

# **Accessibility, Privilege, and Social Justice in the Outdoors - A Guide for Youth/Teens**

Education Guide compiled by Talia McMahon, Bristol Trail Network Intern Spring 2024  
Adapted from Brown Outdoor Leadership Training, NC State College of Natural Resources Guides, and Outside Sources

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## 1. Facilitation and Conversation Guidelines

A great way to start is with a **living list**. A living list is a list of ground rules that the group creates that offer guidelines for the group to follow and it offers to you and group members something to reference. It can allow you to facilitate the group experience when/if a difficult situation presents itself within the conversation. The group should construct it based on their own wants and needs for the conversation/learning session.

Examples of guidelines:

1. **Respect Everyone's Voice:** Ensure that everyone has an opportunity to speak without interruption or judgment. Value diverse perspectives and experiences.
2. **Active Listening:** Listen attentively to others without interrupting. Show respect by giving full attention to the speaker and refraining from side conversations.
3. **Speak from Your Own Experience:** Share personal experiences and opinions without assuming them to be universal truths. Use "I" statements to express thoughts and feelings.
4. **Be Open-Minded:** Approach discussions with an open mind and willingness to consider viewpoints different from your own. Avoid preconceived judgments or biases.
5. **Maintain Confidentiality:** Respect the privacy of others by refraining from sharing personal information disclosed during the conversation without permission.
6. **Use Inclusive Language:** Choose language that is inclusive and respectful of all individuals present. Avoid language that may be offensive or exclusionary to certain groups.
7. **Be Mindful of Time:** Stay mindful of time constraints and ensure that everyone has an opportunity to contribute. Avoid dominating the conversation or veering off-topic.
8. **Encourage Constructive Dialogue:** Foster an environment where constructive dialogue is encouraged, and disagreements are handled respectfully. Focus on finding common ground and understanding rather than winning arguments.
9. **Respectful Disagreement:** If you disagree with someone, do so respectfully and without personal attacks. Engage in constructive dialogue to explore differing perspectives.
10. **Acknowledge Privilege and Power Dynamics:** Recognize and address power imbalances and privilege within the group. Ensure that all voices, especially those of marginalized individuals, are heard and valued.
11. **Seek Clarification:** If you do not understand something or need clarification, ask questions respectfully. Avoid making assumptions or misinterpreting others' statements.

## 3. History of Accessibility in the Outdoors

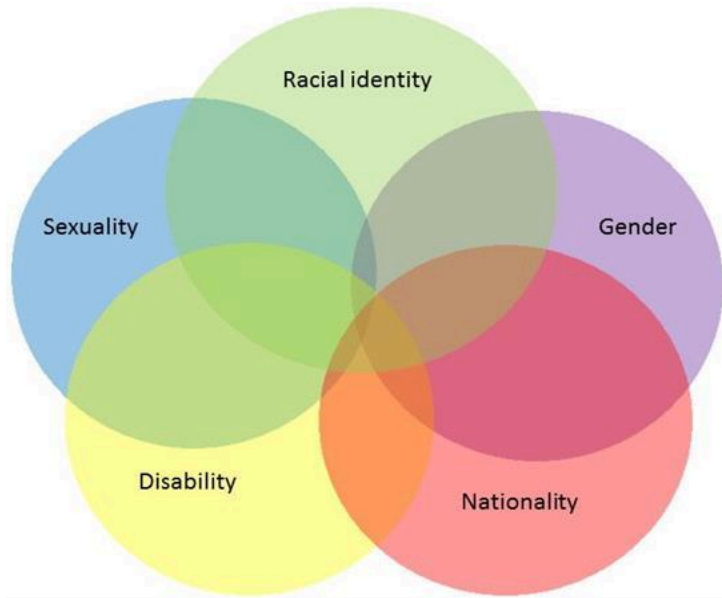
The history of social justice, accessibility, and privilege in outdoor and environmental spaces is complex and deeply intertwined with broader societal dynamics. Colonization and industrialization has led to the exploitation and privatization of natural resources, displacing Indigenous peoples from their lands and restricting access to marginalized communities. The establishment of national parks and conserved natural areas have historically excluded Indigenous peoples and people of color, reflecting racial segregation and discriminatory policies. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and subsequent advocacy efforts prompted increased awareness of environmental justice issues, highlighting the disproportionate environmental burdens on low-income communities and communities of color. Efforts to address environmental inequities have since expanded to encompass broader social justice concerns, including access to green spaces, environmental education, and representation in environmental leadership roles. Movements advocating for diversity, equity, and inclusion in outdoor and environmental spaces have gained momentum in recent years, challenging systemic barriers to access and privilege while promoting inclusivity and empowerment for marginalized communities. However, significant disparities persist, underscoring the ongoing need for intersectional approaches that address the complex interplay of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other axes of identity in shaping experiences of privilege and access in the outdoors and the environment.

While Vermont has made strides in promoting social justice and accessibility in outdoor and environmental spaces, there is still work to be done to address systemic inequities and ensure that all people have equal opportunities to enjoy and benefit from the environment. Continued efforts to center marginalized voices, dismantle barriers to access, and promote inclusive policies and practices are essential for creating a more equitable outdoor space here.

#### **4. Intersectionality**

The term intersectionality was coined in 1989 by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, and put simply, is the concept that **all oppression is linked**.

“The interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage”. Intersectionality is the acknowledgement that **everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression** and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalize people – gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc.”



Source: Coombes, Hannah. "Intersectionality 101: What Is It and Why Is It Important?" *Womankind Worldwide*, 15 Oct. 2020, [www.womankind.org.uk/intersectionality-101-what-is-it-and-why-is-it-important/](http://www.womankind.org.uk/intersectionality-101-what-is-it-and-why-is-it-important/).

## 5. Sexism and Homophobia

Sexism or gender discrimination is the prejudice or discrimination based on a person's sex or gender. Sexism can affect any gender, but it is particularly documented as affecting women and girls. It has been linked to stereotypes and gender roles, and may include the belief that one sex or gender is intrinsically superior to another. Sexism can foster sexual harassment and other forms of sexual assault and violence.

Homophobia is the fear or hatred of homosexuals, often resulting in prejudicial hostility and violence.

There is an underrepresentation of women in outdoor activities and leadership roles, safety concerns and harassment, and stereotypes about women's abilities and interests. Women often encounter barriers to access and participation in outdoor recreation, stemming from societal norms and systemic inequalities. Addressing sexism in these spaces requires challenging gender stereotypes, promoting inclusivity and diversity, and creating environments that empower women to be included and involved. This involves advocating for gender-inclusive gear and facilities, supporting women's leadership in environmental initiatives, and fostering a culture of respect and safety for all people in outdoor settings.

## 6. Racial Exclusion

Racism is a complex system of beliefs and behaviors, grounded in a presumed superiority of the white race. These beliefs and behaviors are conscious and unconscious; personal and institutional, and result in the oppression of people of color and benefit the dominant group, whites. A simpler definition is:

**racial prejudice + power = racism**

Beginning with slavery, a long history of racial oppression, including job discrimination, redlining (refusal from the Federal Housing Administration to insure mortgages in and near Black neighborhoods) and lack of sufficient access to housing, has caused a disparity in income between persons of color and white people. People of color tend to have higher unemployment rates and lower income levels, leading to less disposable income to take trips for outdoor recreation. If you are low income, you don't necessarily have vacation time to take trips to state and national parks.

The lack of diversity and inclusion in outdoor spaces can be traced back to the very beginning of parks, especially to the individuals who created the park system and for what reasons, according to Myron Floyd, dean of the College of Natural Resources and lead author of several studies exploring race and ethnicity in parks and outdoor recreation. Throughout history, parks in the United States have been conceptualized, created and managed by white men who held racist beliefs. People of color were rarely considered to be major stakeholders in outdoor recreation or park-related activities. People of color have experienced segregation from a multitude of outdoor recreation agencies, including the Civilian Conservation Corps and National Park System.

Source: Gosalvez, Emma. "Nature Gap: Why Outdoor Spaces Lack Diversity and Inclusion." *College of Natural Resources News*, 14 Dec. 2020, [cnr.ncsu.edu/news/2020/12/outdoor-diversity-inclusion/](http://cnr.ncsu.edu/news/2020/12/outdoor-diversity-inclusion/).

## 7. Ableism

Ableism is the **discrimination or prejudice against people with apparent or perceived disabilities**, whether they be physical, developmental, or psychological. This system of discrimination manifests itself in an acceptance of norms that serve able-bodied people and disadvantage those who are not-able-bodied. An example of this is holding a class in a building that has no elevator, assuming that everyone is able-bodied and can walk up the stairs.

Some history of disability exclusion in the outdoors:

The Wilderness Act excluded disability because of the emphasis on encounters with “raw” nature as ideal. (Although the act has been interpreted to mean that wheelchair use is not explicitly excluded from wilderness areas, agencies are also not required to make improvements to enhance accessibility.) People who engage in wilderness activities are often considered to be more attuned to the natural environment through these physical experiences, but the bodies that can have these experiences are typically fit, white, cisgender, and

There is also the false assumption that disabled people do not want to be outdoors or recreate on public lands because their [their being disabled people] bodies prevent the “correct” experience. The idea is that the outdoors is inherently inaccessible due to natural features, and therefore if disabled people do want to be outdoors, it must be made accessible for them, usually through making special changes to the built environment. We come up against the idea that disability is un-environmental—that any changes to the built environment negatively affect the natural environment. But this is not true. It has been proven many times that accessibility improvements can reduce the ecological impact that all bodies have on the environment and surrounding areas. For example, paving a popular trail and installing overlooks improves safety and reduces off trail use, and improving trail grade and surface improves soil conditions and reduces run-off. What people fail to acknowledge is that trails, roads, and other features that make public lands accessible to them already have an impact on the environment—this impact is just normalized and accepted.

Source: Anderson, Beryl. “Conservation, Eco-Ableism, and Reclaiming Limitations.” *Sempervirens Fund*, 5 Jan. 2024, [sempervirens.org/news/reclaiming-limitations/](https://sempervirens.org/news/reclaiming-limitations/).

## 8. Classism

Classism is the institutional, cultural, and individual set of practices and beliefs that assign differential value to people **according to their socio-economic class**, and an economic system which creates excessive inequality and causes basic human needs to go unmet.

There are systemic barriers and inequalities that restrict access to natural spaces and outdoor activities based on socioeconomic status. This issue has deep historical roots intertwined with racial and economic oppression. The creation of public parks and protected natural areas in the United States, such as Yellowstone National Park in 1872, was intended to provide recreational opportunities for all citizens. However, over time, economic factors have increasingly limited access to these spaces, as outdoor activities like camping, hiking, and skiing have become expensive hobbies accessible primarily to the affluent.

## 9. Privilege and Domains of Oppression

The term privilege refers to “a right that only some people have access or availability to because of their social group memberships (dominant social groups).

Oppression is the “systemic and pervasive nature of social inequality woven throughout social institutions as well as embedded within individual consciousness.” Oppression fuses institutional and systemic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry, and social prejudice in a complex web of relationships and structures that control most aspects of life in our society.

Oppression permeates all identity “categories,” and certain social groups and social identities can be oppressed by the dominant social group within these “categories.” As discussed in the “Intersectionality” section of this guide, any person can be both oppressed and an oppressor due to the complexity of one’s identity. As stated above, these domains of oppression all operate internally, interpersonally, institutionally, and systemically. Meaning, they are all connected.

Source:

Goodman, Diane. *Oppression and Privilege: Two Sides of the Same Coin*, Journal of Intercultural Communication , 2015, [dianegoodman.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/PrivilegeandOppression.pdf](http://dianegoodman.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/PrivilegeandOppression.pdf).

## **10. Access to National parks**

The National Parks Movement followed a framework and path that was dominated by white leaders and paid little attention to indigenous peoples in the area. Today, National Parks continue to be a predominately white space. According to a 2011 survey, “22% of visitors were minorities, though they make up some 37% of the population.” In the same survey, “nonwhites were more than three times as likely as whites to say that the parks provided poor service and were not safe to visit.” This shows that the idea of National Parks as a white space has persisted into the present day culture, despite attempts from the National Park Service to diversify its visiting population.

One of the reasons underlying these uneven statistics, in addition to the National Park’s historical image as a white movement, is accessibility. Due to high park fees, there is a decreased familiarity of parks amongst minority populations. In addition, about 80% of park service employees in 2014 were white, which can give off the impression that nonwhite populations are not as welcome in these parks. Lastly, incidents over the past decade of racial discrimination amongst park employees suggest that employees may be contributing to this problem, instead of minimizing it.

## **11. Indigenous History in Green and White Mountains in Vermont + Surrounding Areas**

### **Main Points:**

- Indigenous people have lived here for tens of thousands of years, and there is a severe lack of discussion about their erasure and the history of how they were driven away and treated (in history and now!)
- Indigenous people were stewards of the land and had advanced ways to manage the land, and we often draw on their ideas today.
- Important to discuss who was on this land first in Vermont and remember all the people who have inhabited it when we engage in the outdoors.

### **History of the Abekani:**

The Abenaki tribe's reach spanned across what would become New Hampshire into present-day Vermont and Maine. They lived in small bands without a central authority giving them the advantage in wars with neighboring tribes. They sustained themselves primarily through hunting and gathering until about 3000 years ago when the tribe transitioned; they began growing food to supplement that which they hunted and gathered, allowing them to settle and form villages in the region. Through times of war, through times of peace, this is how the people of this region of the world continued to live.

This all changed in the early 16th Century. European contact began when fishermen started to come ashore and trade with the Abenaki tribe. This gave them access to better tools and textiles, but it also introduced them to new diseases like smallpox and influenza. Through the combination of their population being decimated by disease, continued tension and war with enemy tribes, and pressure from Europeans claiming their land as their own, it is estimated that about 90% of the pre-contact Native population had died or moved on to other regions by the mid- 1700's. By the time of the American Revolution, it is likely that less than 1000 Abenaki were left, and many of them had married Europeans or retreated into the rural landscape.

It is in this tragic environment that the Green and White Mountains we are most familiar with came into being. Europeans cleared land to build their communities, opportunists built hotels and lodges to facilitate recreation in the region, and logging companies took advantage of the rich natural forest without regulation or moral misgiving into the 1900's. In doing so, they renamed many of the mountains that, until they arrived, had been filled with Abenaki culture and names. While some Native names survive, nearly all have been erased, either consciously or unconsciously, by Europeans "discovering" the land for the "first" time. Only after massive forest fires and damage to the local watershed occurred as a result of actions by the logging industry—destruction that affected manufacturing facilities to the south—did people clamor for the region's protection.



Questions and Discussion:

- Have you learned about indigenous tribes from Vermont in school? How much or how little? What do you know about their history?

Resources about Abenaki language, maps, culture, books, etc. can be found here:  
<http://www.native-languages.org/abenaki.htm>

Sources:

Maggie Maclean. "Native Americans of New Hampshire." Web log post. *History of American Women*. 9 June 2008. Web. 23 Jan. 2016.  
<<http://www.womenhistoryblog.com/2008/06/native-americans-of-new-hampshire.html>>.

Janice Brown. "New Hampshire's Native Americans: Hiding in Plain Sight." Web log post. *Cow Hampshire*. 10 Aug. 2006. Web. 23 Jan. 2016.  
<<http://www.cowhampshireblog.com/2006/08/10/new->

Abenaki Nation in Vermont: <http://www.abenakitribe.org/>

## 12. Social Justice and Outdoor Accessibility Activities

### Identity Grid:

Follow the instructions below. There are blank boxes so you can fill in other identities you hold that are not prompted here. You do not have to fill in all of the blank boxes.

Categories: Sex, Age, Education Level, Religion, Race, Socioeconomic Status, Gender, Sexual Orientation, Nationality, Ability, etc.

Ability	Race
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Sex	Socioeconomic status
Age	Gender
Education Level	Sexual Orientation

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### **Clap Activity:**

*Purpose:* This is an activity that allows people to share aspects of both visible and invisible privileges or marginalizations and promotes self-awareness and group awareness of these privileges and marginalizations. This is meant to be anonymous.

#### *Materials:*

A list of statements to read aloud. Here is a list of examples, this is generally meant for older teens, so they may be adjusted for younger ages, especially for middle schoolers to be applicable.

1. I have never hiked for five days straight.
2. My parents or I are immigrants to this country.
3. I have never been judged by the color of my skin.
4. I feel that my ability to perform a task has been judged by my physical characteristics.
5. My value system has conflicted with that of my family.
6. I have never feared the possibility of sexual assault for myself.
7. I have been embarrassed because of where I live.
8. I have missed out on social events/gatherings because of my financial situation.
9. I have been in a situation where I have had to hide my social class in order to fit into a group.
10. I have questioned my sexuality.
11. At some point, I have sought or have considered seeking counseling.
12. I have been in a situation where people around me unknowingly make fun of a group with which I identify.
13. My family is making sacrifices for me to be here.
14. My religious beliefs and my sexuality have come into conflict.
15. I have been made to feel that, when speaking in a group situation, I am speaking on behalf of my entire race.
16. I have felt uncomfortable because of my religious beliefs.
17. I am the first in my family to go to college.

18. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial
19. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of people of color.
20. When I was in primary/secondary school, I had free or reduced lunch.
21. At some point in this exercise, I chose not to step in when a statement applied to me.

*Directions:* For this activity, the reader will read numerous statements. If the statement is one that is true for a group member or one that they identify with, they can clap. Everyone's eyes should be closed and this activity is meant to be anonymous. People can also choose to not clap if they don't want to, even if they feel like they identify with that statement. Everyone defines for themselves what certain questions mean and whether to share the statements for which they self- identify with or not. There will be people who choose not to share something when they self- identify with a statement; please know that this is okay.

#### **Four Corners (of Access):**

*Purpose:* To interrogate and deepen our understanding of outdoor access, the concept of "nature", and environmental justice.

#### *Materials:*

Four pieces of paper--one that says "Strongly Agree," "Strongly Disagree," "Agree," and "Disagree" to be taped at four corners of a room.

Tape

A list of statements to read aloud. Some examples:

1. The outdoors are easily accessible.
2. The way we experience the outdoors is inherently political.
3. The social dynamics experienced in the woods reflects the social dynamics experienced in society at large.
5. The fight against climate change is the most important fight in the world.
6. "Nature" in the US is a social construct.

#### **Access/Allyship Snowball:**

*Purpose:* To share personal experiences about what has been a bridge or barrier for them in accessing the outdoors or environmentalism. An alternative prompt would be to discuss the concept of allyship.

#### *Materials:*

Paper, pens/pencils

*Directions:* Sit in a circle and everyone grab a piece of paper and pen/pencil. Everyone writes down an answer to the following question, and puts it in the middle of the circle.

**How have the different aspects of your identity increased or hindered your access to the outdoors?**

**How can we be a more effective ally in difficult situations? What does it mean to be an ally?**

When everyone is done writing, everyone grabs a piece of paper that isn't their own, maintaining confidentiality, and then popcorn shares (not everyone has to share). Then have a group discussion.

### **13. Outline of shorter sessions to do on the Bristol Trail**

This was created in mind for the Bristol Hub! This is a good resource if a classroom would like to utilize the curriculum in a few short sessions.

First session: History of Access and Social Justice in the Outdoors,

This would hopefully occur as a conversation on the Bristol Trail, where I would give some information and then lead it as an open conversation with leading prompts.

I would like to divide this one into 3 parts, starting with a brief history and overview of why I am there and what I want us to talk about, then posing some questions to open up the conversation, and then an activity or two.

History:

- Explanation of land access in Vermont, indigenous land use and acknowledging who has used the land before us and why it's still relevant today.
- Explanation of disparities in access to the outdoors

Open conversation up to their previous knowledge of the outdoors and social justice and access! What have they learned in previous settings (or not learned/lack thereof), in school or other places?

2nd Session:

- Identity Activities: (all optional, some may resonate with a group more than others, all can lead into open conversation of identity)

- Four corners of access → have them go based on strong agree, agree, disagree, strong disagree → read statements to deepen understanding of outdoor access, the concept of “nature”, and environmental justice
- Open this up into group conversation based on their answers!
- Identity Grid → paper with boxes of identity → (race, ability, gender, nationality, religion, etc), ask them to star the identities they think about the most, the least, what they want to learn more about, etc to open up into conversation
- Clap activity → list of statements, reader reads them out, if they identify with the statement they clap, let them know they clap based on what they’re comfortable with, don’t need to clap even if they identify with a statement
- Purpose of clap activity is to share aspects of both visible and invisible privileges or marginalizations and promotes group and self awareness

*Suggested Debrief Questions:*

1. What did you find challenging when filling out the grid/map?
2. What was your thought process as you decided on how to depict your identities (map)?
3. How has your relationship to your identities changed over time?
4. What are some messages (implicit or explicit) you have received about your identity?
5. What are some messages (implicit or explicit) you have received about your relationship to the outdoors?
6. How do multiple identities of yours intersect? To what extent are they separable or inseparable from one another?
7. How has your perception of your social identity or relationship to the outdoors been shaped by the place you live in/other factors?