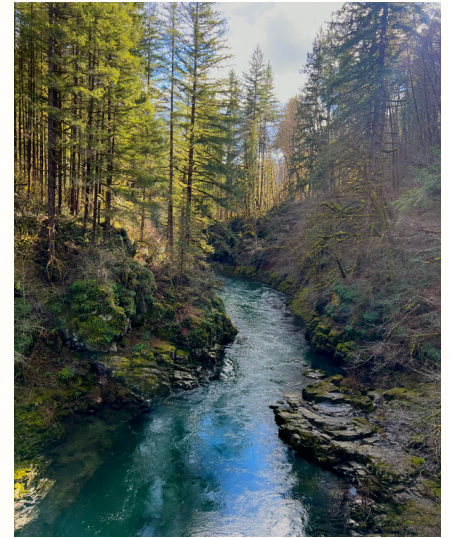


Color the Outdoors: How AfroNature is Helping Black Oregonians Reclaim Nature



Picture Taken at a AfroNature Hike at Moulton Regional Park

Black People and Nature - Outdoor Casualties of Racial Disparity

Have you heard of the phrase “color the outdoors” or the expression “coloring nature?” The term “colored,” originally a racial descriptor from the Jim Crow Era, has found new resonance among Black nature enthusiasts. This positive reframing of a word once associated with segregation and the erasure of Black people in many areas of society has become a source of liberation for many in the Black community.

Contrary to widespread belief, Black people do not lack physical and spiritual attachment to nature. From ancient Africa, slavery, to the modern day, Black people have long held a special tie to nature. The wilderness helped Black people transgress oppression, violence, and segregation, among many other racist barriers: economic, health, and psychosocial.

Nature continues to surround the environmental, historical and artistic excellence that comes from Black people. From agriculture, environmental activism, social gatherings, folklore, and poetry, to music and dance, the earth finds many forms and languages when speaking through Black people.

The difficulty of naming an issue that stems from the intersection of identities and systemic racism is that the majority lack the need to understand the disparities race creates. Representation is a crucial part to the accessibility and inclusivity of all spaces, even more so in the outdoors.

There is a reason why “reclaiming nature” gained popularity within

the Black community: the genuine belief and ownership of the knowledge that nature was never separate from Black people, but something to be taken back after it was forced out of their lives by American history and systemic racism. Many environmental and social advocates have expressed their hopes and efforts in breaking the boundaries assigned to how, when, where and if Black people can use nature.

From their 2021 Outdoor Participation Trends Report, Outdoor Industry unveiled that Black people were only 9% of outdoor participants (compared to 14% of the total population), while their white counterparts had a 72% outdoor participation rate (compared to 76% of the total population).



In leading the movement to reclaim outdoor spaces, Black advocates and activists have ignited a passion for exploration among Black communities, encouraging visits to metro, natural, and national parks. As a result, Black participation rate increased by 5% between 2021 to 2022, from 38% to 40% of Black Americans partaking in outdoor activities.

Disparities and exclusion have taxed the Black community when it comes to nature.

It is not the simple thought of nature that

evokes fear and disconnect, but the subjection to unequal and disproportionate socioeconomic status and physical and environmental settings.

The outdoors have been made taboo and a risk for Black people and other people of color. Black and Brown communities are stereotyped with vilifying persona in the outdoors. A Black or Brown man outside is criminalized and made to feel dangerous which created this mindset of viewing the outside as a safe spot for white people and a playground for “white activities.”

Access and outreach for outdoor recreational involvements such as hiking, camping, backpacking, and biking, etc., are very low for Black communities. Despite the low efforts, Black outdoor lovers have successfully orchestrated a growing trend of Black nature lovers enjoying the wilderness in non-Eurocentric ways.

It is necessary to support and uphold individuals and spaces that aim to directly highlight and facilitate the need and available capacity of nature for everyone, especially Black people. Portland, Oregon has been blessed with a visionary that has motivated so many Black Oregonians to take up space in the outdoors.

Portland's Nature Enthusiast Turned Nature Leader

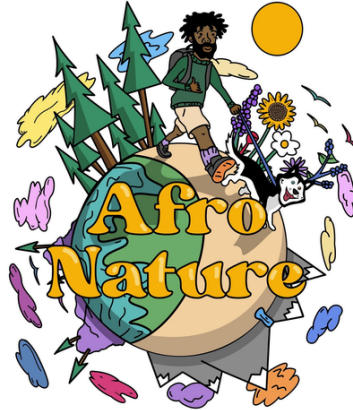
One man, Jabari Lateef, and his beautiful nine-year-old Siberian husky named Elsa, have started a grassroots space that has brought Black people together in nature. While talking about Elsa, Jabari says “she has been such a great companion for me and we go on hikes together all the time.



Jabari Lateef & Elsa

To Jabari, going into nature, this ecosystem that encapsulates so much greenery and life, became an escape. Nature was a place that turned the post-traumatic stress and fear that surrounds Black people within nature into a practice that breathes peace and spirituality into his life. Having grown up and attended college in Birmingham Alabama, coming to the Pacific Northwest gave nature a new meaning and access point for Jabari.

Jabari Founded AfroNature in 2021 after a hike with two friends who did not know each other. The hike awoke a natural rhythm of conversation and camaraderie for all three men. Due to the vulnerability and youthfulness the hike evoked, Jabari's friend insisted that he make this a “recurring theme of gathering Black people to go out in nature.”



Through word of mouth, AfroNature grew from one man and two strangers, to a village of over 40 people at a time carpooling for hours to share a moment in nature. Then, in 2022, when the AfroNature Instagram page was created, it didn't take long for loyal and supportive walkers and hikers to show up and show out, leading to the growth and incredible engagement the page receives to this day. When someone commented that AfroNature changed their life, Jabari knew he had created a community that went beyond his imagination.



Many will be saddened to hear that Jabari has embarked on a new journey to California, but before leaving he has made sure AfroNature is in great hands. He brought together a mighty team of three nature lovers who will continue to organize and facilitate the growth of AfroNature. Shanna, who is the Hike Lead, Raina, who will be the Event Planner, and Raven, as the Social Media Manager, will all cohesively put on active events for their community once every month. Jabari wrestled with the prospect of birthing an AfroNature in California,

but thought against the idea because he believes that the work and mission of AfroNature serves the Black demographic of Oregon better. As AfroNature expands, the vision is to incorporate a holistic approach to wellness, by stretching its branches to other active and physical fields.

Whether guided by Jabari's inviting and inclusive cadence, by Elsa's joyfully wagging tail, by the whispers between a never ending line of trees, or by the soothing harmonies of water falling onto rocks, AfroNature lovers continue to explore some of the most beautiful and serene parts of Oregon and its surrounding areas.

Individuals like Jabari, spaces like AfroNature, along with initiatives like the Black to Nature walking series (co-hosted by Oregon Walks), highlight the Afro-Ecology framework while helping Black Portlanders connect with nature.

Organizations like Multnomah County REACH and Oregon Walks are organizations that are creating safe and accessible spaces for Black communities across Portland and aim to dismantle the systemic barriers that have kept so many Black Oregonians inside for a very long time

Oregon Walks is teaming up with the new AfroNature leadership to put on an event this April! Look for details and as encouraged by AfroNature: Come as you are!

HAPPY BLACK HISTORY MONTH!