



Parks Now Principles and Recommendations for Reopening Parks, Beaches, and Natural Areas

Parks, beaches, and natural areas are essential for our health and wellbeing; this is a longstanding truth highlighted by the pandemic. The current public health crisis and shelter-in-place orders increased the public's desire for outdoor recreation opportunities. However, access to safe, welcoming public lands remains deeply inequitable in many areas, especially now that some park closures and limitations have negatively impacted communities that have historically faced barriers to access.

Parks Now is a coalition of California-based organizations and scholars committed to public health and social and environmental justice. We believe that access to parks, the coast, and public lands is fundamental to healthy, vibrant communities. Our mission is to encourage meaningful action towards investing and improving parks and access to the outdoors, especially for California's increasingly diverse, urban, and young population.

As parks, natural areas, and beaches begin to reopen across the state, we urge officials to consider the following principles and recommendations to ensure equitable access for all Californians. Parks Now created these suggestions in response to the reopening of natural assets, but we encourage consideration of these principles and recommendations beyond the pandemic, to ensure equitable access is an ongoing priority.

PRINCIPLES:

1. Everyone in California has a right to enjoy our state's public lands and natural treasures.
2. Low-income populations and communities of color must have access to information that can support an enjoyable trip to the outdoors.
3. Equitable access recognizes, acknowledges, and responds to cultural differences.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The following recommendations are guided by these principles and serve to support managers of parks, beaches, and public lands in the development of equitable reopening plans. These recommendations do not reiterate restrictions, nor supplant or undermine guidelines by the CDC and public health officials on social distancing or ways to reduce risk.

Ensuring equitable access to parks, beaches, and public lands (natural assets) requires an understanding of the communities that use them, how they are used, and the historic barriers that prevent others in the vicinity from enjoying them. These six recommendations are intended to serve as a framework for increasing equitable access as parks reopen and for the long run:

1. Commit to ensuring safe and equitable access.

Work with local public health officials to implement necessary measures to ensure outdoor spaces are safe, open to the public, accessible, and welcoming to all. Many



public health practitioners agree that spending time outside is safe and even encourage it. Now is the time to get creative with available resources to ensure outdoor activities remain accessible. It is critical to ensure parks and beaches are also well staffed to support social distancing and safety protocols.

Questions to consider:

- Have local public health departments and officials been consulted for guidance on necessary measures to protect public health?
- To avoid full closure of sites, what can be done to promote safety and minimize the risk of infection at frequently visited outdoor spaces?
- Is closing parking lots further perpetuating inequitable access?
- Do staff have the necessary protective gear and training?

2. Identify and understand the visitors of the park, natural area, or beach to make informed and sound decisions about restrictions and expectations.

Decisions about access restrictions must account for the needs of the local and regional populations that usually access these natural assets.

Questions to consider:

- What types of people/groups typically visit this location?
- How are current restrictions perpetuating historic inequities?
- How will the visitor base change with new restrictions?
- What accommodations need to be considered for people with disabilities?

3. Communicate with the public before, during and after their visit.

There is no one-size-fits-all response to the pandemic, so it is vital to meaningfully engage the usual and potential users of the natural site. Natural asset managers should understand the level of public awareness regarding COVID-19 restrictions and respond to feedback received. Understanding the needs of the community ensures that restrictions are appropriate and more likely to be respected.

Questions to consider:

- Are restrictions available in multiple languages, multiple platforms, and easily visible upon arrival?
- Are safety instructions available in graphic format?
- Are visitors encouraged to provide feedback to improve services?
- Can you provide real-time information about visitor numbers to discourage overcrowding (for example, via Google Maps)?
- What has been or can be done to ensure public education and awareness of accessibility?



4. Take proactive steps to promote a welcoming and safe space.

Lack of access to parks and the outdoors exists, largely because of institutionalized racism. Policies and restrictions are tools that can be abused to target, exclude, and harass people of color. People of color could be disproportionately subjected to social distancing and mask-wearing enforcement or may be prevented from enjoying many outdoor places. Creating a safe and hate-free space requires staff/ranger training in implicit bias, historic racism, and diversity in general to understand culturally aware and informed uses of outdoor spaces. Staff should be more focused on providing education about COVID-19 safety restrictions and less on enforcement. Park staff should communicate with park police or local police in their jurisdiction, as needed, to ensure the latter does not create an unwelcoming atmosphere through selective, racially biased enforcement of restrictions or by displaying an unjustified aggressive demeanor. Prioritize de-emphasizing police presence and seek alternatives, such as staff from community-based organizations or other public service employees, to serve as ambassadors.

Questions to consider:

- Has leadership communicated with law enforcement to prevent selective, racially biased enforcement of visitors?
- Are there less-intimidating entities, that can be deployed to enforce public safety measures in lieu of law enforcement?
- Has staff received training on cultural humility and trauma-informed care practices?
- Are frontline staff reflective of the diversity of California?

5. Assess current restrictions through an equity lens.

Many restrictions currently in place can further perpetuate unacceptable inequities, sometimes unintended, on marginalized communities. Consider how each restriction might exacerbate lack of access, especially for communities that have traditionally faced barriers to access. Evaluate the implications for accessibility that these restrictions may have over the short and long term. Develop more optimal solutions by seeking guidance from local, community-based recreation and outdoor organizations to ensure natural assets are accessible to all.

Questions to consider:

- What populations are disproportionately being excluded by these restrictions?
- What populations are disproportionately affected by the type of permitted access?
- What changes to current restrictions would result in a more equitable approach?
- Is it feasible to waive parking fees for individuals financially impacted by the pandemic?
- Is it possible to waive special permit fees for nonprofit organizations running programs for groups that traditionally face barriers to access?



6. Create a dialogue of learning with the community, with the intent to improve guidelines and ensure equitable access.

The uncertainty of the current pandemic requires continual learning and flexibility to change restrictions and expectations as the situation evolves. Seeking input from the community can lead to improved access for those that need it most. Parks Now members and other nonprofit organizations working directly with communities can provide a direct connection to the communities that are often excluded from land use decisions.

Questions to consider:

- Have you explored non-traditional partners in your decision-making process?
- Have you reached out to local community organizations for partnerships and input surrounding community needs?
- Are local minority-owned and women-owned business leaders part of the conversation?
- Does the reopening plan acknowledge and respect California Native American Tribes and their sovereignty? Have you engaged with local Tribal leaders in a conversation about your reopening plan?
- Are there ways to partner with local organizations on programming to promote access?

With a massive budget deficit upon us, California state leaders face difficult choices as they figure out how to fund vital public services during the pandemic. At a time when public mental health is strained, and recreation and social connection can take place safely outdoors, Californians need the outdoors more than ever. Considering the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on communities of color, we encourage asset managers to advance equity in parks, which are essential to building healthy and resilient communities.