Why outdoor recreation matters for Baltimore and beyond

By Clifton H. Harcum Sr.

This October, I will be speaking at the Maryland Outdoor Recreation Summit, and I am grateful to be home, showing Baltimore how outdoor experiences can reshape our health, confidence and community.

I grew up in Baltimore City. For me, nature was a patch of grass by a rowhouse, the blacktop around a rec center or the swings at a neighborhood park. Hiking trails and riverbanks were not part of my everyday life, and the outdoors felt distant and almost off-limits. I shared that feeling in a Sports Illustrated profile when I described being raised in a city environment with playgrounds in the '80s and '90s, and how the outdoors was not part of my world. That feeling was real, and it is one I carry with me as motivation.

My first nature-led group trip was both exhilarating and frightening. On an alternative spring break, I took students to a trail beside the lake. I was nervous, worried everyone would be bored or uncomfortable. But that day, under quiet open skies, one student paused during a nature walk and said, "I have never felt this kind of peace before." Another, watching a heron rise across the marsh, whispered, "I did not know I needed this until now." Those simple moments confirmed what I now believe. Outdoor recreation is not just about adventure. It is about healing, confidence and belonging.

Research supports what our hearts tell us. A 2022 scoping review conducted by Imperial College London and NHS Wales found that nearly all studies on nature-based interventions reported improved mental health outcomes. Harvard researchers have also shown that even brief daily time outdoors reduces stress and sharpens focus. For children, outdoor play builds resilience, stronger social skills and healthier bodies. These benefits do not require expensive gear or long-distance travel. They can begin with a short walk in the park, a quiet moment under a tree or fishing at a local pond.

Here in Baltimore, nature is closer than many realize. Druid Hill Park, Patterson Park and the Gwynns Falls Trail offer open air and calm within the city. Just beyond, Gunpowder Falls and Patapsco Valley State Park provide opportunities for fishing, camping and hiking at little or no cost. And in nearby Baltimore County, Rocky Point Park and Beach offers one of the region's only public beaches, along with a fishing pier, boat ramps and wide views of the Chesapeake Bay. These are everyday entry points to better health.

Other cities show how outdoor access can be simple and inclusive. In Philadelphia, family nature days invite children and parents to explore parks together. In Chicago, "Camping in the Parks" introduces first-time campers to tents and night skies right in their neighborhoods. In Detroit, community groups host regular fishing trips and guided hikes that bring nature directly to families. If those cities can weave outdoor time into daily life, Baltimore can too.

That is why I launched the Live Now! movement. Whether it is rafting, zip-lining or a quiet mile on a shaded trail, I have seen students, educators and families discover strength and belonging together. What works in upstate New York and on the Eastern Shore can work in Baltimore neighborhoods as well.

And I am proud to be back home, representing a positive Black male who is working to make a difference in the community. I am Baltimore strong, and I want others to see that they belong in outdoor spaces as well.

Baltimore is resilient. Outdoor recreation can be part of how we strengthen that resilience, not just in our bodies but in our hearts and in our communities.

Get outdoors, try something different. Live Now!

Clifton H. Harcum Sr., a Baltimore native, is an author, educator and higher education administrator. He is the founder of the Live Now! movement, which blends outdoor recreation, wellness and empowerment to expand access for first-generation and underrepresented communities.