550 adults, measuring their sentiments toward nature, activities in nature, perceived benefits of nature, and barriers and facilitators to contact with nature. (Separate surveys of residents in Florida and Texas provided closer looks at two large, rapidly growing, bellwether states. Findings from these states can be found in their respective reports.) In each part of the study, oversamples of blacks, Hispanics, and Asians provide a closer look at these important groups.

Chapter 1 presents the conceptual framework and methods used in this national inquiry. Remaining chapters then describe results from adults as a whole (Chapter 2), children ages 8–12 and their parents (Chapter 3), and adults of different demographic groups (Chapter 4). We conclude with a description of major findings and discussion of the recommendations emerging from this study (Chapter 5).

Major Findings

Our research distills into eight major findings that reveal a profound *interest–action gap* in Americans’ relationships with nature. We begin first with the problem at stake, then describe factors of particular importance in developing strategies or programs to address this problem.

1. *Americans face a significant gap between their interests in nature and their efforts, abilities, and opportunities to pursue those interests.* Five interrelated, society-wide forces disconnect adults and children from nature in daily life. 1) Physical places, or a built environment, generally discourage contact with the natural world. 2) Competing priorities for time, attention, and money prevent contact with nature from becoming routine and habitual. 3) Declining direct dependence on the natural world for livelihoods and subsistence allows Americans to orient their lives to other things. 4) New technologies, especially electronic media, distract and captivate. 5) Shifting expectations about what “good” contact to nature ought to be mean adults are generally satisfied with the relatively little time they spend outdoors in nature. Some groups—especially minorities, younger adults, and urban and suburban residents—encounter additional barriers, including discomfort being outdoors alone, a lack of financial

resources, and a lack of social support, such as adults to accompany children outside or friends to encourage other adults to make time for nature.

2. *Experiences in nature are deeply social.* Developing strategies for addressing the interest–action gap begins with the reality that for the majority of adults, children, and parents, experiences in nature are not primarily marked by solitude. Instead, influential, meaningful, and durable moments in nature and connections to special places typically occur in the company of others, especially family and friends. When describing influential or memorable moments in nature, Americans reveal again and again that these experiences occur—and are remembered—because they connect people to one another.
3. *Adults and children differ in where they locate unforgettable, authentic nature.* For children, nature is located quite literally right out the door, and special places outdoors and unforgettable memories often consist of nearby yards, woods, creeks, and gardens. Adults, to be sure, describe nature as consisting of the trees, beaches, animals, flowers, and lakes near where they lived. But in contrast to children, adults tend to set a high and even impossible standard for what they perceived to be “authentic” and unforgettable nature, believing that it requires solitude and travel to faraway places, which reinforces their perceptions of the relative inaccessibility of nature.
4. *Access to nature is as much about the quality of places as their quantity.* The vast majority of adults agree that there are “plenty” of places to enjoy nature. However, when asked about places near where they live, minorities and urban residents in particular perceive fewer places *nearby* to enjoy the outdoors. Parents of minority children report that there are fewer parks nearby compared with parents of white children. In terms of the quality of places, less than one-third of adults are very satisfied with places for outdoor and nature recreation near where they live. The social safety of places is an important concern for all parents and children, and even more so for minorities and urban residents. Concerns include the barriers of driving long distances or fighting traffic to access quality places—places they perceive are free of dangerous people and speeding vehicles, places where they feel like they belong, and places that afford opportunities for a wide variety of uses, including exploration, learning, admiration of beauty, peacefulness, and engagement with the spiritual and the divine.
5. *Americans value nature in remarkably broad, diverse ways.* Americans today value nature in broad, diverse ways—a pattern that holds across demographic differences of age, race and ethnicity, residential location, educational attainment, income level, and gender. The great majority value contact with the natural world through multiple dimensions, including affection and attraction, intellectual development, spirituality, and symbolism.
6. *Americans support nature-related programming, funding, and conservation.* The majority of adults surveyed believe programs to help Americans enjoy nature and wildlife are underfunded. Most support increasing these programs, and they support a number of ways to pay for nature and wildlife activities. Furthermore, most adults do not agree that we should build on land if it results in fewer places for wildlife to live. Children and adults on the whole disagree that people need to be dominant over wild animals and plants.
7. *Americans’ relationship with nature is complex and nuanced.* Across many questions—including time spent outdoors, general interest in nature, and certain values of nature—Americans of all types are strikingly similar. However, clear and substantial differences emerge across and within race and ethnicity, residential location, and age in two particular areas: interest in particular recreational activities, and barriers to those interests. For example, interest in ac-

tivities like camping and hiking differs dramatically across groups, while interest in activities like fishing, walking outdoors, and visiting nature-education centers is more widely shared. In addition, minorities, younger respondents, and urban residents are especially concerned about the lack of nearby places to enjoy nature, competing interest from computers, health reasons, lack of time, and lack of social support for their interests in nature.

8. *Americans perceive tremendous benefit from experiences in nature.* The vast majority of adult Americans surveyed note that nature is highly important for their physical health and for their emotional outlook. Most say that being in nature provides them with peace, meaning, and purpose. The great majority of the 8–12-year-old children in our study indicate that contact with nature makes them healthier, happier and more creative, and more connected with others. In short, Americans of all types report that exposure to nature promoted their physical, psychological, and social wellbeing.

Recommendations

Central to this initiative is transformative action. Hence, we offer 22 actionable recommendations for those who seek to connect Americans and nature. We detail these recommendations in Chapter 5.

1. Pay close attention to—and respond to—adults’ existing concerns about younger generations’ disconnection from nature.
2. Emphasize regular, recurrent, and routine engagement with nature, the outdoors, and wildlife.
3. For adults and children, promote nature not only as a place for experiences, but also as a place for involvement and care.
4. Assure adults and children that time in nature can be (and even ought to be) social.
5. Recruit pre-existing groups to programs.
6. Reach adults through children.
7. Support mentorship that extends beyond the parent–child relationship.
8. Carefully consider how different sectors promote what “good” connection with nature is or ought to be.
9. Deepen local experiences in nature near home.
10. For children and adults, use geographically local or familiar activities as a bridge to geographically distant or unfamiliar activities.
11. Provide socially safe and satisfying places outdoors, especially for urban and minority adults and children.
12. Work to lower the perceived costs of participation in recreational activities.
13. Promote experiences in nature that match Americans’ multidimensional values of nature.
14. Broaden programming to include a range of outcomes.
15. For adults, promote conservation efforts as a way to improve their overall community and quality of life.

16. Set clear goals and objectives.
17. Question “one-size-fits-all” and “silver-bullet” diagnoses and prognoses.
18. Be explicit about common assumptions, and consider revising them.
19. Use differences across age and stages of life to tailor programs and policies.
20. Clearly state, trace, test, and analyze causal pathways.
21. Join parents, children, and adults alike in recognizing that expenditures on children’s engagement with nature are fundamentally important investments.
22. Build partnerships among professionals in healthcare, education, urban planning, conservation, community development, and other sectors.

Connecting Americans and nature must be a vibrant, ongoing effort propelled by all members of the public. The state of the natural world and our place within it cannot afford for us to act slowly. We must act now to ensure that present and future generations are connected with nature for the health and wellbeing of all.