POST-TRIBUNE

Guest column: Why National Parks Week arrives amidst a widening nature gap

By Kimmie Gordon

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As we begin National Parks Week, a time traditionally set aside to celebrate “America's best idea,” a sobering reality hangs over our public lands: our national parks remain deeply fractured by a persistent, widening “nature gap.” Decades of federal intent to democratize these spaces have plateaued. By many metrics, the park system today mirrors the stark lack of diversity that defined its inception. To understand why Black and brown visitors remain vastly underrepresented in the outdoors, we must look at the compounding forces of historical exclusion, recent federal policies, and modern local bureaucracy that systematically keep marginalized communities on the periphery of the outdoors.

A legacy born in Jim Crow

The foundation of the National Park System was built on an architecture of erasure and segregation. While the early preservation of pristine wilderness required the violent, forced removal of Indigenous communities, the rise of twentieth-century outdoor recreation was strictly bound by the legal codes of Jim Crow. National parks were never exempt from the doctrine of “separate but equal.”

In the 1930s and 1940s, state-mandated segregation laws dictated access to public recreation across the American South. At major federal sites like Virginia’s Shenandoah National Park, officials explicitly noted that while they could not openly ban African Americans, they would state that “the parks have no facilities for taking care of them.” This logic led to the creation of isolated, segregated areas like Lewis Mountain, designed specifically to keep Black visitors separate from white patrons. Across state and federal lands, accommodations designated for Black Americans were routinely and nakedly inferior, relegated to remote, underdeveloped parcels or mosquito-prone swamplands. For generations, entering the remote wilderness carried acute physical danger, institutionalizing a well-founded generational hesitation toward public lands that required guides like The Negro Motorist Green Book just to navigate safely.

The persistence of the nature gap

The legacy of this history is heavily reflected in modern statistics. Although People of Color make up roughly 40 percent of the United States population, National Park Service (NPS)

comprehensive visitor surveys have consistently shown that Black visitors comprise a meager 1 to 2 percent of total park attendance.

A peer-reviewed study published in the Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism highlights that awareness of NPS educational and recreational programs is lowest among Black respondents, tied tightly to spatial accessibility and structural socioeconomic barriers. Rather than finding a sanctuary, many marginalized people navigating rural gateways to major parks still face racial incidents ranging from microaggressions in visitors' centers to overt hostility on the trails.

Widening the gap: Policy and politics

In recent years, the push for equity on public lands faced heavy friction. The current administration has implemented sweeping overhauls to federal land management that critics argue systematically isolate underserved communities.

Following executive actions targeted at eliminating "race-centered ideology" from federal institutions, the Department of the Interior moved to purge diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives within park leadership and staffing. This has triggered a critical internal shift, with advocacy groups noting that the administration is actively erasing the diverse history and cultural representation that national parks protect.

Most symbolically, the National Park Service reconstructed its fee-free calendar to optimize what it labeled "patriotic resident-only days." Under this framework, Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Juneteenth were officially stripped of their fee-free entrance status. They were replaced by dates including June 14, coinciding with Flag Day and President Trump's birthday. Civil rights organizations heavily condemned the move, noting that removing the only two federal holidays honoring Black history severely limits community-led service and volunteer projects traditionally organized on those days.

The on-the-ground reality: Policed, not welcomed

The systemic widening of the nature gap is not just happening through macro-level federal policies; it is manifesting on the ground through the over-policing and alienation of Black-led organizations. A glaring multi-year example of this institutional gatekeeping involves Indiana Dunes National Park and the grassroots organization, Brown Faces Green Spaces (BFGS).

In July 2021, BFGS was hosting a backyard camp out event for local families at the Nature Play Zone in Miller Woods, right across from the Paul H. Douglas Center for Environmental Education in Gary, Indiana. As families were packing up, two National Park Service law

enforcement officers approached the campsite in full tactical gear, wearing Kevlar vests, with the lead female officer visibly resting her hand atop her holstered firearm. Despite two internal Indiana Dunes park rangers being actively present at the event and explicitly confirming to the officers that BFGS was officially scheduled on the park's calendar, the atmosphere was instantly shattered. The aggressive approach deeply disrupted and frightened the participants.

One young eight-year-old boy, leaving with his mother and grandmother, anxiously asked, “Are they going to arrest Ms. Kimmie?”

When BFGS leadership and its board of directors called a formal accountability meeting with the park's Chief of Law Enforcement, the institutional response was defensive rather than restorative. Leadership attempted to justify the team's aggressive stance as routine procedural rounds, relying on incomplete body-cam footage that failed to capture the initial escalating approach. Rather than addressing the deeply damaging psychological impact that an armed law enforcement presence has on Black families trying to heal in nature, the administration offered standard procedural explanations and commemorative coin.

Institutional indifference and erasure

Fast forward to today, and that defensive posture has hardened into absolute institutional erasure. Since 2017, Brown Faces Green Spaces pioneered the very fishing clinics, youth programming, and outdoor educational frameworks that successfully brought underserved, diverse audiences into the Indiana Dunes ecosystem.

Yet, despite years of establishing vital community trust, the organization has recently been completely ghosted by park administration, left with absolute silence and not so much as a single response to repeated email communications regarding ongoing partnerships. Worse still, when a new funding source was secured specifically to support area fishing programs, Brown Faces Green Spaces was entirely excluded from the financial allocation, despite having built the framework for those clinics from the ground up.

This pattern of utilizing grassroots, Black labor to meet diversity and inclusion metrics only to subject them to over-policing, cut off communications, and sever financial ties, directly mirrors the historical inequities that have long kept Black and brown communities of the periphery of public lands.

Reclaiming the narrative

Despite federal rollbacks and local institutional friction, the effort to claim outdoor spaces has moved heavily into the hands of community-led networks. Grassroots groups refuse to let institutional silence or intimidation erase their footprint, continuing to emphasize that public lands belong to all Americans by right. True equity in the outdoors requires more than performative marketing; it demands a full acknowledgment of history, accountable local management, an overhaul of protocols, and an unyielding commitment to safety and belonging.

As civil rights leader and strategist Bayard Rustin profoundly observed:

“We need, in every community, a group of angelic troublemakers.”

When it comes to dismantling the enduring nature gap in America’s national parks, organizations like Brown Faces Green Spaces will continue to be exactly that—troubling the status quo until these spaces truly belong to everyone, free from fear.

Kimmie Gordon is the Founder/Director of Brown Faces Green Spaces.