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A CALL TO ACTION: EQUITY IN OUTDOOR RUNNING

By Sophie Smith

Outdoor running has become an increasingly popular form of exercise that is known to benefit both physical and mental health, and it is often presented as the ‘most accessible sport’

Due to its simplicity, both recreational and competitive running are mistaken as easily affordable, accessible, and as a sport that requires a minimal amount of gear compared to other sports. However, running is not separate from the context of environmental justice, also known as intersectional environmentalism. Vic Thasiah, founder and Executive Director For Public Lands, in *Trail Runner Magazine* says, “To me, environmental justice has to do with recognition, remediation, and reparations... [it’s] about restoring environments, communities, livelihoods, cultures, etc.” Looking at running through an environmental justice lens, emphasizes how access to safe outdoor spaces for physical activity is not only a matter of personal health but also a crucial component of social and environmental equity. It turns out that there are more barriers than simply finding the right pair of shoes for outdoor running.

I started running during a period when the running community was advocating for greater equity. Around a year after I joined the sport, in 2019, my high

school coach guided our women’s team, encouraging us to embrace our individuality and not compare ourselves to our male counterparts. Coach Markham has helped to dismantle the idea that women in running are just smaller versions of men. Lauren Fleshman, author of *Good For a Girl: A Woman Running in a Man’s World*, emphasizes that “Title IX opened a door fifty years ago that can never be closed again, but equality doesn’t end at the equal right to pay. True equality in sports, like any other industry, requires rebuilding systems so there’s an equal chance to thrive.” (Fleshman, 257)

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To ensure that runners have an equitable opportunity to thrive in both their community and sport, the presence of safe and accessible trails and urban areas is indispensable. Unfortunately, many urban areas face environmental injustices where marginalized communities often lack access to such spaces. A study published in *Trail Runner Magazine* in August 2023 revealed, “56% of Black and

brown runners saying they always feel safe at trail races compared to 80% of white runners.” The study also highlighted that Black and brown runners, who reported feeling 56% safe on trails, experienced even greater concerns about safety when participating in urban running. The availability of safe running spaces for Black, indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) is a crucial part of making the sport more inclusive. By recognizing and actively addressing these issues, we can promote not only individual well-being but also contribute to a more sustainable and just society. Equity in outdoor running goes beyond just gear - it involves guaranteeing access to secure outdoor spaces in trails and urban areas, particularly for marginalized communities.

In the book, *Planet Work: Learning to play in the Anthropocene*, authors Will Elliot and Kevin Maier stress the vital role of leisure activities, particularly those linked to outdoor recreation. They contend, “Leisure activities, especially those related to outdoor recreation offer important sites of inquiry because they form the basis of many people’s concrete experiences of climate change.” (Elliot and Maier, 2022) This underscores the idea that such pursuits provide valuable insights into how individuals directly experience the effects of climate change.



It is also important to recognize that climate action transcends individual impacts, encompassing the advocacy for equal access to outdoor systems.

The intersection of my running journey and the principles of environmental justice highlights a shared responsibility.

Integrating running into a broader environmental narrative serves to connect with communities and empower individuals.

Community engagement is essential for initiatives focused on revitalizing the environment and creating safe spaces.

To make running truly inclusive, these root issues need to be tackled. The call to action is clear: to advocate for the creation of safe, accessible trails and urban spaces that cater to all, transcending racial and economic divides.