

Outdoors for All

A Local View on Environmental Justice in Outdoor Recreation

Introduction

Environmental justice in outdoor recreation means making sure everyone can access natural spaces, feel welcome, and have a say in how these places are cared for and planned. It is about more than just building trail infrastructure; it's about creating access to outdoor spaces that serve all community members regardless of background. **This paper highlights how the Santa Barbara County Trails Council has been working for decades to advance equity through trail access and stewardship and how we will continue to build on this as new opportunities arise.**

This work is especially important now as Santa Barbara County takes on major planning efforts that offer a real opportunity to ensure all communities are represented, engaged, and supported.. Planning initiatives like the Countywide Recreation Master Plan, the El Capitan, Refugio, and Gaviota State Park General Plan Update, and the Hollister Ranch Coastal Access Program create space to align local trail advocacy and stewardship with broader equity goals.

Achieving environmental justice in recreation requires fair distribution of outdoor opportunities, inclusive decision-making processes, and outdoor spaces that are welcoming and respectful to all.

California's Leadership and Momentum in Santa Barbara County

Santa Barbara County has seen growing momentum in environmental justice programs that connect underserved communities with nature. At the state level, the Outdoor Equity Grants Program (OEGP), authored by State Senator Monique Limón, has expanded California's

leadership by funding community-based initiatives that help historically excluded groups engage with natural spaces to support outdoor education, family recreation, and better access to nearby trails, parks, and open spaces.

Programs like [Outdoor Adventures](#), run by People's Self-Help Housing Corporation, and funded with almost \$700,00 from the Outdoor Equity Grants Program, bring families from the Jardin de las Rosas multi-family housing complex on trips to parks and open spaces in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo County. The [Wilderness Youth Project](#) and partners such as [NatureTrack](#) focus on increasing equitable park access for children, while [The Sea League](#) offers year-round ocean sports for youth, building connections to the ocean. [Native Like Water](#) supports Indigenous youth and adults in cultural and ocean-based experiences rooted in intergenerational learning. Meanwhile, the City of Santa Maria Recreation and Parks Department has received over \$500,000 to enhance nature access and outdoor recreation programs in Santa Maria and other communities in Santa Barbara County.

These initiatives demonstrate a strong state and national commitment to environmental justice and equitable access. While some federal programs face uncertain futures, California's ongoing investment reflects the growing recognition that access to nature is a public good. Local organizations are key to translating policy goals into real-world progress.

Our Place in the Trail Community

Investments in open space conservation, trail infrastructure, and environmental stewardship have a valuable and tangible role in advancing environmental justice in our community. For decades, the Trails Council has planned, funded, built, maintained, and protected trails that connect people to diverse outdoor habitats.

Since 2010, the Trails Council has helped create over 30 miles of new public trails across Santa Barbara County, thanks to strong partnerships and sustained advocacy. These trails are geographically diverse and highlight the unique landscapes of our region—from the ocean views of the **Baron Ranch Trails** in Gaviota, to the remote **Midland School Trails** nestled deep in the Santa Ynez Valley, to the popular

Franklin Trail, which climbs into the Los Padres National Forest above Carpinteria. Upon completion, the **Paradiso del Mare Trail** segment of the California Coastal Trail will add a mile of new trail and access to the Gaviota Coast blufftops, featuring a parking lot and a bridge over the railroad. Each of these trails represents a major milestone in expanding public access to the outdoors.

The work of building and maintaining trails does not happen in isolation. We collaborate with many trail-building and conservation groups including the Los Padres Forest Association, the Montecito Trails Foundation, Lompoc Trails, Orcutt Trails, the Sage Trail Alliance, the Santa Barbara County Land Trust, and the Bucket Brigade are adding new trails and maintaining existing ones in the countywide trail network. Public agencies and institutions like UC Santa Barbara have taken leadership in open space development. **One powerful example is UCSB's transformation of the North Campus Open Space from a fee-based golf course into a free, restored natural area with accessible trails near a disadvantaged community.**

Social Equity Programs and Growth Areas

While creating new trail infrastructure remains our mission, we recognize that meaningful equity work must also address who feels welcome, heard, and included. The social side of environmental justice is an area where we are growing. One example is [Healthy People Healthy Trails](#), a countywide initiative we co-founded with Sansum Clinic that connects healthcare providers with outdoor and recreation partners. Through trail guides, outdoor prescriptions, and a shared events calendar, this collaboration helps more people access the mental, physical, and community benefits of nature. We are committed to strengthening these efforts through deeper partnerships with community-based organizations, inclusive public engagement, and programs that center the voices of historically marginalized groups.

Conclusion

Environmental justice in recreation is not just shaped by national policy but by consistent, local action. The Santa Barbara County Trails Council will continue to support equity through

building and maintaining accessible trail infrastructure, partnering with diverse community groups, and expanding access for all. **Trails are free to use, require no special equipment, and support the most common form of recreation, walking.** This makes them one of the most inclusive outdoor recreation resources we have.

Reframing Local Efforts with National Priorities

Equitable access to parks, trails, and natural areas has become a public priority. Federal initiatives like the [U.S. Forest Service Equity Action Plan](#) and state laws like California's Environmental Equity and Outdoor Access Act show a clear belief that nature should be available to everyone.

The Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP) program was established in 2014 and is funded through the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Since its inception, ORLP has awarded more than \$488 million in grants across the country to expand access to nature in urban communities that lack adequate park infrastructure. While no projects in Santa Barbara County have yet received ORLP funding, the program's priorities closely align with local needs and offer strong potential for future collaboration. Together, these programs and partnerships are helping shape a more inclusive future for outdoor recreation in Santa Barbara County and beyond.

Across the country more funders and agencies are aligning with local groups to support community-driven conservation. Programs like ORLP and foundations like the [Doris Duke Foundation's Equity in Conservation](#) affirm the importance of local, inclusive stewardship. The Trails Council's long-standing work is a strong match for these values. As these programs grow, our local experience positions us to contribute meaningfully while ensuring Santa Barbara County benefits from this momentum.