

# THRIVING NATURAL WORLD

Everyone deserves to live in a clean, healthy environment—one that is free from hazards and emerging pathogens, resilient to future changes, and fulfills our need to connect with nature.

Healthy environments provide clean air, water, land, and well-functioning ecosystems, ensuring people are able to adapt to the inevitable impacts of climate change. Individuals need thriving natural places to feel healthy today—and communities rely on natural systems to support health now and in the future.





# THRIVING NATURAL WORLD

## CHANGING ECOSYSTEMS

**54%** of Black people face a higher health burden from air pollution than the overall population

**2M+** Americans live without running water or a working toilet at home—and Native Americans are more likely than any other group to have trouble accessing water

**1 in 3** households in the United States faces extreme hardships paying energy bills to heat and cool their home, prepare meals, and keep food and medicine secure

**2X** as many Black people suffer heat-related deaths as compared with non-Hispanic White people

*Facts adapted from the Thriving Natural World Deep Dive*

**LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES AND COMMUNITIES OF COLOR** in the United States have experienced disproportionate burdens from environmental hazards, unhealthy land uses, lack of access to parks and green spaces, historical traumas, and other sociodemographic stressors. Communities of Color are more likely to live near sources of toxic air and water pollution, exposing them to a higher risk of serious health problems. These very health conditions—asthma and cardiovascular disease, for example—have now been linked to worse COVID-19 outcomes, underscoring the cumulative nature of vulnerability that is experienced daily by low-income communities and Communities of Color.

A just response and recovery to COVID-19 requires an understanding of the interconnectedness of this global pandemic with issues of income and place-based inequality, environmental degradation, and racism. The loss of ecosystems and habitat, climate change, and other factors are part of the reason for this and future pandemics. Addressing climate change, health inequities, and disparities in access to nature will require transformational change in our policies and systems. We cannot have healthy people without healthy places, and we cannot have healthy places without a thriving natural world.

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### KEY ISSUES

- **Climate change disproportionately impacts the health of low-income communities and Communities of Color.**
- **People of color are more likely to live in neighborhoods with multiple environmental stressors, such as air and water pollution.**
- **Safe running water, energy, and healthy housing are especially necessary** during this pandemic and are basic conditions everyone needs to be healthy and thrive.
- **Low-income communities and Communities of Color are least likely to have access to the public, open spaces** that are critical to well-being, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis, when access to fresh air, sunlight, and exercise while maintaining proper distancing is so important.

# PIVOTAL MOVES

A SELECTION OF IDEAS FOR CHANGING COURSE

## EQUITABLE ACCESS TO PARKS & OPEN SPACE

Cities can adopt a transparent, data-driven, community-led approach to improve the equitable allocation of public resources as part of park and urban open-space development. Parks can contribute to higher land values that lead to gentrification. The positive aspects of parks and open space can only be created if their development is just, equitable, and inclusive in both process and outcome—so that people can stay in place if they so choose.

## TURN EDUCATION INSIDE OUT: GREEN SCHOOLYARDS

Outdoor classrooms can help with social distancing and, over the long term, studies show that exploring, playing, and learning in nature improves academic achievement. Green schoolyards also help address climate change by reducing flooding, loss of pollinator habitat, and heat island impacts. Public schools are one of the largest landholders in most communities and can be incentivized to create more green schoolyards.

Creating more parks and green spaces, including green schoolyards, as part of COVID-19 recovery is an important opportunity to train and employ youth—particularly youth of color who are more likely to be unemployed than White youth.

## NO SHUT OFF

A national moratorium on shutoffs of water, electricity, and gas for residential buildings would ensure all people have basic necessities to be healthy and combat the spread of COVID-19.

## CONNECTIONS

### BASIC NEEDS

Running water and electricity are necessary to be safe and healthy, yet are not affordable for everyone. Residential water rates have increased at three times the rate of inflation over the last decade, and in some cities, such as Flint, MI, water affordability has reached crisis levels.

### PATH TO RENEWAL

Parks, green schoolyards, and other community spaces not only have many health benefits, but they can also strengthen social bonds and social capital, especially when communities are engaged in planning.

ADAPTED FROM THE [THRIVING NATURAL WORLD](#) DEEP DIVE

We need to flip the sequence of events—**create community-driven equity strategies**, implement those strategies, and only then create the asset (park, infrastructure, etc.). In the Bridge Park’s case, by the time the park is expected to open in 2023, we’ll have implemented our equitable development strategies for seven years.

**SCOTT KRATZ**

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WASHINGTON, D.C.



**The 11th Street Bridge Park** in Washington, D.C., brings green infrastructure to a community that lacks it, including stormwater management, native plants and trees, a rooftop farm, meadow, and river garden. The Street Bridge Park project has:

- Created 71 full-time jobs in historically lower-income Wards 7 and 8
- Engaged more than 2,500 residents in tenants’ rights initiatives
- Supported cultural works, like the Black Love Experience featuring music and art
- Harvested more than 7,500 pounds of fresh produce

This model illustrates how green spaces can facilitate equitable community development and ensure a wide range of social, economic, environmental, health, and cultural benefits for all.