

Los Angeles Communities Are Lacking Affordable Access to Nature

By: Jack Mitemeyer

A cool morning breeze; sounds of crunching dirt and heavy breathing fill their ears. A group of friends is hiking the Wisdom Tree trail just behind the Hollywood sign. At the top of the trail are panoramic views of the Hollywood Reservoir and downtown Los Angeles.



Panoramic view from the top of Wisdom Tree Trail. The Hollywood Reservoir and Downtown Los Angeles can be seen on the right side of the picture.

After the hike, they continued their time together over breakfast. For Remigio Mateo, this was the start of a new lifestyle.

“I was just amazed that this was in our backyard. It was such a beautiful view,” Mateo said. “Then being with other people and having breakfast with my friends afterward, that whole experience made me want to go more and more.”

Growing up in Echo Park Los Angeles with both parents working full time, Mateo wasn't connected to nature. Gardens, parks, beaches and mountains always seemed far away because he had no easy way to visit them. Going on hikes wasn't something he would think of doing with his friends.

Mateo's parents are from Guatemala. When he was young, his family would go back to visit. Here, Mateo saw numerous lush green forests. However, he assumed there wasn't anything similar in LA.

Growing up he had always been active, whether going to the gym or playing football. It wasn't until his late 20s, when he went on the Wisdom Tree trail, that he fostered a connection to LA's natural beauty. Mateo and his friends decided to take on the 52 Hike Challenge, a social media dare to do one hike a week for a year. It was a big commitment, but he stuck to it, and as he discovered new trails and took on new challenges his love for the outdoors grew.

"It's just so simple," Mateo said, describing the decision to spend time outdoors. "But it still needs a lot of promotion. I think a lot more people need to know about the benefits."

Natural areas are not distributed evenly around Los Angeles. Many underprivileged communities lack access to nature. A [2021 survey](#) shows that low-income neighborhoods in the US have 70% less park space than high-income neighborhoods do.

Out of 100 cities ranked for park access, Washington D.C. claimed the number one spot with Los Angeles all the way down at 71. If Los Angeles wants to improve then much work needs to be done to improve access to its public parks.

That's especially true for residents of low-income neighborhoods. They have an even harder time accessing LA's natural areas because of the cost and effort to get there.

Mateo, who is now 36, is aware of the difficulty. Although he works full-time as a social worker helping people with special needs, he spends much of his free time helping Angelenos enjoy the outdoors.

“I wish people would realize that it benefits them mentally, physically, and spiritually,” he said.



The trail Mateo took on his first hike of the 52 Hike Challenge.

Organizations Working to Help

Mateo is just one person but there are organizations dedicated to connecting low-income communities to Los Angeles’s natural resources.

One of these organizations is [Nature for All](#). Araceli Hernandez leads its community transit program. The program charters buses to marginalized neighborhoods and takes about 50 people at a time to the San Gabriel Mountains. A bilingual interpreter accompanies the group to educate participants about the land and how to protect it.

Another challenge for many communities, aside from the lack of access, is the lack of accommodation.

“A barrier for a lot of our community members is, let's say, I got on the bus, but nobody speaks my language,” Hernandez said. “I'm not going to get the same information and the same experience as everyone else.”

These trips also serve as an opportunity for people to learn more about the land they live on. The guides who lead the trips often teach about the Native Americans who once inhabited the land. They also discuss the plants, animals or natural resources that visitors see on the trip.

“We believe it's a civil rights concern to be able to access nature,” Hernandez said. This is what drives her and her colleagues to do their work.

Nature for All uses data from [LA County's Parks Needs Assessment](#) to target communities in need. The Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation did this study to understand the varying amounts of park access and space in different communities.

Nature for All also provides training programs for community members who want to learn more about outdoor stewardship. Mateo has taken one of their programs and now helps lead community events.

He recently led a hike at the Audubon Center at Debs Park. Binoculars were provided so attendees could look at birds. Mateo explained that binoculars are expensive and allowing folks to use them provides an opportunity to experience nature in a previously unattainable way.

Health Benefits of Nature

Spending time outdoors comes with a lot of benefits, including boosting people's mental and physical health. This is another reason why Mateo enjoys going on hikes.

"When you go on a hike for two or three hours your mind is more fresh," he said. "It helps you to not be stuck in that rut."

For example, a 90-minute nature walk has been shown to [reduce negative thoughts](#). This study found that those who took nature walks, "reported lower levels of rumination and showed reduced neural activity in an area of the brain linked to risk for mental illness compared with those who walked through an urban environment."

Other studies indicate that spending time outdoors [decreased levels of depression](#). The study concluded that "nature offers huge potential as an easily accessible and cost-effective approach to illness prevention."

Tiffany Wright is a LA-based therapist who specializes in ecotherapy / nature based therapy. This type of therapy involves incorporating nature into one's healing process.

"We've spent more time in nature as a human species that we have inside and connected to technology," she said.

Spending time outdoors helped Wright get through difficult times. "When I was going through a major mourning process, grieving the loss of a parent, I traveled a lot, I hiked a lot and I was in nature a lot," Wright said. "That experience made me realize how grounding nature is for me."

It was after this experience that she decided to incorporate nature into her work because anyone can get its benefits.

“It can even be as simple as walking somewhere, or sitting by a tree, or observing flowers, or engaging your senses through smell, touch, sight and taste,” Wright said. “Maybe you can be outside with an edible plant.”

Nature also provides space for people to be active. In fact, green areas inspire and motivate exercise, which has been shown to [increase levels of](#) enjoyment. This benefits participants in casual activities as much as avid hikers like Mateo.

“Monday to Friday, challenges at work, challenges in school, anything you know,” Mateo said. “I’m not going to be afraid because I just hiked a 12,000 foot mountain.”

The outdoors also helps prevent the spread of diseases. Since the rise of Covid-19, the outdoors has been seen as a good way for friends and family to safely spend time together without the burden of a mask.

For Wright, spending time outdoors is more than just for her own benefit. “For me in a personal way, it’s very important to impede in natural spaces,” Wright said. “It’s not only for myself, but I like to be the representation of someone to say, oh look, Black people do go outdoors, or black people do hike, or they are doing things like canoeing, kayaking and all of this stuff.”

This is similar to Mateo, who since getting more involved in the outdoors, is working to increase representation in the Latino communities.

The Future of Outdoor Access

Community Nature Connection is a Los Angeles organization that seeks to increase diversity in park attendance and park careers. It works to provide pathways for people to pursue the outdoors through training for naturalist, interpretive and outdoor recreation fields. Jobs in these fields help educate people about the natural area they are in and how to help protect the environment.

Marissa Llanes, the organization's executive director, explained that she graduated college with a degree in anthropology and didn't know what career path to pursue. She started at the California Science Center where she worked on their science-based programming. She later heard about the Diverse Outdoor Leaders Institute put on by Outward Bound Adventures, a LA based organization working to increase diversity. Through that program she found an opportunity to work at the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority.

Now she wants to help youth know about the outdoor jobs they can pursue and to foster more diversity in these careers.

Llanes mentioned that one of the program's goals is to educate participants so they can teach members of their communities about the outdoors.

Mateo is a good example of someone who got involved in educating more people. "Every year, every month, there's new people discovering the outdoors, and they love it," Mateo said. "What we need to do is get more of these people to become the next leaders for the future."

Along with working with community members, organizations such as Nature for All work with local governments to provide resources to improve access to public parks. They also try to pass bills that help protect public lands. Nature for All was a leader in

getting former President Barack Obama to designate the San Gabriel Mountains as a National Monument. This designation protects and maintains the area for public use.

Brian Matsumoto, a project manager at Nature for All, is working to create long-term transportation solutions. He is engaged with local and state governments to fund new bus routes that allow people in park-poor communities to access the San Gabriel Mountains.

These buses would connect to the Gold Line and split off to different areas in the mountains. Matsumoto hopes the buses can help with traffic along the mountain roads. He mentioned that the road up the mountains is not very wide, and hikers often park on the side of the road. This can cause traffic jams and may even get in the way of emergency vehicles.

The new routes would also allow people to visit the parks when they want. They would not be dependent on a scheduled bus trip organized by Nature for All or Community Nature Connection.

However, it takes a lot of time and funding to get projects off the ground.

“In our field, there's not a lot of competition,” Matsumoto said. “LA is such a huge area, and the need is so wide and so deep, that if we could clone all our organizations, it'd be great because we just need more people working on this stuff.”

As more people take part in the organization's educational programs there will be more people like Mateo equipped with the knowledge to help solve the issue of outdoor access.

Since taking part in the 52 Hike Challenge Mateo has moved on to climb mountains. He has climbed peaks around LA, hiked across the Alps and climbed Mt. Fuji.

These treks give him something to look forward to and motivate him to save up money. When he goes on hiking trips he posts pictures to his [Instagram](#).

“People see these things and like oh my god, it's so beautiful,” Mateo said. “It motivates people to also want to go and try this stuff.”

On top of that, he started a website called [Adventure is Calling Me, where](#) he posts blogs about the outdoors and his experiences. He also sells merchandise to help support him.

As the struggle for accessible nature spaces persists, Mateo along with the organizations continue their work. Mateo is currently training and planning to hike Mt. Kilimanjaro next year.

Until then he still enjoys spending time in the mountains around LA.

“I'm very fortunate and I'm grateful for my health,” Mateo said. “Whenever I'm out there just blessed and grateful that I'm able to live in a beautiful city, that even though there's crime and poverty and across the city, I'm able to find peace here.”



The Wisdom Tree at the top of the trail that sparked Mateo's love for the outdoors