



EXPLORE OUTDOORS SAINT PAUL

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The Explore Outdoors Saint Paul initiative is a cross agency commitment to promoting equitable nature access for young people in Saint Paul through programming, partnerships, and policy.

Explore Outdoors Saint Paul reflects the pillars of the Saint Paul 2040 Comprehensive plan emphasizing:

Equity and opportunity.
Celebrating parks.
Health.
And Integration and coordination.

“The best part about camping was my kids getting out of their comfort zones and being in the outdoors – it felt empowering.”

— Ahmed, Parent



Benefits of Nature

Research shows that time spent outside makes young people happier, healthier and smarter. Yet, today, children spend an average of 6-7 hours a day in front of screens. They spend an average of seven minutes in unstructured outdoor play.

Learning in nature supports improved relationship skills, reduces stress and anger, and improves focus and creativity in children, especially for children of color or low-income communities. Time spent outdoors promotes physical well-being including better health for expecting mothers, and lower rates of obesity in adolescents. Promoting equitable access to green space counteracts disparities in health and academic outcomes.¹

The Explore Outdoors Saint Paul initiative addresses this discrepancy by providing nature-oriented resources, access to green space, and nature programming across the community. Through our programs, we introduce more families to camping and our terrific park system. Since children living in poverty are increasingly isolated from healthy outdoor environments, Nature Smart focuses on providing the proven benefits of nature to those who need it most.

This cross-agency work group demonstrates an integrated approach to promoting nature learning in Saint Paul. Stakeholders from the Mayor's Office, Saint Paul Parks & Recreation (SPPR), and Saint Paul Public Library (SPPL) work in close step with myriad community partners to promote healthy learning outside.

Regular time spent playing and learning outside enhances children's physical and mental health, social emotional skills, and academic outcomes—and inspires environmental stewardship. These benefits reflect an overall vision of making Saint Paul the most livable city. The Explore Outdoors initiative helps Saint Paul accomplish that vision!

About Explore Outdoors Saint Paul

The Explore Outdoors Saint Paul initiative in the City of Saint Paul is an interagency effort to champion a nature-oriented mindset across youth programs.

The goal of the Explore Outdoors work group is to promote equity-based nature programming across the City of Saint Paul.

This work group supports a number of city-wide programs including training for youth serving staff, Nature Smart Libraries, The YMCA Mobile Camp at Hidden Falls and Phalen regional parks, Urban Camping, Summer Space Outside with SPPR, and the proposed Mississippi River Learning Center.

Nature Training for Youth Serving Staff

The Explore Outdoors Saint Paul work group is providing nature-oriented training for youth serving staff across city programs, with an emphasis on SPPR and SPPL.

Last fall our training series included six workshops, including nature play and urban ecology. There were 51 participants from different organizations including SPPR, SPPL, Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS), the YMCA, and the Sprockets Network.

The outcomes of these trainings include:

1. Greater understanding of the nature learning mindset
2. Comfort with a specific theme around sustainability and the environment
3. Participation in a clear hands on activity
4. Take home resources for educators to lead this activity foregrounding the environment and sustainability at their home site

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

6

Established six nationally-recognized Nature Smart libraries

450

Launched mobile summer camp for 450 Saint Paul youth to learn in nature

200

Introduced 200 people from across Saint Paul to urban camping

76

Provided four trainings for 76 youth serving staffing on hands-on nature oriented activities

Transitioned all recreation services outside in response to COVID-19; Worked to establish Mississippi River Learning Center; and developed the Nature in the City Comprehensive Plan .

¹ <https://www.childrenandnature.org/resources/category/benefits-of-nature/>

NATURE SMART LIBRARIES



SUN RAY LIBRARY BEE HIVES Sun Ray Library installed a pollinator prairie garden and an outdoor reading garden. They also began providing a new collection of activities that promote literacy and environmental education through fun, hands-on learning for children, youth, and families. The goal was to offer nature experiences to families who don't normally have opportunities to explore nature.

About Nature Smart Libraries

Research shows that time spent outside makes young people happier. Nature Smart Libraries bring the benefits of nature to already established community centers – the library. Nature Smart Libraries in Saint Paul offer access to green space, resources for exploring nature, and nature-based programming.

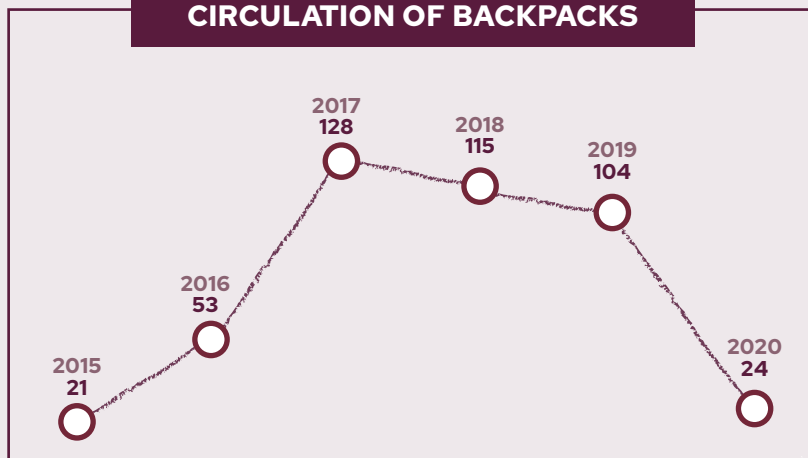
The Nature Adventure Backpacks were the beginning of the program at Sun Ray Library, offering outdoor activities, alongside gear, and staff guidance. Today, librarians at the Sun Ray maintain kits of outdoor activities available to encourage young people to take a break from computer games and “Go Outside.” This intersection of hands-on learning through resources, access to green space, and intentionally designed programming is the core of the Nature Smart initiative.

Nature Smart Backpacks

The Nature Smart Backpacks are available across the City of Saint Paul. Today, Nature Smart Library locations — Hamline Midway, Highland Park, Merriam Park, Riverview, Saint Anthony Park, and Sun Ray — offer Nature Smart backpacks to check out with books and activities on selected themes such as monarchs, trees, and birds. These libraries also have a garden or outdoor space where families can explore nature and put those nature-themed backpack materials to good use!



CIRCULATION OF BACKPACKS



STORY STROLLS



Get in touch with us at exploreoutdoors@ci.stpaul.mn.us.

About Story Strolls

In an effort to provide safe and socially distanced learning outdoors Saint Paul Public Library (SPPL), Saint Paul Parks & Recreation (SPPR), and Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) worked together to produce oversized story books, and install them in parks. We began by meeting with peer libraries and counties leading similar programs, to develop a proposal. From there, we offered recommendations regarding safety and engagement. We updated our signage to make sure families enjoyed these oversized picture books in a safe manner. Then we worked with publishers to develop four new stories that feature diverse characters in nature prioritizing diverse authors.

By leveraging partnerships with libraries, schools, and parks, we were able to champion an equity focus, targeting parks in areas with high concentrations of students receiving free and reduced lunch, and working to ensure diverse representation in our story strolls. Additionally, by working with SPPR to deliver these story strolls at meal pickup sites, and sites of summer programming, we brought stories to our community where they were already congregating.

As a result, we have deployed stories in four city parks beginning in June, 2020. We've developed four new oversized stories to share in parks with diverse authors and characters. And we've leveraged our partnerships to provide engaging and safe programming with an equity lens during this time of crisis.

Winter Snowshoe Story Stroll

On January 30, 2021, Saint Paul families came together for a winter Story Stroll, Dakota People in Winter, walking on snowshoes from page to page. This story, created in partnership between Lower Phalen Creek Project, Saint Paul Parks and Recreation, and the Capitol Region Watershed District shares the knowledge and history of how Dakota People relate to the winter and water. Families learned the Dakota names for the seasons and how Dakota people enjoy the winter. This event took place outside the Sun Ray Library.

STORY STROLL HOURS (SUMMER 2020)

4

Total Number of Sites

160

Total Story Stroll Presentations

1280

Total hours of Story Stroll Presentations





YMCA MOBILE CAMPS

Get in touch with us at exploreoutdoors@ci.stpaul.mn.us.

YMCA Mobile Camps

In 2017, the City of Saint Paul partnered with the YMCA of the Greater Twin Cities and the National Park Service to host a day camp at the Hidden Falls Regional Park. In the first year, more than 150 campers from non-profit partners visited the park for hikes, fort building, fishing, arts and crafts, environmental education, camp games, canoeing, climbing and more. Since then, the program has expanded to serve 450 youth.

Young people from the City of Saint Paul are invited to explore nature in the incredible environment so close to home. The Mississippi River provides a great classroom for learning about the outdoors. Youth learn to canoe, participate in team sports, arts and crafts and more. For many, this is their first time engaging in these nature activities.

This exciting partnership is one of the pillars of the City's efforts to expand access to nature learning for all young people – especially those who would otherwise not have the opportunity.

While this has all the trappings of a traditional nature day camp, the past two years have seen an increased focus on relationship building between YMCA staff and campers. According to Niall Murton, the Camp Director, "Campers spend multiple hours with their peers, sharing meals, engaging in hands-on science, and learning about the ecology of the outdoors. This format allows students to, not only connect with nearby green spaces and natural resources, but it also provides opportunities to develop social interactions, communication, and relationships with each other. After all, the key to learning is relationships."

MOBILE CAMPS (2017-2019)

2017

One week of camp at Hidden Falls with **110 campers**

2018

Two weeks total at Hidden Falls Lake Phalen with **191 Campers**

2019

Two weeks at Hidden Falls and one week at Lake Phalen with **258 campers**





URBAN FAMILY CAMPING

Get in touch with us at exploreoutdoors@ci.stpaul.mn.us.

Urban Family Camping

Through a partnership with Wilderness Inquiry and Great River Passage, Saint Paul Parks and Recreation (SPPR) works to expand the access of outdoor education and camping for families across the city.

Beginning in 2017, this initiative focuses on special camping events at three tiers: (1) Within neighborhood recreation centers; (2) At local and regional parks; and (3), through a three day canoeing and camping trip along the Saint Croix River.

Objectives include:

- Create greater knowledge of, access to, and leadership opportunities within outdoor recreation for communities that have been historically marginalized and underrepresented in nature.
- Build new traditions for intergenerational recreation, deepening relationships to each other and to Saint Paul's wilderness.
- Remove barriers to outdoor recreation and spending time in nature.
- Support family and community health and well-being and promote a culture of care and respect for the environment.

From the 2017 launch there has been steady expansion of the program:

FAMILY TRIPS (2018-2019)

2018: 172 campers

1 indoor trip (84 people)
3 one-night trips
1 two-night trip

2019: 157 campers

1 indoor trip (63 people)
3 one-night trips
1 two-night trip

Outdoor Recreation Programming

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Saint Paul Parks and Recreation shifted programming outdoors for the summer of 2020.

In the summer of 2020, Summer Space offered young people structured activities that encouraged connection while maintaining the "space" to allow for social distancing. Curriculum was written by youth workers and shared across all 17 Summer Space sites. Each day included an activity specifically and intentionally designed for connecting young people with nature.





BIPOC FAMILY PROGRAMMING

Get in touch with us at exploreoutdoors@ci.stpaul.mn.us.

Black Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) Family Nature Club

The Black Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) Family Nature Club launched in April 2021 with the goal of connecting BIPOC families with young children, birth to age six, with nature and one another. Racialized trauma is harmful to the health and well being of BIPOC communities and with the pandemic exacerbating social conditions, we believe BIPOC communities need healing and restorative spaces for connection and decompression more than ever.

At Family Nature Club, we want to gather and connect BIPOC children and their families to receive the unequivocal message, “You belong here. We belong here. Together.” Family Nature Club always includes a circling opportunity, which begins with the recognition of the Dakota people and unceded land upon which we gather, self/family introductions, snack time and “Solidarity Storytime” - an opportunity to read children’s literature that centers BIPOC representation and reflects a range of themes: from nature and emotions to justice and solidarity.

Embedded into our Family Nature Club format is ample time for child-led play and exploration outdoors. On average, and in compliance with current CDC regulations due to COVID, each Family Nature Club gathers four families, ranging anywhere from 5-10 children and 4-6 adults.



Latinx Family Hiking

Latinx Family Hiking kicked off in 2021, after an invitation went out to the community offering paid positions to lead nature-based programming for youth and families. The Latinx Family Hiking program was designed entirely with community input and is led in Spanish by a native Spanish speaker. It focuses on connecting families to nature, teaching them how to feel comfortable and safe in the outdoors, and promoting physical activity and emotional wellbeing through being outside in nature.

While the term family is broad, we make sure to say that our definition of family includes at least one caring adult and one young person, even if they don’t live in the same household. Each outing starts with a welcome and introductions, followed by a land acknowledgement and a hike in which the pre-planned route can easily be adapted as needed by any youth or adult participant.

The children are encouraged to explore, ask questions, and expand their knowledge by being curious along the way. At the end of every hike, each family has learned something new and has deepened their connection to nature and to one another. Latinx Family Hiking is the first of what we hope will be more family nature programs to be led in a language other than English.



MISSISSIPPI RIVER LEARNING CENTER



Get in touch with us at exploreoutdoors@ci.stpaul.mn.us.

About Mississippi River Learning Center

We are connecting our two greatest assets — our people and the Mississippi River.

Saint Paul is one of only two capital cities along the 2,300 miles of river and the city with the largest amount of river and riverfront. With 3,500 acres of riverside parkland, 17-river-adjacent parks, six major trails, and five historic and preserved sites, the Mississippi River is a well-used and well-loved asset in Saint Paul. More than 4 million people visit parks along the river annually and 30,000 school-aged children visit the river annually for environmental experiences.

The Mississippi River is the largest, most complex floodplain river ecosystem in the northern hemisphere. The fourth largest watershed in the world, the river serves as an important migration and flyway route for birds and habitat for animals. The river also is an economic engine in Saint Paul. Four terminals owned and managed by the Saint Paul Port Authority are home to 30 businesses, nearly 750 jobs and a \$51 million payroll.

Great River Passage is both the 17 miles of the Mississippi River that flows through and defines Saint Paul and a City-led initiative to enhance, better connect and to steward one of the three great rivers of the world and its surrounding natural and built environments.



PROJECT SUMMARY

Project Goals

- » Create the next generation of park users and river stewards
- » Transform what is now a strategic but underutilized, isolated edge of Saint Paul to an accessible regional center of activity
- » Leverage the Mississippi River, the naturalized urban location, and public and private partnerships to stimulate economic development and act as a catalyst for future strategic development to improve quality of life for the community and health of the river

Project Benefits

Economic

Create jobs in design, construction, maintenance and operations, education, recreation, food and marine services. Develop strategic partnerships for revenue-generating opportunities and cost sharing. Leverage public dollars for private investment

Health and Wellness

Develop year-round environmental, cultural and historical education and recreation opportunities that are integrated into the community and region's routines, traditions and collective identity. Cultivate a constituency that values the river and will care for it in the future.

Identity

Minnesota's identity and well-being is inextricably linked to the Mississippi River. The River Learning Center is an opportunity to:

- » Build on the history and interconnectedness to the river
- » Create an authentic, signature destination that positions the state nationally, and internationally and
- » Improve the quality of life for residents and visitors

Accomplishments to Date

- » Securing public and private support for the River Learning Center (2017)
- » Completing technical study (2017) and feasibility analysis (2018)
- » Compiling a programming survey that includes year-round program offerings, partners and space needs (2019)
- » Signing a General Agreement outlining the City and National Park Service partnership in pursuit of the project (January 2020)

Project Timeline, Deliverables, and Budget

- » **July - September 2020 (\$1,350,000):** Design- Concept, schematic design, design development and construction documents
- » **April 2021-April 2022 (\$500,000):** Site Evaluation - Survey, testing, permitting
- » **May-September 2022 (\$1,150,000):** Site Clearing and Stabilization- Clean-up of marina site

TOTAL BUDGET: \$3,000,000

Thank you to our partners

Capitol Region Watershed District **Capitol Region Watershed District (CRWD)** is dedicated to protecting, managing and improving the water resources of the District, which includes parts of Falcon Heights, Lauderdale, Maplewood, Roseville and Saint Paul, Minnesota. All of the District's lakes, including Como Lake, Crosby and Little Crosby Lakes, Loeb Lake and Lake McCarrons, eventually flow into the Mississippi River. CRWD works across geographic and political boundaries to protect the health of the District's wetlands, lakes, streams and river. Through research, planning and action, CRWD helps solve and prevent water-related problems within the 40 square-mile District. Learn more at capitolregionwd.org.

The Children & Nature Network was founded in 2006 by a group of educators, writers, and community leaders who share a deep concern about children's disconnection from nature. The Children & Nature Network was created to encourage and support the people and organizations working to reconnect children with nature. The organization provides access to the latest news and research in the field and a peer-to-peer network of researchers and individuals, educators and organizations dedicated to children's health and well-being. Based in Minneapolis, MN. Learn more at childrenandnature.org.

The Children and Nature Network Natural Leaders Initiative is building a network of diverse young leaders working to increase equitable access to nature in their communities. It provides training, ongoing support and peer-to-peer mentoring for this growing network. To date, they have trained more than 200 Natural Leaders working in 178 communities in 47 states in 4 countries. Learn more at childrenandnature.org/initiatives/natural-leaders.

CommonBond Communities is an affordable housing nonprofit that creates communities throughout Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa to help people of all ages and walks of life meet their goals and thrive. With nearly five decades of working with vulnerable populations, they know that when people have stability in their homes, children do better in school, teens graduate, adults find jobs with wages to support their families, and older adults maintain their independence. CommonBond Communities: Affordable Housing Nonprofit MN, WI and IA

The Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN) initiative helps city leaders and their partners ensure that all children have the opportunity to play, learn and grow in nature, from urban parks and community gardens to the great outdoors. Based in Washington, DC as part of the National League of Cities. Learn more at nlc.org/cities-connecting-children-to-nature .

Great River Passage Conservancy is working in partnership with the City of Saint Paul's Great River Passage Initiative to lead advocacy and private fundraising efforts for capital projects along Saint Paul's 17 miles of the Mississippi River. By advancing major projects along the Mississippi River that allow people to experience the river in new ways, the Great River Passage Conservancy fosters environmental stewardship, community health and economic development. Great River Passage – Saint Paul's 17-mile Stretch of the Mississippi River!

Growing West Side Seed Library was launched at the beginning of 2014 by a group of neighbors from the West Side neighborhood of St. Paul, Minnesota. They were already working together on a number of projects in their community, under the banner of Growing West Side, when the library was formed. Other initiatives include a Farmers Market, a community orchard, and a collaborative gardening project called Beans on the Boulevard. The different strands of their program have grown together and have helped the group to build awareness and support in their neighborhood. Based in Saint Paul, MN. Learn more at seeddiversity.wordpress.com/portfolio/growing-west-side.

Minnesota Children and Nature Connection (MN-CNC) is an alliance of individuals, organizations, and communities engaged in a movement to connect children and families to nature. MN-CNC seeks to build awareness of the developmental, social, emotional and health benefits of connecting children and families to the natural world. Based in the Twin Cities. Learn more at mncnc.org.

Mississippi Park Connection provides opportunities for people to get to and on the river—and have a national park experience in the Twin Cities. In partnership with the National Park Service, our youth education, community engagement, and environmental stewardship programs connect people to their national park. [Mississippi Park Connection](http://MississippiParkConnection.org)

The **National Park Service** preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world. Learn more at nps.gov.

Pollinate Minnesota is working toward a better Minnesota for pollinators and people. They teach immersive education classes, establish educational hives with community partners, and advocate at the local, state and federal level for pollinator-friendly policies. Based in the Twin Cities. Learn more at pollinatemn.org.

Saint Paul Parks and Recreation. Saint Paul is an ecosystem with many diverse and interconnected parts that rely on each other to survive and thrive. Our ecosystem fares best when all people understand the relationships between human and natural systems and the actions that we can all take to support a holistically healthy ecosystem. We offer a variety of activities throughout the year for folks to discover, celebrate, and protect the natural resources of our city.

Saint Paul Public Library is the cornerstone of a thriving city. There are 13 locations across the city and a Bookmobile. The Nature Smart Libraries initiative provides access for children to interact with nature at six neighborhood libraries: Hamline, Highland, Merriam, Riverview, Saint Anthony, and Sun Ray. Nature Smart libraries provide circulating nature-oriented resources, access to green space, and nature programming.

Tree Trust **Tree Trust** was created in 1976 to address two problems in our communities: the devastation of the urban tree canopy due to Dutch elm disease and the high unemployment and poverty rates for youth and adults at the time. We began combating these issues by hiring unemployed individuals and training them to plant trees and reforest the Twin Cities. Since then, we have expanded to offer integrated JobPrep programs, community forestry and environmental education programs. Today, our mission is to improve the community environment by investing in people.

The University of Saint Thomas Students have managed garden projects across Saint Paul, MN. In 2014 these students received a grant from the St. Thomas Campus Sustainability Fund to launch a project called Growing Science. They worked with the Saint Paul Parks and Recreation Department to establish garden sites at two Saint Paul community centers, West 7th and Conway. Learn more at stthomas.edu .

Wells Fargo Green Teams. Groups of Wells Fargo employees, organized around environmental and sustainability-related community service projects. Based in the Twin Cities.

Since 1978, **Wilderness Inquiry** has served more than 500,000 people and leads the outdoor recreation industry in providing equitable access to outdoor adventures throughout North America and around the world. Headquartered in Minneapolis, Wilderness Inquiry owns a basecamp on the south shore of Lake Superior, operates in 32 states and 10 countries, and promotes inclusion, active learning, and meaningful connections to the natural world. Each year they serve 40,000 people. Learn more at wildernessinquiry.org.

The YMCA has partnered with the City of St. Paul to bring Day Camp into the City! Located on the mighty Mississippi River, Hidden Falls Regional Park is the perfect place to learn about the city's water source and explore the great outdoors. With the National Park Service as partners, campers will get to meet a Park Ranger and learn how to care for this precious natural resource. And no, YMCA Day Camp would not be complete without traditional camp activities such as Canoeing, Archery, Shelter Building and Fishing. The best part of this experience is that campers will learn how to experience recreation in a park that is open every day all year! Learn more at ymcanorth.org.