

Jose Gonzalez: As California grows, our parks must keep pace

BY JOSE GONZALEZ

For too many Latinos growing up in the Central Valley, Yosemite National Park's world-renowned beauty is just a backdrop and sometimes just a name — a wonder they may never get to enjoy.

There are many reasons why only 11% of Yosemite's visitors are Latinos in a state where they make up 38% of the population: prohibitive costs, transportation challenges, and a sense that they don't belong.

This needs to change. Yosemite is one of many examples for communities in the Central Valley, which generally suffer from a lack of green, open spaces. Despite being a gateway to some of our nation's most treasured parks, too few public lands in the Central Valley are easily accessible to the majority of people.

As California and its communities face critical milestones in the future of our parks, we need to fight for equal and equitable access to green space. We need Latino communities to be invested in the stewardship of our natural resources. And we need to make sure our park leaders listen to how Latino communities want to connect with our parks.

Luckily, change is underway. My organization, Latino Outdoors, is helping new communities connect with recreational places throughout California. And we are teaming up with other park advocates in a new coalition called Parks Now to ensure that the message of inclusiveness and innovation is reflected in park policy.

Parks Now was founded by a broad group of community activists, environmentalists, students, and others who believe that all Californians deserve:

- Parks that meet the needs of an increasingly urban, diverse, and young California.
- Parks that are safe, well-kept, and readily accessible to our communities.
- A parks workforce and leadership that reflects California's diverse communities and listens to the needs of the public

Members of Parks Now include prominent leaders like Ed Norton Sr., Rue Mapp of Outdoor Afro, and talk show host Tavis Smiley.

Going forward, our plan is to finally have a conversation focused on public health benefits that parks provide and the right to equitable access for all communities. We believe that by bringing this conversation to the forefront, we will encourage elected leaders throughout the state to finally take meaning action towards improving our parks system.

Our first opportunity for action is right around the corner. Recently, the Parks Forward Commission issued recommendations for an ambitious transformation of California's parks.

The Parks Forward Commission plan calls for modern parks that do more to attract diverse, young and urban users, and recommends a management overhaul to make park staff more responsive to users' needs. The plan recognizes that state parks do not reflect the current face of California, and that more work needs to be done to attract new visitors who will become the future champions of nature and recreation.

It is important that our state leaders expeditiously implement the Parks Forward recommendations. By taking real action to advance the Commission's ambitious park vision, the Department of Parks and Recreation and park partners can elevate the importance of park issues at all levels of government. By bringing these issues to the forefront of a public conversation, we can start taking steps to connect parks to the communities that need them most.

When Latino Outdoors leaders take people to places like Caswell Memorial State Park and Calaveras Big Trees State Park for their first time, we also instill a message of urgency about the need to get involved in park advocacy. The young girl who goes on her first wilderness hike and a mother who experiences the calming respite of the outdoors are also the future leaders who will fight to increase green space across our communities. They care, we care and there is a role we can all play.

We need 21st century parks now. All Californians need and deserve access to the best our state has to offer. Now is the time to make this vision for California parks a reality.

Jose Gonzalez, who grew up in Turlock and Tulare, is the founder of founded Latino Outdoors, a volunteer-run organization that connects Latino youth and families to recreational opportunities. The organization has volunteer leaders in Modesto, Los Angeles, Riverside, the Bay Area, Sacramento and Humboldt, and plans to expand to Fresno and other communities soon.

Read more here: <http://www.fresnobee.com/2015/02/15/4378335/jose-gonzalez-as-california-grows.html#storylink=cpy>