

Bringing Diversity Outdoors

Organizations around the Twin Cities are working to bring diverse communities together.

By Maya Harris

As a teenager, Aaron Sharper paddled down rivers and learned leadership skills he still uses today. Like many kids, he spent weeks during his summer vacations meeting new friends and playing in the woods at summer camp.

Sharper thought he was just like any other kid who went to camp, but as he got older, he noticed no one else looked like him. “I never had a black counselor or saw people like me spending time outdoors recreationally,” he said. “I think it is important for young kids to have role models that look like them, and I never got that as a kid.”

Sharper grew up in an average middle class family but went to a school that was mostly white. Just like at school, when he went to summer camp he was one of the only black kids. He now leads month long backpacking trips, something he never thought he could do because growing up he did not have black role models.

Spending time outdoors has been proven to help mental clarity and physical health. Camping, hiking or even just going to the park for a short amount of time has major health benefits.

But the great outdoors has a diversity problem. According to the National Park Service, only 22% of the 292.8 million people who visit state parks every year are people of color. Currently, 40% of the U.S population are people of color, and by 2044 the majority of the population will be non-white, according to a study done by the United States Census.

Health disparities are a striking issue. Thirty-seven percent of African American men and 50% of African American women are considered obese. According to Diversify Outdoors, an activist group, there are other factors that play into obesity rates such as economics and accessibility, but lack of time spent outdoors is an issue.

Minnesotans tackling the issue

A number of programs in the Twin Cities are targeting nonwhite youth populations with the goal of getting them outside for summer camp. While these efforts teach them outdoor and leadership skills in the short term, the long-term effects of these programs are unknown.

“My main goal is to try and get as many kids outside every summer as I can.” said Lauren Ott, program director at YMCA Camp Icaghowan. “We work hard to raise money every year to bring kids to camp that may not be able to afford it.”

Icaghowan still has a long way to go in terms of diversity, but are making strides. One way that Ott does this is working hard to recruit a diverse staff. Like Sharper, she believes that if kids have role models who look like them, they will be more likely to get outside. Thirty percent of Icaghowan’s staff are people of color and she hopes to grow this number every summer.

Icaghowan is also tackling this issue by collaborating with organizations like the Hope Community that work to support inner-city communities. Located in Minneapolis, Hope listens and battles issues within their community. One of their large initiatives is youth engagement and development. During the school year they work closely with kids in the community, and every summer they send around 30 kids to summer camp at zero cost to the families. For weeks before camp the kids go through an intensive leadership training so they can take their new skills to camp with them. The kids learn things like communication skills and what to expect when they go to camp.

Andrew Hopkins (known as DHop) is the director of youth and family engagement at Hope. He’s seen the positive effect of summer camp on hundreds of kids. “These kids come back from summer camp with not only new skills but a new self awareness,” DHop said. The kids learn responsibility for themselves and a greater understanding of how to treat those around them. “Spending time outdoors is important, but the skills you learn from being outside are even more important.”

Icaghowan also works closely with Children of Incarcerated Caregivers (CIC), which provides resources for families with a parent or guardian in jail or prison. While the program is open to all families, around 60% of their participants are people of color. CIC has only been sending kids to camp for two summers, but believes it gives their participants a week to just let them be kids.

“Not only does sending them to summer camp give them a break from the stressors at home, it also gives them a chance to figure out who they are away from what they are used to,” Mary Britts, an advisory board member for CIC said. “Being outdoors clears your mind and that is exactly what these kids need sometimes.”

Are these programs working?

There have not been any studies done to track if these programs are making a difference but both Ott and DHop agree that the effects of these programs are short term. “When kids go back home

they may remember everything that happened up at camp, but eventually real life catches up,” Ott said. “These programs are not staying with kids into adulthood.”

According to Ott, there has to be a cultural shift so people of color feel included outdoors. Numerous diversity initiatives have popped up such as Outdoor Afro and Latino Outdoors which work to create a more inclusive space for all.

“I wouldn’t be the same person if I had not spent all of my summers at camp, in the outdoors,” Sharper said. “Being outdoors should be something that everyone has access to, and it is important kids are getting that too.”