Belonging in Nature:

Exploring Barriers, Impacts and Pathways to Nature for All across Canada

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A Greenpeace Canada Report
With support by the Greenpeace Canada Education Fund

Research:
Athaven Nithianantha

Research & Writing:
Jesse Firempong

Greenpeace Canada Contributors:
Sarah Micho
Sheila Sampath
Salomé Sané

Consultants:
Carolynne Crawley – Founder of Msit no'kmaq and Co-Founder of Turtle Protectors
Demiesha Dennis – Independent Consultant (Environmental Justice, Equity and Access)
Judith Kasiama – Community Builder & Founder of Colour the Trails
Karen Lai – Accessibility & Inclusion Consultant

Note: This report was developed with input from consultants. Their participation does not necessarily imply agreement with all findings or conclusions.

Design:
The Public Studio

Illustrations:
Jarett Sitter

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Foreword

Greenpeace Canada is on a journey to be in a better relationship with the Earth, one that centers Indigenous experiences, knowledge and voices, as those of the inherent rights holders of the lands on which we operate. In the spirit of humility, respect and gratitude, we acknowledge the many Indigenous people who have shared their diverse perspectives with us over the years, including in the development of this report. This is not Indigenous-authored work, nor does it claim to represent Indigenous voices. Accordingly, this report is offered with care, and with a clear recognition of its limits.

We write as a white-led settler organisation, conscious that this work did not originate with us. At the same time, all Greenpeace Canada contributors to this report are racialised with roots in Black African and South Asian heritages, and bring lived experiences of the very barriers and exclusions named in these pages — navigating both proximity to, and distance from power in complex ways. Long before this report took shape, Indigenous communities, Black-led organisations, disability justice advocates and grassroots groups across these lands have been naming, and confronting the deep inequities that shape access to, and belonging in, nature. Their teachings, advocacy, and lived experience inform this work. We offer our contribution with humility, recognizing that much of this knowledge has been carried, protected, and practiced by others before us, and that we have a responsibility to listen carefully and act intentionally, working in partnership to build a truly decolonized world.

The framework adopted for this report — belonging in nature — is intentionally anthropocentric, meaning it centers human experience without diminishing the holistic view that nature has intrinsic value and should be protected. What's more, we recognise that the concept of belonging in nature does not apply to Indigenous Peoples who already belong on their lands, and that belonging embodies unique experiences for each of us, shaped by overlapping identities, histories, and geographies, which cannot be fully understood through a single lens.

Lastly, some of the terms used in the report, such as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) or "racialised" come from the available data that aggregates complex lived experiences into categories, often obscuring nuance. We acknowledge this as a colonial inheritance and a limitation of this work. Where possible, we name the specific experiences of each community and resist flattening differences. Similarly, the use of the term "historically marginalised communities" describes groups who have been systematically oppressed, excluded or disadvantaged through colonialism, patriarchy, classism, racism and other intersecting structures of oppression. While imperfect, this language helps identify shared patterns of harm while holding space for the fact that experiences of marginalization are not uniform.

Overall, this report reflects our intentional entry into this important environmental justice work, and the responsibility we carry to act with care, humility and integrity. It is one step in a much longer journey our organisation is taking toward deeper accountability, relationships, and care for both people and the land.

Executive Summary

Canada's government is failing nature — and failing people across the country who are excluded from nurturing reciprocal relationships with the land, water and air around them. However, Canada has an opportunity to renew its place in the web of life. **Healing these long-standing (and well-documented) inequities has the possibility of creating substantial environmental, social, cultural, economic and health benefits for people across the country.**

In this report, we highlight Canada's stalled progress toward its national biodiversity targets and the role equity-based legislative, policy and programming decisions could play in helping Canada meet its goal to protect 25% of its lands and oceans by 2025, and 30% of the world's oceans by 2030. As of 2025, just 13.8% of lands and freshwater and 15.5% of oceans are protected. Meanwhile, the goals related to access to nature have gone largely unaddressed despite extensive research across Canada and globally that has demonstrated deep equity gaps in accessing, enjoying and benefiting from nature.

We offer the holistic frame of "belonging in nature" — although imperfect — to guide recommended action. We understand belonging in nature to mean the experience of feeling oneself to be whole, integral to nature and safe when in relationship with the plants, animals, water, land and air around them.

In particular, this report examines the systemic barriers faced by the following groups, while acknowledging that such identities are diverse, intersecting and multitudinous: Indigenous Peoples; Black, racialized and newcomer communities; disabled people; and low-income communities. **We highlight the negative health outcomes, social and cultural disconnection, increased environmental and climate risks these groups face as a result of the unique barriers in the holistic frame of what it means to belong in nature.**

Getting back on track to meet Canada's nature commitments requires solutions that address the root causes of inequity and disparity. **We offer (1) "Land Back" as a foundational frame for addressing these impacts and barriers**, given that Canada's protected-area networks — including colonial constructs such as national parks — were developed through expropriation that, under Canadian colonial law, disconnect Indigenous Peoples from their territories.

We also encourage the federal government to (2) implement Bill C-73, the *Nature Accountability Act*, as a means of legislating nature for all. At the same time, we acknowledge that equity-seeking groups highlighted in this report have been forging their own paths into nature. **Governments at all levels should (3) support, scale up and pilot community-driven initiatives in partnership with impacted stakeholders**, as well as **(4) collect disaggregated data on identity and legal/policy/program use and impact** to effectively maintain progress and accountability. **Additionally, as access to nature expands, intimate collaboration will be needed between Indigenous Peoples, communities and policymakers to safeguard ecosystems to honour Indigenous knowledge and cultural traditions.**

Preserving nature is not about serving our own interests. We protect nature so that animals, plants, and all species can flourish—and because caring for nature honours our relationships with the living world. Humans are just one thread in nature's web, yet we have the responsibility and the ability to help reweave and renew the whole design. We cannot afford to let the opportunities before us slip away.

Introduction

Nature is the heartbeat of Canada.

Sweetgrass blows in a gentle wind. Cherry blossoms welcome springtime in cities across the country. Monarch butterflies migrate from here to fir forests in Mexico and back again. The rhythm of nature spins a web of life — one that those of us who call these Indigenous lands home are called to protect with fairness and respect for our interdependence.

Yet, Canada's government — with its colonial roots — continues to fail nature and the people across the country who are excluded from nurturing reciprocal relationships with the land, water and air around them. Progress has stalled on meeting international commitments under the 1992 Convention for Biological Diversity (CBD), the first global Treaty covering conservation and sustainable resource use.[1] The federal government failed to meet its own CBD targets for 2020 under the Aichi Protocol,[2] including broad goals regarding Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and traditional resource use, as well as the wider engagement of Canadians in biodiversity stewardship.[3]

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[1] Canada. (2014, March). *Canada's 5th National Report to the Convention on Biological Diversity. Environment Canada*. https://www.cbd.int/doc/world/ca/ca-nr-05-en.pdf.

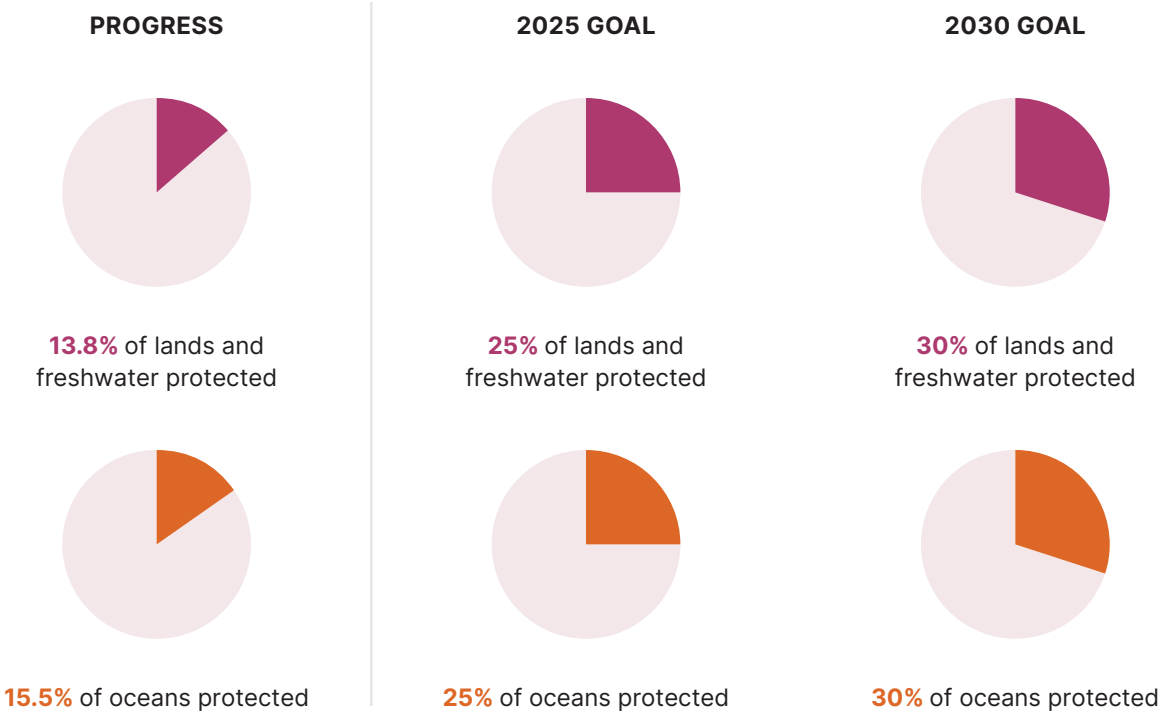
[2] Environment and Climate Change Canada. (2016). *2020 Biodiversity Goals & Targets for Canada*. https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2016/eccc/CW66-524-2016-eng.pdf.

[3] Convention on Biological Diversity. (2024, January 10). *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework*. CBD Secretariat. https://www.cbd.int/gbf.

A long way to go on nature protection

Recently, Canada's *2030 National Nature Strategy* outlined how the country intends to meet new targets under the 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to the CBD, including more specific targets to protect 25% of its lands and oceans by 2025, and 30% of each by 2030. While these targets establish an important foundation, nature cannot be reduced to fragments or percentages, and safeguarding biodiversity requires protecting the whole. **Significant gaps remain in Canada's progress toward its biodiversity targets (see Figure 1). At the same time, much work remains to increase urban communities' access to and benefits from, green and blue spaces.** Nature has intrinsic value; beyond that, the Framework recognizes that nature is "vital for human existence and good quality of life"[4]. However, the federal government's budgeting and policy decisions continue to deprioritize some communities' ability to attain this quality of life through the enjoyment, access and benefits of nature.[5]

Figure 1: Progress against biodiversity targets*

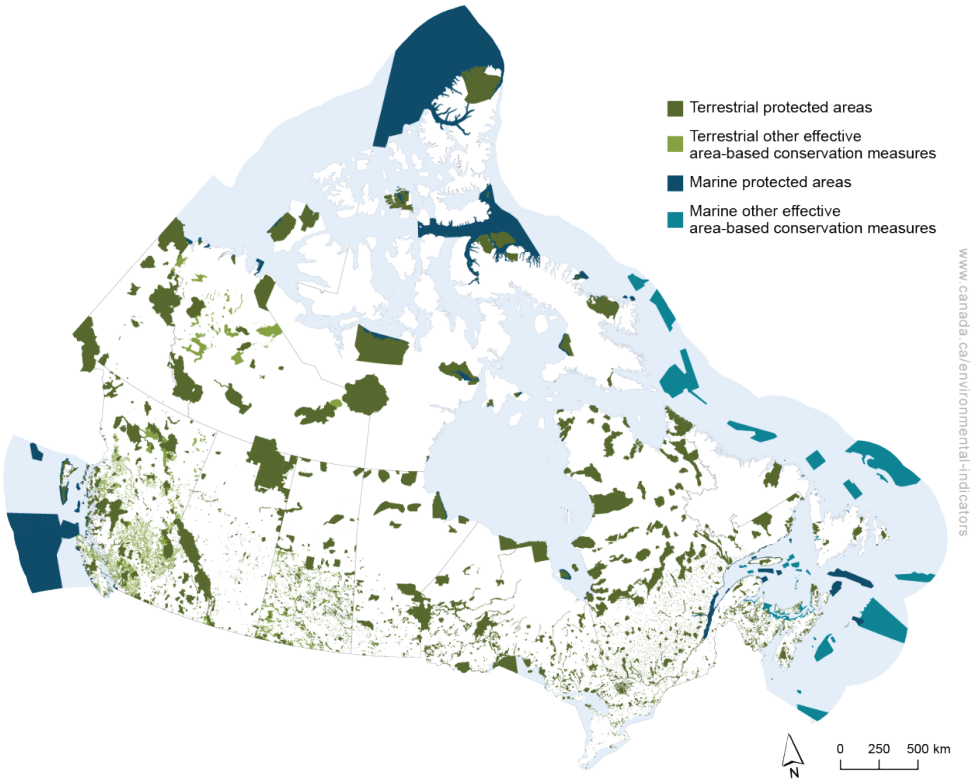


*Based on Canada's commitments to the 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to the CBD.

[4] Environment and Climate Change Canada. (n.d.). *Canada's 2030 Nature Strategy: Halting and Reversing Biodiversity Loss in Canada*. Government of Canada. https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/biodiversity/canada-2030-nature-strategy.html.

[5] Greenpeace Canada. (2025, November 5). *Greenpeace Canada Reaction to Budget 2025*. https://www.greenpeace.org/canada/en/press-release/72911/greenpeace-canada-reaction-to-budget-2025/.

Figure 2: Conserved areas, Canada, 2024



Source: Environment and Climate Change Canada (2024) Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database.[6]

Getting (*everyone*) back on the trail

Getting back on track on equitable biodiversity protection requires urgent action to respect Indigenous sovereignty and to collaboratively address deep-rooted inequities in "belonging in nature" experienced by Indigenous Peoples; Black, racialized and newcomer groups; people with disabilities; and low-income communities. This includes reparations for ongoing and historical harms from colonization, environmental racism, wealth inequality and ableism. Throughout this report, we argue that national and provincial parks, as currently managed by the colonial Canadian government, are not the answer to biodiversity protection; Indigenous-governed protected areas are essential. Authorities must also take concrete steps to end the policing of Indigenous, Black and racialized communities while broadening accessibility and decolonizing governmental approaches to belonging in nature.

At the same time, expanding access to nature for all will require collaboration between Indigenous Peoples whose lands we live on, communities and policymakers to honour ecosystem resilience and Indigenous cultural traditions, ensuring that people enjoy nature with care and reciprocity.

[6] Environment and Climate Change Canada. (2025, August 28). *Canada's conserved areas.* Government of Canada. https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/environmental-indicators/conserved-areas.html.

77%

of Canadians believe people experience parks differently.[7]

43%

of cities across Canada said addressing inequities and discrimination was a challenge.

87%

of cities reported increasing demand for universally accessible park design.

This report outlines the following:

- The historical context and current research on barriers related to existing inequities
- The negative impacts these barriers have on affected communities in Canada
- The solutions (along with expected outcomes) that may begin to correct these historical and ongoing wrongs

Belonging in nature must be a fundamental right for all people in Canada — *not* simply a right reserved for the privileged few. This is not only a matter of justice; rights-based policy change can meaningfully and measurably improve the health and transform the well-being of millions.

[7] Amberber, N.,Tobin Garrett, J., & Stark, A. (2021). *The Canadian City Parks Report: Centring Equity and Resilience*. Park People. https://ccpr.parkpeople.ca/2021/sections/inclusion/data.

Methodology and Acknowledgements

The research consisted of a literature review and environment scan, conducted by Black and racialised researchers and writers, in consultation with experts in the field of access to nature, who reviewed and shaped the research findings.

Greenpeace Canada acknowledges the expertise, insights and work of the following consultants:

- **Judith Kasiama, Community builder & Founder of Colour the Trails**, a national Black woman-owned organisation, focused on improving access to outdoor activities for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities, including those who lie within the intersection of BIPOC and 2SLGBTQAI+ communities;

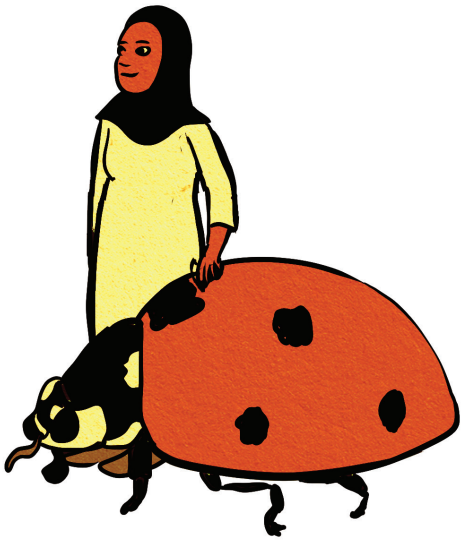
- **Karen Lai, an Independent Accessibility and Inclusion Consultant** with more than 20 years of experience increasing inclusion, especially for people with disabilities;

- **Carolynne Crawley, Founder of Msit no'kmaq and Co-Founder of Turtle Protectors**, which supports people in reconnecting with themselves, each other the land, waters and all beings through land-based workshops, webinars, walks and retreats; and

- **Demiesha Dennis, Independent Consultant for Environmental Justice, Equity and Access.**

Inclusion, the intentional process of creating welcoming spaces where everyone feels respected and can participate, is the foundation of solutions for biodiversity loss and nature-based inequities. However, inclusion alone is not enough. **In this report, we offer the holistic frame of "belonging in nature" to guide recommended actions and policy shifts. We acknowledge that "belonging" does not mean the same for each of us and that Indigenous Peoples *already* belong in nature and have deep ties to their lands. Today, we are adopting this lens to push back against the colonial constructs and boundaries of what "belonging in nature" represents. We understand this to mean the experience of feeling oneself to be safe, whole and integral when in relationship with the plants, animals, water, land and air around them.**[8]

The body, race, and place are deeply intertwined. This report focuses on decolonial solutions that dismantle colonial, capitalist, ableist, and anti-Black barriers to belonging in nature. Here, we use the term "people with disabilities" to acknowledge that disability often arises from systemic exclusion rather than inherent traits, while also respecting that many people embrace their disabilities as part of their identity.[9]



[8] Following Carin Taylor's concept of belonging: (1) Knowing you're an integral part of a community; (2) Feeling safe within that community; (3) Being recognized as an individual. See Taylor, C. (2022, May 17). *Why Belonging is an Essential Element of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion*. Medium. https://medium.com/culturati/why-belonging-is-an-essential-element-of-diversity-equity-inclusion-63f9e99fc0e9.

[9] McColl, M. A. (2019, April 11). Should I say 'disabled person' or 'person with a disability'? *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/should-i-say-disabled-person-or-person-with-a-disability-113618.

1. A system built on exclusion

Canada's nature conservation system — including the country as a whole — remains an ongoing colonial project that systematically dispossesses Indigenous Peoples of their lands and waters.

Protected-area networks, including colonial constructs such as national parks, were developed through expropriation, legally disconnecting Indigenous Peoples from their territories, despite their deep and enduring connections to their lands. These historical wrongs continue to shape how communities can access, enjoy and govern their territories today.[10]

Beginning with Alberta's Banff National Park in the 1880s, the process of forcible removal of Indigenous Peoples began to take place, in order to make way for protected areas. This strategy became part of a larger capitalist development and post-Confederation nation-building agenda across Canada that required removing Indigenous Peoples from their lands.[11] The practice of clearing land for the use, enjoyment

[10] Mansuy, N., Aarsø, S., Bennett, S., Desbiens, J., Elliott, H., John, M., McLeod, N., & Schuster, R. (2023). Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs): Canada's New Path Forward for Biological and Cultural Conservation and Indigenous Well-Being. *FACETS, 8*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2022-0118.

[11] Phillips, N. K., & Little Light, W. (2020, February 10). Poster #20: Conservation is Colonialism. In *Remember | Resist | Redraw: A Radical History Poster Project*. Graphic History Collective. https://graphichistorycollective.com/project/poster-20-conservation-is-colonialism.

and recreation of European settlers is further mirrored in how, for example, the Indigenous villages of X̱wáýx̱way (Whoi Whoi) and Chaythoos (as well as homes of Hawaiian and Chinese settlers[12]) were razed to make way for the city of Vancouver's Stanley Park around the same period during the 19th century.[13]

These violent processes were intrinsic to the construction of the colonial idea of "wilderness," a landscape devoid of humans — namely, Indigenous Peoples — where only white settlers could thrive in their dominion over, or communion with, nature.

In addition to anti-Indigenous racism which attempted to (unsuccessfully) separate Indigenous Peoples from their lands, anti-Black racism was — and is — also part of this conceptualization that has sought to specifically erase Black bodies from nature.[14] Despite the historical erasure, Black communities, too, have been present in nature for centuries, as noted by University of Toronto researcher, Jacqueline L. Scott. The contribution of Black slaves working the land is often not recognized as stewardship, while other equivalent contributions have also been erased. For example, freed slave George Bonga joined the fur trade, canoeing from Montreal to Manitoba and back again. Harriet Tubman was an expert hiker who navigated 20 perilous routes to lead slaves to freedom.[15] It has historically been a "fugitive act"[16] for Black people to be in nature, so unsurprisingly, there is a legacy of fear of white violence, or what has been called "the spectre of lynching."[17]

In both rural areas and cities, colonial land use policies, along with racist urban planning decisions, have impacted how Indigenous, Black, racialized and newcomer communities relate to the land around them. For centuries, Indigenous communities have been policed, surveilled and restricted onto reserve systems regulating access to their traditional (and in many cases, unceded) territories.[18] Meanwhile, under the guise of "urban renewal," Black Nova Scotians were displaced and relocated from seaside Africville in the 1960s,[19] while similar policies relocated Black residents of Vancouver's Hogan's Alley and Montreal's Little Burgundy to make way for roadways.[20] Today, research shows that low-income and underserved neighbourhoods with limited green space continue to be disproportionately settled by Black and other racialized and immigrant communities.[21]

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12 De Boer, A. (2019, September 30). Her family lived in Vancouver's Stanley Park, until they were forced out in 1931. *The Doc Project, CBC Radio*. www.cbc.ca/radio/docproject/her-family-lived-in-vancouver-s-stanley-park-until-they-were-forced-out-in-1931-1.5288311.

13 Eragoda, M. (2020, July 28). Tent cities and the violent origins of Vancouver's parks. *The Tyee*. https://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2020/07/28/Violent-Origins-Vancouver-Parks/.

14 Anti-black racism refers to the, "policies and practices rooted in Canadian institutions ... that mirror and reinforce beliefs, attitudes, prejudice, stereotyping and/or discrimination towards people of Black-African descent." Definition by Akua Benjamin, cited by Black Health Alliance. (2025). Anti-Black Racism. https://blackhealthalliance.ca/home/antiblack-racism/.

15 Scott, J. (2020, October 27). *Eco Racism in the Parks: The Black Canadian Experience* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89pSLUzD540.

16 Scott, J. L. (2024). *Being Black and Outdoors: The Perception of the Wilderness in the Canadian Imagination*.[PhD dissertation, University of Toronto]. https://utoronto.scholaris.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/78ad7c52-00e7-44f0-a233-897dd09c9452/content.

17 Redden, T. (2025). The Resonance of Anti-Black Violence in the Great Outdoors. *Land, 14*(6), 1252. https://doi.org/10.3390/land14061252.

18 Barker, A. J. (2024). Carcerality and the Elimination of Indigenous People in Canada. *Canadian Geographies / Géographies canadiennes*, 69(1). https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12962.

19 Brooks, B. (Photographer). (ca. 1965). *Young Boy with Ralph Jones' House in the Background, Africville, Boarded Prior to Demolition* [Photograph]. Nova Scotia Archives. https://archives.novascotia.ca/Builtheritage/archives/?ID=139

20 Assam, S. (2023, May 18). A Black neighbourhood destroyed half a century ago is on the brink of a comeback. *The Walrus*. https://thewalrus.ca/black-neighbourhood-come-back/.

21 Hulchanski, J. D., & Maaranen, R. (2018, September). *Neighbourhood Socio-Economic Polarization & Segregation in Toronto: Trends and Processes since 1970*. Neighbourhood Change Research Partnership. http://neighbourhoodchange.ca/documents/2018/09/hulchanski-2018-toronto-segregation-presentation.pdf.

This legacy of exclusion continues in the form of environmental racism. Environmental racism is, "the inequitable and disproportionate placement of toxic facilities and other environmental hazards near [Indigenous, Black and other] communities of colour and the working poor" and includes the failure to engage communities in decisions about such facilities.[22] Often racialized, these "fenceline"[23] communities bear the disproportionate impacts of their hazardous neighbours' pollution. Consider, for instance, the dumps, landfills and pulp and paper mills more frequently located near Mi'kmaw and Black communities in Nova Scotia.[24] Meanwhile, 50% of Indigenous communities in reserve areas face high risks of pipeline spills,[25] while others face toxic exposures from mining and mercury poisoning from pulp and paper mills, such as in the Grassy Narrows First Nation.[26]

Colonial settlement, discriminatory land use and environmental racism continue to limit the way Indigenous, Black and communities of colour may access, enjoy and steward nature — a reality vital to dismantling the barriers to belonging many people traversing these identities experience.

[22] The ENRICH Project. (n.d.). Glossary of terms. https://www.enrichproject.org/resources/#Glossary.

[23] Belleau, A., & Fennario, T. (2025, June 20). Sacrifice zones: Life along the fenceline between the land and industry. *APTN*. https://www.aptnnews.ca/investigates/sacrifice-zones-life-along-the-fenceline-between-the-land-and-industry/.

[24] Waldron, I. (2018). *There's something in the water: Environmental racism in Indigenous and Black communities*. Fernwood Publishing.

[25] Hurlbert, M. A., & Datta, R. (2022, September). When the environment is destroyed, you're destroyed: Achieving Indigenous led pipeline justice. *Energy Research & Social Science, 91*, 102711. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2022.102711.

[26] Law, S. (2024, May 23). Mercury poisoning near Grassy Narrows First Nation worsened by industrial pollution, study suggests. *CBC*. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/grassy-narrows-first-nation-methylmercury-study-1.7211750.

2. Barriers facing communities in Canada

The barriers faced by Indigenous, Black, racialized, disabled and low-income communities in deepening their relationships with nature are like broken threads in our collective, ecological web. While grassroots, public-interest and scholarly research continue to grow, meaningful data gaps persist, serving to formally invisibilize the equity challenges.

At the policy level, current reporting models often rely on aggregate data that group all racialized groups together (that is, if race-based data is collected at all; a long-standing problem in Canada), regardless of their unique and intersectional experiences. Identity-based data is rarely collected at the program impact level, contributing to the persistent data gaps. Equity-related CBD targets, for example, tend to lack the same robust indicators established for ecosystem-specific targets, leaving policymakers in the dark about (and unaccountable for) health and well-being impacts stemming from deprivation of nature.[27]

[27] Affinito, A., Blount, B., Brondizio, E. S., Dantas de Paula, R., Díaz, S., Green, R. E., Isbell, F., Jetz, W., Obura, D. O., Purvis, A., Scholes, R. J., Tittensor, D. P., & Turner, P. (2025). Assessing Coverage of the Monitoring Framework of the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and Opportunities to Fill Gaps. *Nature Ecology & Evolution, 9*, 1280–1294. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-025-02718-3.

Despite being last in line for greenspace investments,[28] historically marginalized communities — namely discriminated against based on race, class, gender, immigrant status, for instance — are first in line when it comes to bearing the impacts of the climate crisis and environmental degradation.[29] The limited integration of marginalized communities undermines the Kunming-Montreal Framework's "whole-of-society" approach,[30] which makes the dismantling of equity barriers a vital part of the government's ability to fulfill their biodiversity promises.

2.1 Barriers faced by Indigenous Peoples

As previously acknowledged, Indigenous Peoples hold deep relationships with nature and already belong in nature in a holistic sense, despite colonial attempts to sever these ties. Living in a settler-colonial society, the barriers faced by Indigenous Peoples in Canada must be understood as extensions of federal, provincial, municipal and corporate failures to respect their full, prior and informed consent (FPIC) over decisions affecting their territories. As Anishinaabe storyteller Isaac Murdoch emphasizes, restoring a balanced relationship with the land and nature is foundational, as reconciliation begins with the land.[31]

However, Canadian governments and companies have intentionally excluded Indigenous communities from participating in government decisions about the use and ecological health of their territories — both out on the land and in urban centres.

The federal government did not meaningfully consult Indigenous Peoples on its Aichi targets despite its constitutional obligations.[32] Historically, conservation policies recognized only federal, provincial and territorial areas, sidelining Indigenous governance. While momentum is rising for Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs), they still lack a national legal status.[33] Unceded land, as well as unsettled or unevenly recognized titles or treaties can create jurisdictional grey areas, complicating the ease of access and enjoyment of territorial rights.

Documented evidence of colonial interference with Indigenous Peoples' sovereignty and belonging in nature is far too extensive to fully name, but key examples are instructive for equitable action on biodiversity goals. Park development, especially in urban contexts, has made it more difficult or unsafe for many Indigenous Peoples to connect with traditional foods and cultural sites, the impacts of which remain understudied.[34] Protected and natural areas frequently lack signage in Indigenous languages, and lived experience from community members consulted for this report indicates that Indigenous communities are frequently made unwelcome. They may experience over-policing by park staff or other officials' poor and limited understanding of treaty rights to harvest on the land, including in urban areas, or forcibly removed to make way for colonial infrastructure.

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[28] Hegazy, B., Khodeir, L., & Fathy, F. (2025). Achieving Socio-Economic Resilience in Neighbourhood through Nature-Based Solutions: A Systematic Review. *Results in Engineering, 25*, 104266. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rineng.2025.104266.

[29] Waldron, I. (2021, July 22). Centring social justice is sound climate policy. *Canadian Climate Institute*. https://climateinstitute.ca/centring-social-justice-is-sound-climate-policy/.

[30] Affinito et al., (2025), pp. 1280–1281.

[31] Murdoch, I. (2016, January 26). *Reconciliation Begins with the Land* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/3pwHxmGU58U.

[32] Lemieux, C., Scott, K. R., & Sunkersett, T. (2019). How the race to achieve Aichi Target 11 could jeopardize the effective conservation of biodiversity in Canada and beyond. *Marine Policy*, 99, 314. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2018.10.029.

[33] Mansuy et al. (2023), pp. 1–16.

[34] Moola, F., Schuster, R., Vachon, F., Arifin, Y., Elliott, H., John, M., McLeod, N., & Vogl, M. (2024, April 5). The Potential for Indigenous-Led Conservation in Urbanized Landscapes in Canada. *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*, 6. https://doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2024.1340379.

In 1981, 500 provincial police officers in Listuguj, Quebec, raided Mi'kmaw fishing grounds, despite those rights being enshrined in *Peace and Friendships Treaties* signed in 1760-61 — a wrong which has only recently been more fully rectified.[35] Such harassment of Indigenous fishers and harvesters continues today across Canada.[36] Additionally, Indigenous Peoples asserting their territorial rights and non-consent to petrochemical projects such as the Trans Mountain Expansion,[37, 38] Coastal GasLink[39] and Alton Gas[40], have routinely been arrested and removed from their homelands. Such acts of policing replicate violent colonial patterns of forcible displacement, land dispossession as well as violations of cultural rights.

2.2 Barriers faced by Black, racialized and newcomer communities

Despite the limited and aggregated data on race, we know that environmental racism and systemic discrimination have meant that **Black communities, racialized people and newcomers to Canada face racism in nature, enjoy limited access to green and blue spaces in their neighbourhoods and face language barriers (lack of multilingual signage or programming).[41] They are less likely to see themselves represented among park staff and policymakers and they benefit less from robust social networks for outdoor activities.** Similar to Indigenous communities, Black, racialized and newcomer communities also bear a disproportionate burden of pollution. Parks are one of the most frequent places for hate crimes to occur,[42] such as those directed at people of East Asian descent during the COVID-19 pandemic.[43]

It's important to underscore that Black communities face a unique burden of racism: the fear that white people will call the police on them merely for enjoying nature, whether alone or in groups; one expert said Black outdoor-goers feel that their presence is judged by white park users to be "polluting the space".[44] A high-profile example of this occurrence is the white woman who called the police on Black birder, Christian Cooper, in New York City's Central Park in 2020.[45] Similarly, Black, male cyclists

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35 [Based on a report by] Larose, I. (2021, June 11). 40 years after Listuguj Salmon Raids, Mi'kmaw community is asserting control over ancestral fishing rights. *CBC*. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/40-years-listuguj-salmon-raids-leads-to-fishing-agreements-1.6062729.

36 Cecco, L. (2024, April 3). Canada: Indigenous fishermen left to walk shoeless after officers seized boots. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/03/canada-mikmaw-fishermen-left-shoeless.

37 Blackburn, M. (2017, March 24). Treaty Alliance Against Tars Sands Expansion vows to fight TransCanada and Keystone Pipeline Project. *APTN*. https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/treaty-alliance-against-tars-sands-expansion-vows-to-fight-transcanada-and-keystone-pipeline-project/.

38 Hemens, A. (2025, February 15). Awaiting sentencing, Tiny House Warriors tell court they acted for Secwépemc rights: 'We're not criminals'. *IndigiNews*. https://indiginews.com/news/tiny-house-warriors-tell-court-they-acted-for-secwepemc-rights/.

39 Amnesty International. (2023, December 11). *Canada: "Removed from our land for defending it": Criminalization, Intimidation and Harassment of Wet'suwet'en Land Defenders*. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr20/7132/2023/en/.

40 Moore, A. (2019, April 17). Mi'kmaq grandmothers arrested at Alton Gas site to launch title claim. *APTN*. https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/mikmaq-grandmothers-arrested-at-alton-gas-site-to-launch-title-claim/.

41 Robinson, T., Alavi, Y., & Hampson, C. (2023). Examining Psychosocial and Economic Barriers to Green Space Access for Racialized Individuals and Families. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 20*(1), 17. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9819928/pdf/ijerph-20-00745.pdf.

42 Wang, J. H., & Moreau, G. (2022, March 17). Police-reported hate crime in Canada, 2020. *Juristat*. Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2022001/article/00005-eng.htm.

43 Cheung, C. (2021, June 23). On Anti-Asian Hate, Silence Is 'Death by 1,000 Cuts'. *The Tyee*. https://thetyee.ca/News/2021/06/23/Anti-Asian-Hate-Racism-Reporting-Silence-Death-By-Thousand-Cuts.

44 See Scott & Tenneti. (2021).

45 Pereira, I., and Katersky, A. (2020, July 6). Amy Cooper charged in Central Park false report case involving Christian Cooper, Manhattan DA says. *ABC*. https://abcnews.go.com/US/amy-cooper-charged-central-park-false-report-christian/story?id=71635157.

in Toronto have reportedly stopped cycling the Pan Am Path after frustration about this exact issue.[46] Research on city parks in 2021 shows that BIPOC communities were more likely than their white counterparts to feel a renewed interest in nature stewardship during the COVID-19 pandemic, but that harassment or discrimination was a barrier to being in parks.[47]

The unequal distribution of urban green space[48] is fundamental to understanding structurally racist patterns of exclusion, since 9 in 10 recent immigrants[49] live in cities, along with 7 in 10 "visible minorities" (a term utilized by Statistics Canada, but remains problematic for centring whiteness as the default standard).[50] **Research shows that (like in many cities around the world), racialized, low-income and historically marginalized communities enjoy less tree cover, grass and vegetation than wealthier, white-majority neighbourhoods.**

In Toronto — the city with the largest Black population in the country, where more than half of its residents are racialized[51] — just 17% of High Park users were reported to be "visible minorities" and only 4% of park users were from the low-income neighbourhoods adjacent to the park.[52] Too often, narratives about racialized people in nature point to problems of "cultural familiarity," blaming communities rather than systemic barriers for structural inequity. Moreover, anti-Blackness and racism in funding, leaves community organisations with less money, higher administrative burdens and greater scrutiny that inhibits consistent, long-term, community-driven programming — unique problems dominant groups often overlook.

Focus group research conducted for *Nature Canada* with Black, racialized and immigrant youth in Toronto, for instance, shows that despite racialized youth's interest in environmental protection, climate action, community gardens and more, the perceived "Whiteness" of nature makes them feel unwelcome, hypervisible and afraid.[53] These youth came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Sudan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, Egypt, India, Iraq, Iran, Somalia, Bangladesh, Nepal and Afghanistan (as well as from multiple religions and genders). Environmental groups often do not make outreach efforts to Black and racialized communities. Also, research shows that environmental groups continue to emphasize a connection with nature located outside urban areas, thereby perpetuating the colonial version of "wilderness."

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[46] TDSB EcoSchools. (2020, November 26). *EcoRacism in Environmental Education - The Black Canadian Experience (Part 2)* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3njwXvhLTk.

[47] Amberber, N.,Tobin Garrett, J., & Stark, A. (2021). *The Canadian City Parks Report: Centring Equity and Resilience*. Park People. https://ccpr.parkpeople.ca/2021/sections/inclusion.

[48] Landry, F., Dupras, J., & Messier, C. (2020, October). Convergence of urban forest and socio-economic indicators of resilience: A study of environmental inequality in four major cities in Eastern Canada. *Landscape and Urban Planning, 202*, 103856. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2020.103856.

[49] Zimonjic, P. (2022, October 26). Population share of immigrants, permanent residents hits 23% record: census. *CBC*. https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/statistics-canada-immigration-census-1.6629861.

[50] The Employment Equity Act defines as visible minorities, "persons, other than Aboriginal persons, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour." The visible minority population consists mainly of the following groups: South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Arab, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean and Japanese). Statistics Canada. (2013). *Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity in Canada* (National Household Survey (NHS) Analytical Products, 2011). https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/99-010-x2011001-eng.cfm.

[51] Scott, J. L. (2021, May 26). Urban nature can't just be the Great White Outdoors. *National Observer*. https://www.nationalobserver.com/2021/05/26/opinion/urban-nature-cant-just-be-great-white-outdoors-racism.

[52] Park People. (2023, June). *Report on Park Use and Stewardship* (pp. 4–5). High Park Nature Centre. parkpeople.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/HPNC-Cornerstone-Report.pdf.

[53] Scott, J. L., and Tenneti, A. (2021, April). *Race and nature in the city: Engaging youth of colour in nature-based activities*. Nature Canada. https://naturecanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Race-Nature-in-the-City-Report.pdf.

These barriers can feed intergenerational patterns of unbelonging in nature, as parents discourage outdoor activity, alongside neighbourhoods that lack enough educators. Such gaps limit opportunities for advocates to influence policy and reconnect entire communities with nature (see, for example, the excerpts from *Nature Canada's* research below).

"Nature here is like a *Get Out* movie. I have lots of family in Kenya and we go into nature often. I have a place there and everyone looks like me."

"We wanted to go to the valley like a week ago, and my mother was with us and my sister had to pray namaz. But my mother said, "No, don't pray namaz here" because she was just scared."

— Racialized respondents in Nature Canada study[54]

67%

of individuals were white in Nature Canada's Twitter images.

33%

were described as "people of colour" among the Twitter images.

This under-representation can send youth the message that racialized communities do not belong in nature.

2.3 Barriers faced by people with disabilities

One-in-four Canadians aged 15 or older (8 million people) live with one or more disabilities that require accommodation.[55] Yet, a mere 3.5% of Parks Canada employees live with disabilities.[56] Knowing that people with disabilities across Canada lack the same opportunities for employment as people without disabilities[57] (this means fewer opportunities to shape policies as employees and managers), it is unsurprising that people with disabilities — whether invisible, neurological or physical — continue to face accessibility barriers.

The key barriers people with disabilities face are: inaccessible and uneven trails or parks, non-inclusive nature programming, unsafe and poor-quality infrastructure (such as narrow doorways and seating)[58], absent or inaccessible washrooms (particularly important for people with Crohn's Disease or Colitis),[59] the unavailability of support people — along with failures of inclusive urban design and more widely available transportation links.

[54] Scott & Tenneti. (2021), pp 21-25.

[55] Statistics Canada. (2024, October 8). Canadians with learning, developmental and memory disabilities, 2022. *The Daily*. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/241008/dq241008d-eng.htm.

[56] Parks Canada Agency. (2022). *Accessibility Action Plan, 2022-2025*. Government of Canada. https://parks.canada.ca/agence-agency/plan-action.

[57] Employment and Social Development Canada. (n.d.). *Employment strategy for Canadians with disabilities*. Government of Canada. https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/disability-inclusion-action-plan/employment-strategy.html.

[58] Robinson, Alavi & Hampson (2023), pp. 18-19.

[59] Crohn's and Colitis Canada. (2024, November 25). Locked Out: Public washrooms and private struggles highlight critical access needs in Crohn's and colitis community. https://crohnsandcolitis.ca/News-Events/News-Releases/Locked-Out.

Often, nature becomes a class-privileged space for people with disabilities, who must access parks using their own vehicles, since services like Wheel-Trans in Toronto and HandyDART in Vancouver are not known to service parks; ParkBus does service national and provincial parks but is not advertised as accessible and user fees are substantial (for example the recent $30 flat-rates for Kejimkujik National Park from Halifax may be inaccessible for a low-income family).[60, 61] **One-in-six people with disabilities live below the poverty line — a rate which for roughly the past decade has been twice as high as that for people who do not have disabilities.**[62]

When it comes to accessing nature in both rural and urban areas, people with disabilities must do a risk calculus: unreliable maps, inaccessible websites or trail guides, unclear signage or missing information alongside uncertainty around accessible restrooms, surfaces and equipment (such as all-terrain wheelchairs, audio descriptions or tactile cues) which may lead such communities to opt-out of nature spaces, unsure of whether their needs will be accommodated.[63, 64] Especially in low-income and racialized communities where governments have under-invested, missing sidewalks and off-street links disrupt safe pedestrian access, undermining independence and comfort for nature-goers requiring accessibility measures.[65]

Another barrier to note is hostile architecture, an urban design tactic that discourages the comfortable use of public spaces. Examples of hostile architecture include park benches with dividers that prevent people from lying down — geared largely toward deterring use by unhoused people — which also prevents people with disabilities from being able to comfortably rest while in nature. It should be noted that hostile architecture is exclusionary by design, with roots in segregationist logic designed to keep working-class Black people out of public places, such as beaches (think of design choices like overpasses designed to be too low to allow buses to approach the beach).[66] Such policies, clear the land of people whom governments deem "undesirable", continuing the perpetuation of colonial legacies seeking to reserve access to green spaces for the recreation of white, wealthy communities rather than for communities who may simply want to exist in nature.

It must also be noted that ableism —"the belief that it is 'normal' to not have a disability and that 'normal' is preferred"[67] — presents significant barriers to belonging in nature. Ideas regarding what nature "should be" often frame accessibility infrastructure, like ramps and paved or manicured trails, as "intrusions" that "ruin" nature. Yet, accessibility features for people who do not have disabilities

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60 Thomas, M. (2025, July 8). Parkbus launches $30 trips to support Canada Strong Program, making national parks truly accessible. *Parkbus Blog*. https://www.parkbus.ca/post/parkbus-launches-30-trips-to-support-canada-strong-program-making-national-parks-truly-accessible.

61 Whiting, A., Lindsay, S., Wray, L., & Gittings, L. (2025, December). A survey on understanding factors that influence accessibility in national and provincial parks for adults with disabilities and caregivers. *Wellbeing, Space and Society, 9*, 100292. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wss.2025.100292.

62 Campaign 2000 and Disability Without Poverty. (2024). *2024 Disability Poverty Report Card*. Campaign 2000. https://campaign2000.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Disability-Poverty-Report-Card-2024-English.pdf.

63 Dewan, I., Aljallad, M., & Johnson, G. K. (2025). Barriers and facilitators to park accessibility: A scoping review of YouTube videos. *World Leisure Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1080/16078055.2025.2516646.

64 Martin, A. J. F., Fleming, A., & Conway, T. M. (2025). Distributional inequities in tree density, size, and species diversity in 32 Canadian cities. *Urban Sustainability, 5*, 18. https://doi.org/10.1038/s42949-025-00210-2.

65 Robillard, A., Cloutier, M.-S., Fancello, G., Dupras, J., & Thiffault, A. (2023). Access to parks and green spaces in Quebec City, Canada: Developing children-specific accessibility measures. *Transportation Research Record*, 2677(10), 472. https://doi.org/10.1177/03611981231161618.

66 Okolie, P. A. (2025). Designing invisibility: How hostile architecture impacts people living with disabilities. *The Scholar: St. Mary's Law Review on Race and Social Justice, 28*(1). https://commons.stmarytx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1440&context=thescholar.

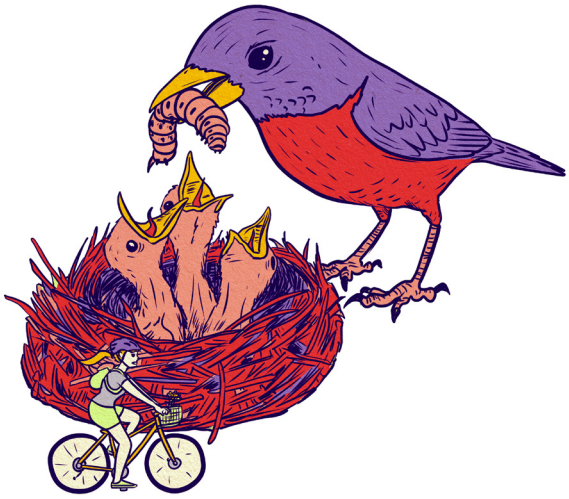
67 Inclusion Canada. (2022, February 8). *This is ableism*. https://www.inclusioncanada.ca/page/this-is-ableism.

(like bridges or trail-cutting) are normalized.[68] People with disabilities may also be pathologized for not being in nature, as a consultant to this report noted.

Lastly, environmental racism intersects with disability justice in the disproportionate exposure of Indigenous Peoples to contaminated soil, water, sediments and air from petrochemicals, mining, waste management, manufacturing and military industries, all of which is not fully accounted for in federal data. Researchers found that the health burdens from these types of exposures may increase neurological, developmental and reproductive disabilities, especially among children and elders.[69] On-the-ground accessibility proceeds only at the pace of environmental remediation, which may translate into long-running (even intergenerational) barriers to full cultural participation for those with mobility, sensory or chronic-illness constraints.[70]

2.4 Barriers faced by low-income communities

For low-income communities (often intersecting with urban, Indigenous, Black, racialized, newcomer and disabled communities), nature can seem out of order, out of reach and out of the comfort zone.[71] Urban planning and zoning decisions have put low-income and renting households in neighbourhoods with fewer (and more poorly kept) green and blue spaces (gardens, parks, tree cover and clean waterways), as well as difficulty accessing parks and recreational spaces due to time, costs (entrance fees and more) and transportation constraints.[72] Environmental racism means that traffic pollution tends to most burden Indigenous, low-income and racialized or immigrant communities living in traffic-heavy areas as well as near industry, marine and rail terminals.[73]



[68] Kling, K. G. (2024). Accessible nature: Balancing contradiction in protected areas. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space, 7*(5), 2036–2057. https://doi.org/10.1177/25148486241263403.

[69] Chong, K., & Basu, N. (2024). Contaminated sites and Indigenous Peoples in Canada and the United States: A scoping review. *Integrated Environmental Assessment and Management, 20*(5), 1306–1329. https://doi.org/10.1002/ieam.4869.

[70] Chong & Basu (2024), pp. 1324–1326.

[71] Scott & Tenneti (2021), p. 23.

[72] See, for instance, Robinson, Alavi & Hampson (2023), p. 18 and Dewan, Aljallad, & Johnson (2025), pp. 14–16.

[73] See, for example. Robillard et al. (2023), pp. 472–475 (for context abroad) as well as Giang, Amanda, and Kaitlin Castellani. "Cumulative Air Pollution Indicators Highlight Unique Patterns of Injustice in Urban Canada." *Environmental Research Letters*, vol. 15, no. 12, 15 Dec. 2020, p. 124063. https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/abcac5.

An examination of five variables of socio-economic vulnerability shows that the factors impacting tree abundance vary from place to place, as highlighted below in Figure 3, in the study of 32 Canadian cities. The study highlights how vital locally-tailored solutions are, rather than blanket recommendations. Notwithstanding, it is important to note that residential instability (the churn of residents) and ethno-cultural composition (a measure of racial diversity) were both significant variables of socioeconomic vulnerability in tree abundance, signalling potential policy analysis and action for green space agendas in low-income neighbourhoods.

Figure 3: Number of cities in which tree distribution is negatively associated with measures of socioeconomic deprivation[74]

Values where the number of cities exceeds 33% of the sample (32) are bolded

Sociodemographic variables*	Tree density	Tree size		Tree species diversity
		(median diameter at breast height)	(basal area)	
Population density	0	1	0	**23**
Residential instability	**16**	**13**	**14**	7
Ethno-cultural composition	**11**	**19**	**18**	5
Economic dependency	9	0	6	9
Situational vulnerability	2	1	1	**12**

*These variables (minus population density) make up the Canadian Index of Multiple Deprivation, which aims to better understand inequalities in various measures of socio-economic characteristics.[75]

Unique class-based issues and discriminatory urban planning result in neighbourhood-level nature gaps. For instance, areas at the edges of neighbourhoods often intersect highway networks and cut off walkable park access in Quebec City.[76] This creates significant nature-access issues for children with research showing it can compound disadvantages for newcomers. Moreover, green spaces may be privatized, adding to stark class divides. For example, the Oakdale Golf & Country Club in Ontario, is located in the Jane and Sheppard neighbourhood, a part of Toronto wherein median household

[74] Martin, Fleming & Conway (2025), p. 18.

[75] Statistics Canada. (2025, March 5). *The Canadian Index of Multiple Deprivation (CIMD)* (Surveys and Statistical Programs). https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=5274.

[76] Robillard et al. (2023).

income is under $51,000, despite the skilled labour and qualifications of its mostly racialized residents.[77] Membership and annual fees for the club reportedly top $130,000[78] — more than twice the annual income of local households.

Studies from Canada,[79] the United States and the United Kingdom (UK)[80] further demonstrate that low-income communities become disheartened by the condition of degraded or dirty parks, discouraging them from spending time there.[81] Consequently, **officials then avoid spending money on unused parks, creating a loop of underfunding, urban environmental degradation and alienation from nature — which ultimately perpetuates a "self-reinforcing cycle of decline."** [82] **This represents an important finding for why equity is essential for the success of nature-based solutions in urban areas.** However, in a catch-22, even investment can have a dark side: "green gentrification." Improved green space may result in higher rent costs and property values, displacing existing residents and pricing locals out of their neighbourhoods. Research from the United States shows that strategies to limit green gentrification are rarely evaluated, creating unique housing vulnerabilities for low-income communities relevant to urban nature-based solutions.[83]

Without quality green space in every neighbourhood and more inclusive urban design and regional transportation links, trips into nature can be a luxury for low-income people, rather than the everyday occurrence they are for wealthier households.

[77] Hassen, N., D'Souza, D., Khan, S., Das, M., Arizala, C., Grey, J., & Flicker, S. (2022). *Park perceptions and racialized realities in two Toronto neighbourhoods* (Community Report). York University. https://www.yorku.ca/euc/research-projects/park-perceptions/.

[78] Suhanic, G. (2005, September 17). Oakdale a 'Bargain' at $125,000. *National Post*. https://www.pressreader.com/canada/national-post-latest-edition/20050917/282192236373366?srsltid=AfmBOoqJhYD9ETHN3vYR-feU5It6vrL2ovAXNyMuRvrRD42908AClTOn.

[79] Scott & Tenneti (2021), p. 24.

[80] Robinson, Alavi & Hampson (2023), pp. 17-18.

[81] Robinson, Alavi & Hampson (2023), pp. 17-18.

[82] See Robinson et al. (2023), p. 18 and Hegazy et al. (2025), pp. 1, 9, 16.

[83] Rigolon, A., Alavi, Y., Hampson, C., Robinson, T., & Dupras, J. (2024). Advancing green space equity via policy change: A scoping review and research agenda. *Environmental Science & Policy, 157*, 103765. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2024.103765.

3. Impacts on health, culture and climate

What we do to the land and water, we do to each other and ourselves. We must preserve nature not just for our own survival but for nature's intrinsic value. Humanity's interdependence with the rest of nature sustains our own resilience and health. Without it, we suffer.[84] Indigenous communities have known this since time immemorial, but it's a teaching colonial and capitalist governments around the world have ignored. It's unsurprising, then, that patterns of harm to the land are mirrored in harm (with various levels of impacts) to marginalized communities (and vice versa).

Too often denied relationships with nature — faced with recurring exposure to environmental contaminants — marginalized communities have suffered and survived negative health impacts, sociocultural disconnection and elevated environmental risks. These impacts are not incidental, but rather the direct result of policy and planning decisions that created the barriers laid out in the previous chapters. Communities are acutely aware of these dynamics, which erodes trust in government.[85] Failure to engage marginalized communities in nature-based solutions and urban planning are a missed opportunity to support the leadership, expertise and strengths these communities already possess in their diversity and uniqueness.

[84] Scott & Tenneti (2021), pp. 10, 27.

[85] See, for example, Martin, Fleming & Conway (2025), p. 5.

3.1 Negative health outcomes

Health-related consequences arising out of a disconnect with nature include **stress, respiratory illness, worse physical health, reduced physical activity, compromised mental health and well-being challenges for adults and children.**

Research shows that racialized residents, racialized women and people with disabilities tend to spend less time in nature than highly-funded neighbourhoods, giving them less access to low-cost physical activity.[86] **The dearth of safe and welcoming spaces to exercise contributes to higher occurrences of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease among racialized and low-income populations.**[87] Residents with disabilities facing "eco-ableism" may be stigmatized in nature resulting in the deprioritization of accessible recreation efforts.[88]

Academic literature also links urbanization with "nature-deficit disorder," a nonclinical term gaining traction to describe the human impacts of alienation from nature, especially among low-income youth.[89] The role of nature in child development is vital but understudied among racialized communities here in Canada; but in the UK, South Asian parents reported better mental health and fewer behavioural challenges with their children when they were satisfied with their green spaces.[90]

Exposure to biodiversity (and not just green space) is critically nuanced, as urban bird and tree biodiversity were further correlated with better well-being.[91] When we step away from the human-centric frame, it is important to remember as well that biodiversity is for the health of land and waters — for ecosystems to stabilize their cycles and renew themselves, and it is also vital to thriving human societies and economies.

White, Indigenous and Black respondents who said that park use during the COVID-19 pandemic improved their mental health:[92]

88%	72%	69%
White respondents	Indigenous respondents	Black respondents

[86] See Kling et al. (2024), pp. 2039–2041 and Scott & Tenneti (2021), pp. 9-10.

[87] Robinson, Alavi & Hampson (2023), p. 18.

[88] Kling et al. (2024), pp. 2038–204 & 2046–2047.

[89] Louv, R. (2019, October 15). What is nature-deficit disorder? *Richard Louv's Blog*. https://richardlouv.com/blog/what-is-nature-deficit-disorder.

[90] Robinson, Alavi & Hampson (2023), p. 18.

[91] Buxton et al. (2024), pp. 2, 4.

[92] Eykelbosh, A., & Chow, A. (2022, March 16). *Canadian green spaces during COVID-19: Public health benefits and planning for resilience.* National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health. https://ncceh.ca/resources/evidence-reviews/canadian-green-spaces-during-covid-19-public-health-benefits-and.

3.2 Social and cultural disconnection

The multiple socio-cultural impacts (which the research doesn't explore for specific communities) of discrimination documented by Canadian and international researchers are: **erosion of community cohesion, feelings of exclusion, cultural disconnection and intergenerational losses of relationships with land and water.**

Trust between communities and gatekeepers of nature and protected areas may be eroded in everyday and ostensibly offhand ways. For example, research of people with disabilities shows that dismissive park staff or inadequate consultation signals that parks and programs are not designed "with us in mind."[93] This makes co-design and representation for communities living with disabilities (and all impacted communities in this report) essential to nature-based solutions.

In Canada (along with the United Kingdom and the United States), language, costs, culturally or religiously inappropriate programming and other access barriers to parks may cause feelings of social alienation among newcomers. Among people from African-Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani identities in the United Kingdom, exclusion from parks and living in lower-income neighbourhoods predicted poorer overall health and life satisfaction.[94] **Often, colonial, capitalist ideals of recreation ignore cultural traditions like music, spiritual connection to the land, teaching, harvesting, ceremonies and planting that are meaningful to Indigenous, Black, racialized and newcomer communities.**[95] This can amplify "othering," exclusion and the loss (or interruption) of passing down Indigenous and diverse traditions of nature between generations.

At a time when Canada greatly needs talent in the field of biodiversity protection and climate action, mitigation and adaptation, BIPOC youth are being left behind. Research with racialized youth in Toronto shows that when nature is coded as "white" and they do not see their identities reflected in environmental professions, such careers feel closed to them.[96] This neglect has translated into missed opportunities to benefit from these communities' wisdom and innovation, as well as failures to scale or nurture urban ecologies and create spaces for excluded communities to be part of a larger green economy.

3.3 Elevated environmental and climate vulnerability

Today, knowing that planetary heating has pushed past 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming[97] with disastrous implications for biodiversity and human health, systemic exclusion leaves climate solutions on the table.

Interventions are urgently needed to end climate-responsive inequities related to mental health, heat risk, pollution exposure and extreme weather. Biodiversity is universally negatively associated with population density, such as in urban areas. **The limited biodiversity and fragmented natural habitats can leave cities vulnerable to non-native plants and pathogens, as well as diminish their health co-benefits** (for example shade, cooling, pollution uptake, growing food and active-travel corridors).[98, 99]

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93 Dewan, Aljallad, & Johnson (2025), pp. 15-16.

94 Robinson, Alavi & Hampson (2023), pp. 16-17.

95 See Robinson, Alavi & Hampson (2023), p. 3 and Chong & Basu (2024), pp. 1324–1326.

96 Scott & Tenneti (2021), pp. 25, 32.

97 King, A., & Cassidy, L. (2025, February 10). Earth is already shooting through the 1.5°C global warming limit, two major studies show. *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/earth-is-already-shooting-through-the-1-5-c-global-warming-limit-two-major-studies-show-249133.

98 Martin, Fleming & Conway (2025), pp. 1, 5.

99 Hegazy et al. (2025), pp. 1-2.

Nature-based solutions have the potential to be a remedy, but they are often absent or low-quality in urban areas, which also leaves Indigenous, Black, and communities of colour, as well as newcomer, low-income communities and people with disabilities without "low cost buffers" against climate shocks, such as floods and heat-waves.[100, 101]

Communities report feeling hotter due to the lack of shade and the urban heat island effect, and they are also vulnerable to extreme storms. Without bioswales, permeable pavements and wetlands, such storms can overwhelm grey infrastructure and cause flooding in underfunded areas.[102, 103] Globally, individuals with disabilities are up to four times more likely to die in weather disasters[104] and people with schizophrenia (just 1% of the population) made up 15.7% of deaths in the 2021 British Columbia heat dome, highlighting the intersection of physical and mental health, poverty, underhousing and unwelcoming public spaces like cooling centres.[105] These individuals' knowledge gap and reluctance to enter official cooling spaces underscore research findings that inequity erodes communities' "confidence, preparedness and collective efficacy" to build climate resilience.[106] Equity-informed nature-based solutions are therefore a missed opportunity in climate resilience.

Lastly, failures to recognize Indigenous stewardship dramatically reduce the effectiveness of conservation. Under-utilized research by Canadian officials demonstrates that community-led management better protects ecosystems and intact forests.[107] Current disaster, risk and reduction tools perpetuate environmental risks by leaving technocratic hierarchies unchallenged. The record 2023 wildfire season in Canada exposed how the colonial fire practices and laws of the Canadian government have contributed to worsening the fire seasons by displacing Indigenous communities from their lands and discarding Indigenous knowledge and stewardship.[108] Undoing this chronic undervaluing of Indigenous knowledge — and perspective from other identity groups — is crucial to reaching biodiversity targets and ensuring resilience within and beyond Canada's colonial borders.[109]

[100] Hegazy et al. (2025), pp. 1-2.

[101] Hegazy et al.(2025), pp. 1-2.

[102] Cook, E. M., Ossola, A., & Cadenasso, M. L. (2025). Nature-based solutions for urban sustainability. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 122*(29, Special Feature: Introduction), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2315909122.

[103] Hegazy et al. (2025), pp. 2, 9.

[104] Stein, P. J. S., Brolan, C. E., & Jaramillo-Strouss, D. (2022, January). Climate change and the right to health of people with disabilities. *The Lancet Global Health, 10*(1). https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(21)00542-8/fulltext.

[105] Yoon, L., & Mew, S. (2025, September 23). People with schizophrenia were hit hard by B.C.'s deadly 2021 heat dome. The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/people-with-schizophrenia-were-hit-hard-by-b-c-s-deadly-2021-heat-dome-265173.

[106] Hegazy et al. (2025), pp. 1-2.

[107] Mansuy et al. (2023), pp. 1–2, 6.

[108] Osgood, B. (2023, July 5). As Canada reels from wildfire, First Nations hope for a larger role. *Al Jazeera*. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/5/as-canada-reels-from-wildfire-first-nations-hope-for-larger-role.

[109] See Sudmeier-Rieux, K., Wallemacq, H., & Le Masson, V. (2025). Nature-Based Solutions for Reducing Disaster Risk: What Is the Evidence? *Nature-Based Solutions, 7 (June)*, 100207. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nbsj.2024.100207.

4. Belonging-first solutions for nature policy

Strong roots for belonging in nature already exist.

Communities left on their own have been forging ahead, creating vibrant outdoor communities that make space for multiple identity groups in pockets across Canada — and increasingly on a national scale. In the words of accessibility consultant Karen Lai, "Inclusion is messy and complex. Each of us brings so many layers of identity into every space we occupy or into every conversation we have with one another. So how do we make space for everyone to be heard, valued, supported and belong?"[110]

In line with our concept of **"belonging in nature"**— and informed by the *10 Principles for Disability Justice*[111] developed by Sins Invalid, a disability justice-based movement building and performance project — we propose nature-based solutions (NBS) that are led by impacted communities and that centre wholeness, sustainability, interdependence and liberation for all.

[110] Lai, K. (n.d.). About. Inclusion & accessibility. https://www.inclusionaccessibility.com/about.

[111] Sins Invalid. (n.d.). *10 principles of disability justice*. https://sinsinvalid.org/10-principles-of-disability-justice/.

The four pillars of an NBS framework that centres belonging in nature could include:

1. The **return of Indigenous territories to Indigenous governance**, including through Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs).

2. A **federal law** to protect nature, including human rights and responsibilities to nature (passing Bill C-73, the Nature Accountability Act).

3. Scaling **locally proven, community-led solutions** and co-design in urban planning to expand access to, belonging in, and stewardship of nature for marginalized groups.

4. Measures to **close the data gaps** that limit awareness of nature-based inequities, inhibit community agency and prevent accountability from policymakers.

4.1 Solution #1: Land back and Indigenous governance

Land back must be the heart of how Canada reweaves itself into the web of nature.

Today, about **89% of all the land known as Canada is Crown Land**[112] **and can be returned to the stewardship of Indigenous communities.** Without meaningful recognition of FPIC, nature-based solutions risk reproducing colonial harms and impeding reconciliation.[113] This aligns with Canada's legal responsibilities under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). This rights-based action is supported by most Canadians.[114] The federal government is therefore acting against the values of Canadians by adopting legislation such as Bill C-5 or the One Canadian Economy Act. This act aims to break down interprovincial economic barriers by giving the federal government permission to fast-track projects deemed in "national interest", while sidestepping FPIC obligations to Indigenous Peoples.[115]

The federal government must reverse course on Bill C-5 and efforts to launch new tar sands pipeline projects.[116] Instead, working government-to-government, Canada should ensure explicit legal recognition of IPCAs, including resourcing Indigenous communities to do this work and self-report in ways aligned with Indigenous knowledge systems and accountability to Canada's biodiversity targets under the Kunming-Montreal Framework.[117]

Outside of land and water-based protections, examples abound for how to support the connection of Indigenous generations to nature. One respondent consulted by Greenpeace Canada pointed to Turtle Protectors, who are involved in discussions about park signage protecting turtles in Indigenous languages. In another example, Indigenous Women Outdoors aims to bring Indigenous women together to cultivate relationships with one another and the environment through shared experiences.[118] Previous research has shown that links between Indigenous and newcomer communities can strengthen cross-cultural solidarity and help teach reciprocal land relations.[119]

[112] Neimanis, V. P. (2024, November 14). *Crown Land*. The Canadian Encyclopedia, Historica Canada. https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/crown-land.

[113] Mansuy et al. (2023), pp. 1–16.

[114] Assembly of First Nations. (2020, September 7). *Views of Canadians on Indigenous Issues*. https://www.afn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020-1579-AFN-Populated-Report-with-Tabs.pdf.

[115] Anderson, D. (2025, June 27). 'Build, baby, build': a guide to Canada's Bill C-5. The Narwhal. https://thenarwhal.ca/bill-c-5-canada/.

[116] Keiller, J. (2025, December 11). Alberta Treaty 8 Chiefs demand pause on pipeline agreement, threaten legal action. *CBC*. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/alberta-treaty-8-chiefs-demand-pause-on-pipeline-agreement-threaten-legal-action-9.7011963.

[117] See Lemieux et al. (2019), p. 315.

[118] See Indigenous Women Outdoors, https://indigenouswomenoutdoors.ca/.

[119] See Scott & Tenneti (2021), p. 28.

4.2 Solution #2: Implement Bill C-73, the *Nature Accountability Act*

Moving forward, a fundamental value must be to treat access to nature as a democratic right.[120] **A federal law to protect nature could legally enshrine belonging. A pivotal lever for this was already on the federal government's table: Bill C-73, the *Nature Accountability Act*,**[121] which could catalyze policy reform on equity, community-driven solutions, Indigenous land and water stewardship. Protecting nature in Canada should be guided by Indigenous principles and governed in Indigenous-led protected areas, whereby equity-measures for other equity-seeking communities can be implemented.

In June 2024, following advocacy and pressure from Greenpeace Canada and environmental justice movements, the federal government tabled Bill C-73 to support its ability to meet the 23 international targets under the Kunming-Montreal agreement of 2022. In December 2024, a month before Parliament was prorogued, Greenpeace Canada and other stakeholders proposed amendments to improve the bill.

Today, there is an opportunity to re-energize momentum behind Bill C-73, reintroduce it and implement it into a law that respects Indigenous sovereignty, sets measurable and enforceable nature protection *and equity* targets and holds polluters accountable. NBS could be embedded into zoning, land-use codes and development standards, as well as de-siloed across government portfolios.[122] Legislation should work in tandem with existing regulatory frameworks, such as the *Accessible Canada Act*, passed in 2019, which mandates all Crown corporations to offer barrier-free services by 2040.

Long-term funding to see legislative measures through — including funds to clean up contaminated sites — is vital. Without it, the *Nature Accountability Act* and NBS could fail to reach the very communities that would benefit most. Holding the fossil fuel industries and other sectors responsible for pollution and biodiversity collapse to financially account for these impacts, as set out in Greenpeace Canada's proposal for a Climate Recovery Fund,[123] could restore and support belonging-first biodiversity measures. Furthermore, by taking a collaborative and creative approach to financial sustainability, governments could also raise funds via (or facilitate) green bonds, private-public partnerships, tax credits, subsidies and undertake "life-cycle cost analysis to show long-term savings".[124]

4.3 Solution #3: Scale community-led and co-designed solutions

It is time for colonial and ableist fixations on nature as untouched wilderness to give way to dynamic, lived-in ideas of what it means to exist in — and *with* — nature. **Community ownership is central to the success and longevity of rural and urban NBS. We do not need to start from scratch: communities are already leading and piloting interventions, providing policymakers with locally-relevant initiatives that demonstrate social proof.**

Indigenous-led parks, recreation and other officials can work with equity-seeking communities to co-design needed accommodations for people with disabilities, as well as culturally relevant programming

[120] See, for instance, Kling et al. (2024), pp. 2037– 2039, 2050–2051.

[121] Canada. Parliament. House of Commons. (2024). *An Act respecting transparency and accountability in relation to certain commitments Canada has made under the Convention on Biological Diversity* (Bill C-73, 44th Parliament, 1st Session). https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2025/bdp-lop/ls/YM32-3-441-C73-eng.pdf.

[122] Hegazy et al. (2025), pp. 10-11.

[123] Greenpeace Canada. (2025, July). *How to make polluters pay: Legislating a climate recovery fund for British Columbia*. https://www.greenpeace.org/static/planet4-canada-stateless/2025/07/ccb5c605-gpca_a-climate-recovery-fund-for-bc_report-2025_en.pdf.

[124] Hegazy et al. (2025), pp. 9-10.

for Indigenous, Black, and communities of colour, and newcomer communities, such as multilingual communication, face-to-face outreach, prayer spaces, gender-separated and mixed-gender events and family-oriented facilities.[125] Indigenous land-based programming should also be supported in lockstep with Indigenous leaders and youth. **Solutions such as PaRx, launched in 2020, allows doctors to prescribe time in nature — two hours a week with sessions at least 20 minutes at a time — including current Parks Canada discovery passes made available free of charge to patients so that they can explore national parks, marine conservation areas and historic places nationwide.**[126] Scaling such initiatives for Indigenous-led protected areas could help dismantle cost-barriers to access to nature for low-income households across Canada.

The World Health Organization recommends that urban residents have 0.5-1 hectares of public green space within a 5 to 10 minute walk from their homes. This gives federal, provincial/territorial, municipal and Indigenous governments a clear, actionable metric for all urban communities in Canada, perhaps as part of a climate-friendly walkable neighbourhoods agenda.[127] Researchers also recommend making it mandatory in municipal budgeting processes that officials adopt child-appropriate, and mobility-friendly accessibility metrics for sidewalk continuity, low-stress crossings and off-street links to parks.[128] Meanwhile, anti-displacement measures (such as affordability protections, small-business support and cultural rights) must be baked into urban NBS to avoid green gentrification.[129]

Such urban solutions must start with partnerships between government officials, city and residential planners, environmental organisations and agencies serving city-based, BIPOC, newcomer, low-income and disabled communities.[130] Housing interventions (e.g., green roofs), shade trees, garden courtyards and more can reduce carbon footprints and energy costs while improving the health outcomes related to green spaces.[131] Additionally, retrofitting existing spaces, heat pumps, public cooling infrastructure and renewable energy are known to mitigate the dangers faced by these populations in a changing climate. Research on centring biodiversity in urban environments further highlights tree planting, community gardens and avian habitat restoration as promising opportunities.[132] Respectful, empathetic dialogue about native species in balance with a diversity of culturally relevant foods must all be on the community and policy discussion tables.

Black-led outdoor groups in Canada, such as **Brown Girl Outdoor World** and **Colour the Trails**, whose Co-Founders both consulted on this report, are providing programs, nurturing social connections and changing narratives about *who* is outside. Their work transforms representation and facilitates belonging for racialized communities across multiple intersecting identities.[133] **Youth in the Greater Toronto Area** also suggested training programs that allow them to fulfill high-school volunteer hours as walk leaders, diversifying representation and deepening legitimacy for engagement in nature.[134]

[125] See Scott & Tenneti (2020), pp. 11, 33 and Robinson, Alavi & Hampson (2023), p. 27.

[126] BC Parks Foundation. (n.d.). *About*. PaRx: A Prescription for Nature. https://www.parkprescriptions.ca/en-ca/en/about#FAQs.

[127] Vabi, V. (2022, March 18). Urban parks and forests are missing in racialized and marginalized neighbourhoods. *Nature Canada*. https://naturecanada.ca/news/blog/parks-and-forests-are-missing-in-marginalized-neighbourhoods/.

[128] Robillard et al. (2023), pp. 464–466, 475–476.

[129] Filazzola, A., Kryshtalskyj, E., & Gillingham, M. A. F. (2024). Using anonymized mobility data to reduce inequality in the availability and use of urban parks. *People and Nature, 6*, 1143–1154. https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10623.

[130] See, for instance, Scott & Tenneti (2021), Rec 1, p. 31.

[131] See, for example, Hegazy et al. (2025), pp. 2-4.

[132] Buxton, R. T., Sponarski, C. C., Bennett, J. R., & Sarr, M. (2024). Mental health is positively associated with biodiversity in Canadian cities. *Communications Earth & Environment*, 5, 310. p. 4. https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-024-01482-9.

[133] See Brown Girl Outdoor World, https://browngirloutdoorworld.com and Colour The Trails, https://colourthetrails.com.

[134] Scott & Tenneti (2021), Rec 11, p. 33.

Around the world, Black and racialized communities were galvanized by the Christian Cooper incident in 2020, which gave rise to a variety of movements, including #DiversifyOutdoors. An analysis of Instagram posts during that time found four key themes: (1) Representation, (2). Challenging narratives, (3) Dreaming and healing and (4) Family and community.[135] When these groups belong, nature can have a dramatic effect on their well-being.

Likewise, research on people with disabilities and their caregivers in Canada revealed four distinct areas for action, including: (1) Access to information during planning, (2) Accessible transportation, (3) The built environment while interacting with facilities and activities and (4) Inclusivity of the park.[136] **NBS for people with disabilities must have inclusive park design (considering mobility, sensory or cognitive disabilities), universally designed amenities, clear and simple signage, safe crossing and public transportation access, as well as loans or low-cost rentals of adaptive equipment such as TrailRiders, all-terrain wheelchairs, adaptive cycles, beach mats, sit-skis and more.**[137]

While parks are not a solution to decolonised nature protection — Indigenous-led protected areas are — Parks Canada has already introduced inclusion-led policies that could be expanded. This includes the Canada Strong Pass, which makes free or discounted admission to national parks available, which led to a 13% increase in visitors in summer 2025.[138] Additionally, partnerships with Indigenous groups and other communities helped the agency employ 1,358 youth, including 17% Indigenous youth, 15% "visible minorities" and 15% persons with disabilities through the federal Youth Employment and Skills Strategy initiative, creating more opportunities for marginalized youth.[139] Focusing on disability, Waterfront Toronto established a permanent Accessibility Advisory Committee with individuals with disabilities to design future projects. Groups like the **Canadian Disabled Outdoor Society** offer services such as certified adaptive mountain bike coaching and inclusive trail mapping with the National Capital Commission in the Ottawa area.[140]

Closing the government's awareness gap is crucial. Equitable hiring practices that include lived experience, along with diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) training, remain essential to dismantling systemic barriers in access to nature (including specific education on topics related to anti-Blackness, Indigenous rights frameworks and disability justice). Such policies would improve inclusion, government accountability as well as create more representative and welcoming environments for Indigenous, Black, racialized, newcomer communities and people with disabilities. Polling shows that DEI continues to be supported by the majority of Canadian workers.[141]

[135] Girgrah, R. (2023). *BIPOC communities in the outdoors: Insisting, resisting, and persisting* [Master's thesis, University of Victoria]. https://dspace.library.uvic.ca/bitstreams/f109020b-9e08-44fe-920a-37e8db41bbfa/download.

[136] Whiting et al. (2025).

[137] See Hegazy et al. (2025), pp. 11-12, 16 and Dewan, Aljallad, & Johnson (2025), pp. 12–14.

[138] Morrison, Catherine. (2025, December 3). Parks Canada sites saw 13 per cent spike in visitors with Canada Strong Pass in place. *St. Albert Gazette*. https://www.stalbertgazette.com/environment-news/parks-canada-sites-saw-13-per-cent-spike-in-visitors-with-canada-strong-pass-in-place-11574167.

[139] Parks Canada. (2025, November 24). *Parks Canada's 2024-25 departmental results report*. Government of Canada. https://parks.canada.ca/agence-agency/bib-lib/rapports-reports/rmr-dpr/2024-2025.

[140] Canadian Disabled Outdoor Society. (n.d.). *About Us*. https://www.candosociety.ca/.

[141] The Canadian Press. (2025, October 30). Most Canadian workers support equity efforts despite some backlash: Report. *CTV News*. https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/article/most-canadian-workers-support-equity-efforts-despite-some-backlash-report/.

4.4 Solution #4: Close data gaps preventing belonging in nature

Biodiversity metrics must move beyond simple counts of access or park presence. **Research to strengthen Canada's evidence base for NBS and belonging in nature can include geospatial data, seasonal participation data, identity data, intersectional lived experience and more.** Priority metrics to track, identified by Greenpeace Canada consultants with lived experience, included tree canopy by income, proximity to parks by equity-seeking groups, access barriers for people with disabilities and air quality disparities.

Equity-informed, systems-oriented and participatory impact assessments, along with disaggregated data (by race, gender, ability, and income, sexual orientation, age and other relevant statuses), can help all Canadians better understand the intersections of these identities and how they impact the use, enjoyment and feelings of belonging in nature. DEI programs should further incorporate reporting and accountability measures that track racialized (especially Indigenous and Black) participation, representation in leadership, and barriers to engagement.

Too often, community-led initiatives are not evaluated for scalability or equity outcomes. Working with communities to co-define reporting frameworks for the stewardship of nature is a necessary starting point.

5. Expected outcomes

When we strengthen nature's web, all living things benefit.

Dismantling the colonial barriers in Canada to ensure everyone can belong and uphold reciprocal relationships with nature offers opportunity for healing, belonging and change.

"Nature restoration projects brought me closer to feeling at home and gave me the agency to make a positive impact. Tending to the land gave me a sense of belonging. Eventually, I joined the executive boards of some of these organisations where I was one of the few racialized people. I leveraged my experience and network to advocate for inclusive programming, aiming to create a more diverse and welcoming environment within these organisations."

— Ambika Tenneti[142]

Researcher on immigrant engagement in urban forests and environmentalist from India

[142] Scott & Tenneti, (2021).

As explained in previous sections, more robust and disaggregated data is needed to understand, monitor and evaluate the outcomes of the suggested interventions. **Still, existing research on the mutually beneficial relationships humans can enjoy with nature shows that significant co-benefits could result from greater equity.** The section below outlines outcomes governments could expect from the suggested policy solutions, based on results-oriented studies in Canada and other jurisdictions.

5.1 Expected outcome #1: Greater likelihood to meet and sustain environmental targets

Indigenous-managed lands cover significant amounts of the world's remaining natural lands, intact forests and mammal habitats. This is important because research shows that Indigenous-led and locally-driven conservation measures, where communities play a substantial or leading role in decision-making, report more positive outcomes.[143] Data from Australia, Brazil and Canada found that biodiversity among birds, mammals, amphibians and reptiles was highest on lands managed or co-managed by Indigenous communities.[144]

Nature-based solutions and land-based education could yield holistic benefits to preserve nature herself, ecosystem resilience, human health and economic, social and cultural well-being. For example, a review of the literature by the Yellowhead Institute shows that in the Northwest Territories, land-based activities such as "hiking, drumming, hide tanning, harvesting, processing foods and medicines, snowshoeing, canoeing, storytelling, language learning, hand games, fishing and dog sledding," often occur alongside IPCAs and Indigenous guardianship programs.[145] **Early research on Indigenous Guardian projects in the territory already shows that they deliver $2.50 of social, economic, cultural and environmental benefits for every $1 invested — a return that could rise to $3.70 with national support.**[146]

"Most, if not all, land-based programs are designed to result in multiple interrelated outcomes and benefits for human mental, emotional, and physical health; environmental stewardship; cultural confidence and Indigenous knowledge; technical and practical skills; and enhanced understanding of and proficiency with critical concepts like settler-colonialism, governance, and Indigenous self-determination."

— Mandee McDonald[147]

Author, *Indigenous Land-Based Education in Theory & Practice*

[143] See Dawson, N. M., Coolsaet, B., Sterling, E. J., Loveridge, R., Gross-Camp, N. D., Wongbusarakum, S., Sangha, K. K., Scherl, L. M., & Carter, H. (2021). The role of Indigenous peoples and local communities in effective and equitable conservation. *Ecology and Society, 26*(3). https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-12625-260319.

[144] Corpuz-Bosshart, L. (2019, July 31). Biodiversity highest on Indigenous-managed lands. *UBC News*. https://news.ubc.ca/2019/07/biodiversity-highest-on-indigenous-managed-lands/.

[145] McDonald, M. (2023). *Indigenous land-based education in theory & practice*. Yellowhead Institute. https://yellowheadinstitute.org/report/land-based-education/.

[146] Pearlman, C. (2025, February 1). *Indigenous-led conservation from Australia to Canada*. Indigenous Leadership Initiative. https://www.ilinationhood.ca/publications/backgrounder-indigenous-led-conservation-from-australia-to-canada.

[147] McDonald, M. (2023). *Indigenous land-based education in theory & practice.* Yellowhead Institute. https://yellowheadinstitute.org/report/land-based-education/.

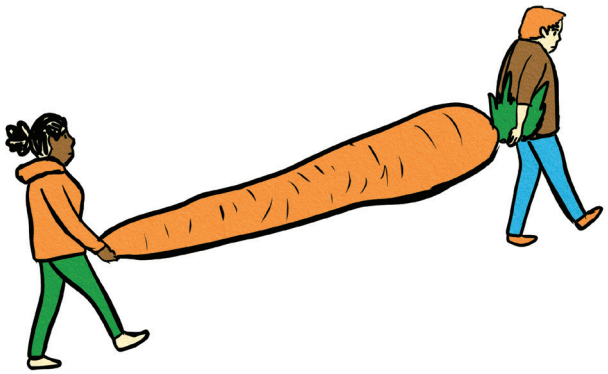
5.2 Expected outcome #2: Healthier, happier communities and environmental co-benefits

Cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and respiratory disease cause roughly 65% of all deaths in Canada, with a significantly high price tag attached when it comes to public health.[148] People with disabilities are less likely to receive the chronic condition care they need,[149] while low-income and BIPOC communities experience a disproportionately higher burden of these diseases.[150]

Greening Canada's cities could save 34,000 lives annually when it comes to chronic disease.[151] Moreover, a conservative estimate of the health care savings from greening Canada's cities puts savings at $100 billion by 2050. [152]

Research in Toronto already links tree density with better self-reported health and cardio-metabolic conditions — akin to being seven years younger. In the United States, Black residents living shorter distances to a river and green space demonstrated better cardiovascular health than those far away.[153] Green space was also associated with lower racial disparities with the Coronavirus infection.[154]

Overall, when green space is available for low-cost physical exercise alongside low-stress and efficient pedestrian, cycling and transit options are on the table, communities become healthier and less reliant on fossil-fuel-powered cars.[155]



[148] Kingsley, M. (2019, April). Commentary – Climate change, health and green space co-benefits. *Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention in Canada: Research, Policy and Practice, 39*(4). https://doi.org/10.24095/hpcdp.39.4.04.

[149] Pucchio, A. M. R., Ghorab, H., Kuspira, K., & Breen, L. (2025). Disability and unmet need for health care in Canada: Findings from the Canadian Community Health Survey. *Disability and Health Journal, 18*(4), 101846. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/40340149/.

[150] Canadian Public Health Association. (2025). *Chronic disease and public health in Canada*. https://www.cpha.ca/chronic-disease.

[151] Twigg, M. (2021, March 29). *Urban nature can help prevent future pandemics (and improve our ability to cope with them)*. Smart Prosperity Institute. https://institute.smartprosperity.ca/UrbanNature.

[152] Twigg (2021).

[153] Kim, K., Li, Z., Ma, H., Zhu, Y., Song, Y., Korf, E. C., Caughey, M. C., Li, S., & Boehme, A. K. (2024). Associations of urban blue and green spaces with coronary artery calcification in Black individuals and disadvantaged neighborhoods. *Circulation, 150*(3). https://doi.org/10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.123.067992.

[154] Lu, Y., Li, S., Wang, K., & Zhou, X. (2021). Green spaces mitigate racial disparity of health: A higher ratio of green spaces indicates a lower racial disparity in SARS-CoV-2 infection rates in the USA. *Environment International, 152*, 106465. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2021.106465.

[155] See, for instance, Anik, M. A. H. (2024, October 1). *Are suburbs and car dependency fueling climate change?* OpenThink, Dalhousie University. https://blogs.dal.ca/openthink/are-suburbs-and-car-dependency-fueling-climate-change/. and Mattioli, G., Anable, J., & Gatersleben, B. (2020). The political economy of car dependence: A systems of provision approach. *Energy Research & Social Science, 66*, 101486. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2020.101486.

Figure 4: Climate change impacts on human health and the accompanying green space co-benefits[156]

Climate-linked health risks	Green space co-benefit/mitigation
Illness and premature death from extreme heat	Provides shade and reduces the heat island effect
Illness, stress and premature death from flooding	Reduces likelihood of flooding through decreased run-off
Mental stress caused by extreme weather	Reduces stress, anxiety and depression, common symptoms experienced after a flood
Food insecurity	Community gardens provide local food source
Cardiovascular and respiratory illness due to degraded air quality	Improved air quality and lowered rates of cardiovascular disease

Additionally, literary reviews of studies on nature-based activities indicate that they can improve the confidence, life skills, strength, health and social life for newcomers and people with disabilities. With permanent economic migration to Canada at its highest levels,[157] it is worth noting that recent Canadian research[158] demonstrates that embodied participation in nature and outdoor recreation activities can foster higher levels of settlement satisfaction and feelings of attachment to their new homes. Other studies have demonstrated that people living with Parkinson's disease showed greater improvement in symptoms compared to non-nature-based rehabilitation.[159]

9-in-10

The number of Canadians who report feeling happier in nature.[160]

36%

The reduction in the risk of dementia in seniors who garden

20 minutes

The amount of time walking in a city park that improved attention test scores for kids with ADHD.

10 points

The amount of blood pressure points dropped by people who sat, walked and relaxed in the forest for four hours.

[156] Kingsley (2019).

[157] Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. (2025, November 6). *Canada's immigration levels*. Government of Canada. https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/mandate/corporate-initiatives/levels.html.

[158] Charles-Rodriguez, U., & Larouche, R. (2024). Being "outdoors" in a new country: Associations between immigrant characteristics, outdoor recreation activities, and settlement satisfaction in Canada. *Leisure Studies, 44*(3), 397–411. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2024.2328087.

[159] Zhang, G., Chen, M., Yang, S., Lin, M., & Wang, K. (2017). Health-promoting nature access for people with mobility impairments: A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 14*(7), 703. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14070703.

[160] All data compiled at BC Parks Foundation. (n.d.). *Why nature?* PaRx: A Prescription for Nature. Retrieved December 16, 2025, from https://www.parkprescriptions.ca/en-ca/en/whynature.

"The camp [hosted by Handcycling Club of Canada at Horseshoe Bike Park and Copeland Forest Trails, near Barrie, Ontario] was a huge success, the turnout and collective impact was so exciting to see and we look forward to the continued development of adaptive mountain biking in Ontario. This weekend we had: 40+ volunteers, 24 adaptive riders, 17 adaptive bikes, 8 riders with family members present, 5 different models of [adaptive mountain bikes] to demo [and] 2 volunteer mechanics."

— Canadian Disabled Outdoor Society[161]

At the same time, nature does not exist in a vacuum. **As access to nature expands, policymakers will need to work with communities to manage ecosystems and prevent overuse or degradation.** The closure of British Columbia's Joffre Lakes Park and other protected areas are creating ways for Indigenous communities to "reconnect with their land and culture, while also providing time for the land to rest from human impacts."[162] This is instructive here, as finding balance — with rest and regeneration for people and nature — is the way forward.

[161] CanDO Society. (2025, October 19). *CanDO at the Horseshoe aMTB Camp*. https://www.candosociety.ca/news/cando-at-the-horseshoe-amtb-camp.

[162] Cyca, M. (2025, May 30). First Nations are closing B.C. parks. Should you be mad? *The Narwhal*. https://thenarwhal.ca/bc-parks-first-nations-closures-racism/.

Conclusion

It is time to reweave everyone across Canada into nature's web. In the words of disability justice activists at Sins Invalid: "[A]ll bodies are valuable, hold beauty, and are deserving of care. This extends to our community bodies, to the bodies of our plant and animal kin, and to our shared planetary body itself, the earth."

This moment calls on federal, provincial/territorial and municipal governments to support marginalized communities to rekindle intentional, caring and reciprocal relationships with nature. **Learning from the wisdom of Indigenous worldviews — and the traditions of many diasporic communities around the world who now call these lands home — relational frameworks can connect humans and ecosystems beyond extractive and recreational models and mindsets.**

Following the surge in people's interest in (especially urban) nature post-COVID-19 — and as people across Canada grapple with the impacts of a rapidly changing climate and collapsing biodiversity — appetite and momentum for nature-based solutions are high. The four solutions proposed in this report can help Canada meet its commitments under the Convention on Biodiversity and achieve equity with co-benefits to health, justice and climate resilience for BIPOC, newcomer, low-income communities

[163] Sins Invalid. (2022, July 7). *Disability justice is climate justice.* https://sinsinvalid.org/disability-justice-is-climate-justice/.

and people with disabilities. **These four solutions are: (1) Indigenous land and resource governance, (2) The implementation of Bill C-73 (*Nature Accountability Act*), (3) The scaling of community-led solutions and (4) Closing data gaps holding back accountability for belonging in nature.**

Humans are just one thread in nature's web, but we can renew and strengthen the whole design. We cannot afford to let the opportunities in front of us slip through our fingers.