

**Testimony to the House Committee on Judiciary
on SB 289A**

May 20, 2021

**Jana Gastellum, Deputy Director for Programs
Oregon Environmental Council**

Founded in 1968, the Oregon Environmental Council (OEC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, membership-based organization. We advance innovative, collaborative and equitable solutions to Oregon's environmental challenges for today and future generations.

Oregon Environmental Council is bi-partisan organization working at the nexus of conservation and human health. We work and movement-build in both urban centers and remote rural areas, where many state parks and natural preserves reside. OEC strongly supports SB 289 A, the Safety in the Outdoors bill, because *everyone* should have the opportunity to enjoy the health, wellness, and community-building benefits of Oregon's beautiful places.

Over the last year and a half, it has become evident how restorative and healing it has been for many people to be able to go outside. Outdoor areas have much lower COVID transmission risks and have been important physical and mental health outlets. Research has shown that access to the outdoors lowers stress and enhances overall health. According to the American Psychology Association:

From a stroll through a city park to a day spent hiking in the wilderness, exposure to nature has been linked to a host of benefits, including improved attention, lower stress, better mood, reduced risk of psychiatric disorders and even upticks in empathy and cooperation.

Spending time in nature can act as a balm for our busy brains. Both correlational and experimental research have shown that interacting with nature has cognitive benefits—a topic University of Chicago psychologist Marc Berman, PhD, and his student Kathryn Schertz explored in a 2019 review... And experiments have found that being exposed to natural environments improves working memory, cognitive flexibility and attentional control, while exposure to urban environments is linked to attention deficits ([Current Directions in Psychological Science](#), Vol. 28, No. 5, 2019).

But the outdoors--and especially more remote areas--are not equally accessible, comfortable, or safe for everyone. This is especially true for historically marginalized communities such as Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color. This is especially relevant during a time that hate crimes have drastically increased in public spaces. The American Hiking Society, Sierra Club, and many others have recognized the racism that underpins the history of establishing outdoor recreation spaces and the ongoing barriers to participate:

Statistics collected from the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, and Fish and Wildlife Service show that although people of color make up nearly 40 percent of the total U.S. population, close to 70 percent of people who visit national forests, national wildlife refuges, and national parks are white, while Black people remain the most dramatically underrepresented group in these spaces.

It has only been a little over 50 years since the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act which among other things granted permission for Black communities to enter public spaces like national and state parks – spaces they had been banned from prior.

Although new laws were introduced to dismantle legal segregation there is still a perceived threat of violence from generational trauma that keeps people of color from visiting the natural world. The monstrous amount of lynchings that occurred from 1865 to 1950s usually took place in forests or natural spaces.

For too long, there has been a lack of tools and authority in public spaces to address harassment. SB 289 A is an important step in leveling the playing field for safer and more equitable access to Oregon state parks and resources.

Thank you.