

**ENHANCING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVITY IN THE  
OUTDOOR INDUSTRY**

by  
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A THESIS

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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This thesis explores how outdoor companies and the broader outdoor industry currently market to underrepresented groups, specifically racial minorities, women, and people with disabilities. The primary research question guiding this study is: how can outdoor companies improve their marketing strategies to enhance accessibility to outdoor activities for these groups? Despite the growing awareness of diversity and inclusion, significant barriers remain, including socioeconomic challenges, cultural perceptions, and a lack of targeted outreach that limits engagement with these communities. This thesis aims to identify effective marketing practices and provide actionable recommendations that outdoor companies can implement to foster inclusivity and ensure that the benefits of outdoor experiences are accessible to all.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

Outdoor activities offer numerous physical, mental, and social benefits, yet access to these experiences remains significantly uneven across demographic groups. Despite the growing need for diversity and inclusion, significant barriers persist for underrepresented groups such as racial minorities, women, and people with disabilities. Socioeconomic disparities, cultural perceptions, and a general lack of targeted marketing contribute to these barriers, leaving many communities excluded from the benefits of outdoor recreation. In fact, nearly 75% of outdoor recreation participants in 2023 were white, highlighting a major gap in engagement across racial and ethnic lines.<sup>1</sup>

The outdoor industry has a unique opportunity to drive change by reshaping its marketing strategies to address these challenges. Current efforts often fail to resonate with underrepresented groups, relying on traditional narratives that do not reflect the diverse realities and needs of these communities. As a result, potential participants from diverse backgrounds may feel that these activities are not designed for them or that they lack the necessary experience or resources to engage in outdoor recreation. Additionally, the industry's historical lack of representation in advertising materials reinforces these perceptions, further deterring marginalized groups from participating.

By exploring how outdoor companies market their activities and identifying areas for improvement, this study seeks to examine how outdoor companies promote their activities and pinpoint areas for improvement, hoping to minimize the gap between their intentions and outcomes to make outdoor spaces more inclusive and accessible for everyone. While some

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<sup>1</sup> Outdoor Foundation, 2024 Outdoor Participation Trends Report: Executive Summary (Outdoor Foundation, 2024)

outdoor brands have made strides toward inclusivity through representation and outreach programs, others have failed to address systemic barriers or resonate with more communities.

Through a content analysis of existing marketing campaigns and research, this thesis aims to uncover effective strategies for fostering inclusivity within the outdoor industry. This study will explore the challenges people in the outdoor industry encounter in making meaningful changes, and the strategies they believe hold the most potential for success. Simultaneously, content analysis of marketing materials will reveal patterns in representation, messaging, and accessibility within outdoor industry campaigns. These findings will be assessed against best practices from organizations that have successfully implemented inclusive marketing strategies.

The findings will provide actionable insights to help outdoor companies create marketing practices that not only expand their reach but also empower and engage underrepresented groups, fostering a more diverse, inclusive, and accessible outdoor community. By implementing evidence-based recommendations, companies can move beyond surface-level representation and develop campaigns that genuinely reflect and support the needs of diverse participants. In doing so, the outdoor industry can play a crucial role in breaking down barriers, ensuring that outdoor recreation is truly accessible to all.

## Literature Review

### Current DEI Efforts in the Outdoor Industry

In spite of current governmental efforts to eliminate DEI over the last several years, industry conferences and organizations have begun placing DEI at the forefront of their agendas, aiming to address accessibility issues within outdoor recreation. For instance, the Outdoor Industry Association's recap of DEI-focused educational sessions at the Outdoor Retailer conference in 2024 presented initiatives by industry leaders aimed at fostering inclusivity.<sup>2</sup> These lessons included initiatives focused on giving employees of color real agency, authentic representation, fighting explicit and implicit bias, and reflecting company values through budgeting for diversity and inclusion initiatives.<sup>3</sup> This industry-wide conference educating companies on how to improve DEI is a first step in improving inclusivity within the outdoors. Similarly, regional organizations have followed suit. For example, the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference is implementing programs to promote diversity in outdoor activities, offering a model for community-driven inclusivity efforts.<sup>4</sup> The Conference is dedicated to helping people understand the barriers to participation in outdoor recreation and promote organizations that are working for greater inclusion.<sup>5</sup> They provide links and resources to different programs that participate in outdoor activities that focus on inclusivity of underrepresented groups within the outdoors.<sup>6</sup> For example, the Conference promotes programs such as GirlTrek: Healthy Black

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<sup>2</sup> "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at Outdoor Retailer: Education Recap," Outdoor Industry Association, accessed February 25, 2025, <https://outdoorindustry.org/article/diversity-equity-inclusion-outdoor-retailer-education-recap/>

<sup>3</sup> Outdoor Foundation, 2024 Outdoor Participation Trends Report: Executive Summary (Outdoor Foundation, 2024)

<sup>4</sup> "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Outdoors," New York-New Jersey Trail Conference, September 26, 2024, <https://www.nynjtc.org/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-outdoors/>

<sup>5</sup> "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Outdoors," New York-New Jersey Trail Conference

<sup>6</sup> "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Outdoors," New York-New Jersey Trail Conference

Women and Girls which has nearly 800,000 members and counting, and is the largest health movement and nonprofit for Black women and girls in the country.<sup>7</sup> These initiatives highlight the outdoors industry's current commitment to increasing representation and accessibility across different regions and settings.

Efforts to make outdoor spaces accessible to people with disabilities have also gained traction. For example, on a state level, the New Jersey State Policy Lab's report outlines specific barriers people with disabilities encounter in natural settings, along with recommended improvements to increase accessibility.<sup>8</sup> This lab discovered that 24% of New Jersey's population has a disability, which includes physical disabilities as well as a wide range of other different health disparities.<sup>9</sup> The numerous physical and mental health benefits of outdoor and nature-based experiences for individuals with disabilities are widely recognized.<sup>10</sup> However, people with disabilities face historic inequities that create overwhelming challenges to their access to these benefits. Thus, in New Jersey, there is a cross-sector collaborative effort that is focused on advancing systemic changes to help ensure access to outdoor and nature-based experiences for people with disabilities.<sup>11</sup> This effort focuses on four different best practices for state policies that can increase access to outdoor spaces for people with disabilities.

First, states must balance policies that increase organized access with passive access to outdoor spaces.<sup>12</sup> This means that there needs to be a balance of organized access, or structured adaptive activities such as adaptive kayaking, hiking or skiing, and passive access which focuses

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<sup>7</sup>Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Outdoors," New York-New Jersey Trail Conference

<sup>8</sup> Josephine O'Grady, "Report Release: Access to Nature for People with Disabilities: Barriers, Challenges, and Opportunities," New Jersey State Policy Lab, August 4, 2023, <https://policylab.rutgers.edu/report-release-access-to-nature-for-people-with-disabilities-barriers-challenges-and-opportunities/>

<sup>9</sup> O'Grady

<sup>10</sup> O'Grady

<sup>11</sup> O'Grady

<sup>12</sup> O'Grady

on independent outdoor opportunities, including strategies that enhance accessibility and enable people with disabilities to enjoy outdoor activities on their own. Secondly, preserving natural resources, which focuses on successful strategies to increase outdoor access while still prioritizing environmental conservation.<sup>13</sup> Third, investing in strategies that transcend multiple social barriers.<sup>14</sup> The last step advocated by New Jersey is increasing direct engagement of people with disabilities.<sup>15</sup> This means to create an effective way to consider accessibility needs for disabled people by hearing directly from them in surveys and focus groups.

However, the need for these localized efforts also reveals a broader, systemic challenge: the national outdoor industry has not kept pace with the changing demographics of the U.S. population. Social barriers extend beyond individuals with disabilities, as marginalized communities often encounter additional social barriers that further limit access to outdoor and nature-based experiences. For instance, more than 76% of people who live in low-income communities of color live in nature-deprived places.<sup>16</sup> Further, while participation numbers have grown to a record 175.8 million Americans engaging in outdoor recreation in 2023, the Outdoor Participation Trends Report shows that 74% of core participants are still white.<sup>17</sup> In light of the Outdoor Foundation’s report, conferences like those in New Jersey that push for more diversity in the outdoors are not just commendable, they are urgently needed. There were 7.7 million Americans who tried outdoor recreation for the first time in 2023, many of whom were more racially diverse, younger, and more likely to be women or LGBTQ+.<sup>18</sup> Yet, the industry’s

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<sup>13</sup> O’Grady

<sup>14</sup> O’Grady

<sup>15</sup> O’Grady

<sup>16</sup> Jenny Rowland-Shea, Shanna Edberg, and Robert Fanger, “The Nature Gap,” Center for American Progress, October 20, 2023, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-nature-gap/>

<sup>17</sup> Outdoor Foundation, 2024 Outdoor Participation Trends Report

<sup>18</sup> Outdoor Foundation, 2024 Outdoor Participation Trends Report

marketing, access policies, and core programming still largely cater to white male outdoor participants. If these new participants do not feel welcomed or see themselves reflected in programming, policy, or marketing, they are unlikely to become long-term outdoors people.<sup>19</sup> Companies like Paradox Sports, which focuses on adaptive climbing, has demonstrated the positive impact of tailored sports programs, and has adapted some of the practices mentioned above while underscoring the benefits of adaptive activities in promoting inclusivity.<sup>20</sup> This is just one example of companies that are focused on increasing DEI in the outdoor industry, yet still there are many barriers that limit DEI within the outdoors.

### **Barriers to Inclusivity in Outdoor Recreation**

Despite the efforts in New Jersey and by Paradox, there are numerous historical, social, and economic obstacles that continue to limit diversity in outdoor spaces. This is referred to as the “nature gap,” a concept that describes the limited access and representation that marginalized groups experience in outdoor recreation.<sup>21</sup> This gap can be attributed to systemic barriers, including socio-economic disparities and a lack of representation in outdoor media.<sup>22</sup> The Nature Gap goes beyond a lack of representation, instead having tangible consequences. For example, access to nature is associated with numerous health benefits, including lower stress levels, improved cardiovascular health, and enhanced cognitive functioning.<sup>23</sup> When underrepresented

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<sup>19</sup>Outdoor Foundation, 2024 Outdoor Participation Trends Report

<sup>20</sup> ParadoxSports. “Our Impact.” Paradox Sports, March 8, 2024. <https://www.paradoxsports.org/our-impact/>.

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Bourdeau, “What Is the Nature Gap?,” The Momentum, accessed February 25, 2025, <https://www.themomentum.com/articles/what-is-the-nature-gap#:~:text=The%20term%20%E2%80%9CNature%20Gap%E2%80%9D%20encapsulates,discrimination%20and%20socio%2Deconomic%20inequalities.>

<sup>22</sup> Bourdeau

<sup>23</sup> Bourdeau

communities face systemic barriers that limit this access, such as lack of outdoor spaces in their neighborhoods, they are denied these benefits and it deepens existing disparities.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, a Center for American Progress report highlights that BIPOC communities are three times more likely than white communities to live in nature-deprived areas.<sup>25</sup> This deprivation is not accidental but a direct result of historical housing discrimination, underinvestment in BIPOC neighborhoods, and environmental racism. In the end the report concluded race and income strongly influence access to safe outdoor spaces and their benefits.<sup>26</sup> As a result, low-income communities, communities of color, and families with children face limited outdoor recreation opportunities, poorer water and air quality, increased climate vulnerabilities, and higher exposure to environmental hazards.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, the Nature Gap is not solely about physical access to outdoor spaces; it also encompasses the fear and intimidation that many marginalized individuals experience in these environments.<sup>28</sup> The legacy and history of exclusion and violence in outdoor spaces of marginalized individuals, specifically BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) individuals continue to impact those individuals' experiences in the outdoors. For example, the experience of Christian Cooper, a Black bird-watcher threatened in Central Park, and Ahmaud Arbery, a young man tragically murdered while jogging in Georgia, underscore the dangers and discrimination people of color can encounter in outdoor spaces.<sup>29</sup> These injustices contribute to

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<sup>24</sup> Bordreau

<sup>25</sup> Rowland-Shea

<sup>26</sup> Rowland-Shea

<sup>27</sup> Rowland-Shea

<sup>28</sup> Bordreau

<sup>29</sup> Bordreau

sustaining the inequitable Nature Gap by reinforcing feelings of exclusion, fear, and lack of safety among marginalized communities.

Addressing these challenges requires acknowledging the systemic barriers that have created the Nature Gap and working actively to dismantle them. These systematic barriers can be categorized into physical, social, economic, and psychological dimensions, each contributing to the overall exclusion of diverse populations from outdoor experiences. Economic barriers complicate access, with financial constraints limiting the ability to engage in outdoor activities or travel to recreational sites, particularly for those from lower-income backgrounds. These barriers highlight a critical need for informed policy and planning to promote inclusivity. Physical barriers, such as uneven terrain, inadequate facilities, and insufficiently maintained pathways, significantly impact individuals with mobility disabilities and deter their access to outdoor spaces.

Physical barriers significantly hinder individuals' access to outdoor recreation, particularly for those with mobility disabilities. Structural constraints such as pavement and slope are often perceived as major obstacles for people with disabilities.<sup>30</sup> Designing these outdoor recreation spaces requires careful planning to address these barriers effectively. Camp shelters, for example, must comply with specific accessibility standards, yet many parks do not offer accessible facilities for disabled people which further complicates access.<sup>31</sup> Lack of available outside aid also complicates access. Although outdoor activity industries such as downhill skiing have made significant strides to make these activities accessible for disabled

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<sup>30</sup> Maria José Aguilar-Carrasco et al., “Assessment of Barriers for People with Disability to Enjoy National Parks,” *Frontiers*, December 13, 2022,

<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1058647/full>

<sup>31</sup> Aguilar-Carrasco

people with modified skis, the price of acquiring special equipment and professional guides and help to manage and assist the individual continue to increase the strength of these barriers to outdoor recreation. The elimination of physical barriers is not solely a design issue but also depends on good governance and ongoing maintenance.<sup>32</sup> Adequate planning, maintenance, and the incorporation of accessibility considerations from the outset are critical to enhancing inclusivity in outdoor recreational spaces.

Furthermore, social barriers significantly impact access to outdoor recreation for various marginalized groups. These barriers can arise from cultural norms, social connections, and the general environment surrounding outdoor activities. Cultural norms play a crucial role in shaping individuals' attitudes towards outdoor activities. For many minority ethnic participants, outdoor recreation is not perceived as a traditional part of their culture, due to a lack of time and resources.<sup>33</sup> This is partially due to outdoor spaces in the United States being conceptualized, created and managed by white men who held racist beliefs.<sup>34</sup> People of color were rarely considered to be major stakeholders in outdoor recreation or park-related activities.<sup>35</sup> Racism within the outdoors can even be traced back to John Muir, who created the national park system and has been called out on his racism by the Sierra Club, an organization which he started and is the most significant grassroots environmental organization in the country.<sup>36</sup> An example of Muir's racism was his view of Indigenous people as having no rightful place in the landscape,

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<sup>32</sup> Aguilar-Carrasco

<sup>33</sup> Patricia L Winter et al., Equity in access to outdoor recreation—informing a ..., accessed May 17, 2025, [https://www.fs.usda.gov/psw/publications/winter/psw\\_2020\\_winter001.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/psw/publications/winter/psw_2020_winter001.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> Emma Gosalvez, "Nature Gap: Why Outdoor Spaces Lack Diversity and Inclusion," College of Natural Resources News, December 14, 2020, <https://cnr.ncsu.edu/news/2020/12/outdoor-diversity-inclusion/#:~:text=People%20of%20color%20were%20rarely,Corps%20and%20National%20Park%20System>

<sup>35</sup> Gosalvez

<sup>36</sup> "Home," Home | Sierra Club, accessed February 25, 2025, <https://www.sierraclub.org/>

despite their deep-rooted presence for thousands of years.<sup>37</sup> He also believed that their villages and way of life should be eradicated to create what he saw as an untouched, "unredeemed" wilderness.<sup>38</sup> This reinforces barriers for minority participants, as they are more likely to feel unwelcome in these spaces when their communities have historically been excluded from shaping them. Additionally, stories of past negative experiences, such as Coopers and Arbery's stories, among BIPOC individuals further discourage future participation in outdoor activities.

### **The Role of Marketing in increasing Diversity in the outdoor industry**

Marketing strategies have been identified as a critical tool for improving DEI in the outdoor industry, yet the authenticity of these efforts is often questioned. In a study in California where there was a telephone survey about forest visitation, it was revealed that the primary information source for outdoor recreation used most frequently and most trusted was the Internet followed closely by social media.<sup>39</sup> Thus, these groups would benefit from companies incorporating culturally relevant messaging and images in their internet and social media advertisements to affirm the message of inclusion in the outdoors.<sup>40</sup>

Yet, several outdoor gear companies have pledged to increase the representation of women in their workforce and are making progress in diversifying their advertising and marketing efforts. REI, for instance, has launched multiple diversity-focused initiatives, including the widely recognized 2017 Force of Nature campaign, which highlighted the

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<sup>37</sup> Gosalvez

<sup>38</sup> Gosalvez

<sup>39</sup> Winter

<sup>40</sup> Winter

experiences of females in the outdoors, many of whom were women of color.<sup>41</sup> REI's Force of Nature campaign is a prime example of how marketing can play a role in increasing inclusivity in the outdoors. Force of Nature aims to ensure that women are just as inspired and equipped as men to embrace life outside.<sup>42</sup> By pledging over \$1 million to this campaign REI was able to; support nonprofits that create opportunities for women in the outdoors; develop and offer high-quality technical gear and apparel for women; and launch over 1,000 events designed for women in the outdoors.<sup>43</sup> By prioritizing authentic representation in marketing, companies can encourage underrepresented groups to feel welcome in outdoor spaces, bridging the gap between awareness and meaningful action. For some companies, increasing diversity ends there, as internal DEI at these companies are still predominantly white. There are concerns about whether diversity-focused campaigns by gear brands are simply marketing tactics or genuinely inclusive strategies.<sup>44</sup> True inclusivity goes beyond advertising to include actions like diversifying leadership and hiring practices. Statistics regarding diversity at gear companies show people of color comprise a distressingly low 12 to 15 percent of employees at these outdoor organizations.<sup>45</sup> Ava Holliday, founding partner of the Avarna Group, a consulting firm that advises outdoor companies and environmental groups in their diversity and inclusion efforts, states that without a diverse workforce, product quality will suffer as the number of BIPOC individuals in the United States increase.<sup>46</sup> Companies that fail to fully commit to DEI in their hiring practices risk engaging in a form of greenwashing, where they create the illusion of

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<sup>41</sup> Claire Martin, "Is Diversity Just a Marketing Strategy for Gear Brands?," RUN, July 23, 2018, <https://run.outsideonline.com/general/outdoor-industry-getting-more-diverse-slowly/>

<sup>42</sup> Rei, "Rei Launches Force of Nature to Reset Perception of the Outdoors,"

<sup>43</sup> Rei, "Rei Launches Force of Nature to Reset Perception of the Outdoors,"

<sup>44</sup> Martin

<sup>45</sup> "The Challenge," Green 2.0, January 6, 2021, <https://www.diversegreen.org/research/the-challenge/>.

<sup>46</sup> Martin

diversity through marketing campaigns without implementing meaningful changes behind the scenes.<sup>47</sup> Kenji Haroutunian, a former director of Outdoor Retailer, the gear industry's biggest trade show, states, "From a marketing standpoint, they're reaching out and showing a different face, internally, though, they're still being run by the usual suspects."<sup>48</sup> True progress of inclusivity requires more than just outward-facing campaigns, it demands structural change within these organizations. While marketing can shape perceptions and invite new audiences, it must be backed by genuine efforts to build a more inclusive industry, ensuring that representation is not just performative but ingrained in company culture and leadership.

### **Successful/Best practices for DEI in the outdoors**

Inclusive marketing plays a critical role in reshaping who feels welcomed and represented in outdoor spaces, making it a key driver of equity and access in the industry.

Inclusive marketing campaigns not only enhance brand image but also create tangible benefits by attracting a wider audience.<sup>49</sup> Successful examples of these strategies demonstrate how brands can leverage authenticity and cause-driven campaigns to resonate with diverse audiences.<sup>50</sup>

These strategies underscore the role of marketing in shaping perceptions and accessibility within the industry. The outdoor industry continues to expand, giving brands the unique opportunity to further engage a growing consumer base. Understanding the current industry trends and the role of marketing is essential for brands to authentically connect with newer audiences. Effective

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<sup>47</sup> Martin

<sup>48</sup> Martin

<sup>49</sup> "The Importance of Inclusive Marketing in the Outdoor Industry," Algotfy Outdoors, accessed March 18, 2025, <https://www.algotfyoutdoors.com/post/the-importance-of-inclusive-marketing-in-the-outdoor-industry>

<sup>50</sup> LuisM, "5 Proven Marketing Strategies for Adventure Gear & Outdoor Brands," VoxFeed Blog, August 26, 2022, <https://blog.voxfeed.com/en/marketing-outdoor-brands/>

marketing strategies for brands must center around authentic storytelling to further their engagement with diverse audiences.<sup>51</sup> Using social media, attractive visuals, and good storytelling are all strategies to improve audience engagement. By using these strategies brands and companies can overcome the barriers of inclusion and diversity in the outdoor industry and truly make the outdoors a welcoming space.

Organizations such as REI and North Face are taking active roles in promoting diversity in outdoor spaces. These organizations demonstrate successful initiatives that can serve as blueprints for industry-wide DEI efforts, showing the impact of dedicated programming on increasing diversity. By prioritizing community engagement and providing accessible programming, these organizations offer effective approaches to making the outdoors more welcoming to underrepresented groups. For example, Brown Girls Climb is a community of women and femme-identifying people of color who share a passion for climbing.<sup>52</sup> It is committed to amplifying the experiences of BIPOC communities, increasing representation, and providing inclusive opportunities to climb and experience the outdoors.<sup>53</sup> With over 45K followers on Instagram, Brown Girls Climb has created an inclusive community for BIPOC individuals to experience and thrive within the outdoors. A similar company that doesn't focus solely on climbing is Latino Outdoors. Latino Outdoors is a Latinx-led organization aiming to inspire and connect people in the Latinx communities in the outdoors, along with a platform for sharing stories/narratives.<sup>54</sup> Latino Outdoors' vision is a world where Latino communities can

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<sup>51</sup> LuisM

<sup>52</sup> Rhea Varma, "Diversity in the Outdoors: Ten Organizations You Should Know About," *The Outdoor Journal*, November 24, 2020, <https://www.outdoorjournal.com/diversity-in-the-outdoors-ten-organizations-you-should-know-about/>.

<sup>53</sup> Varma

<sup>54</sup> Varma

experience nature as a safe, inclusive, and welcoming space—one that fosters the sharing of stories, knowledge, and culture while nurturing leadership and building a vibrant community of Latino outdoor enthusiasts.<sup>55</sup> Latino Outdoors creates volunteer-led outdoor activities in an inclusive environment for thousands of participants annually.<sup>56</sup> These include events such as climbing gym meetups or community hikes through wildflowers or to different waterfalls.<sup>57</sup> With a growing presence both online and in communities across the country, Latino Outdoors plays a vital role in fostering belonging and inclusivity in nature.

Furthermore there are companies that give disabled people opportunities to enjoy the outdoors. A prime example would be Challenge Aspen, which provides year-round adaptive recreation opportunities for people of all ages and with disabilities. For example, Adam Lavender, who in the late nineties was an exceptional downhill mountain biker, raced at a semi-professional level.<sup>58</sup> Unfortunately in 2012 Adam suffered a major injury during a Freeride Mountain Bike World Tour event where the crash left him with a broken C4 vertebrae and thus, an incomplete quadriplegic from the neck down.<sup>59</sup> Thankfully since the injury, Adam has been incredibly resilient. Within two years Adam was able to lift his arm again.<sup>60</sup> Through Adam's resilience and positive attitude, this past summer in 2024 Adam teamed up with Challenge Aspen to ride with an adaptive mountain bike.<sup>61</sup> This was the first time since his injury that he had been able to mountain bike a local trail since his major injury.<sup>62</sup> Challenge Aspen has many stories

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<sup>55</sup> “Connecting Comunidad y Cultura with the Outdoors.,” Latino Outdoors, accessed April 2, 2025, <https://latinooutdoors.org/?ref=outdoorjournal.com>

<sup>56</sup> Varma

<sup>57</sup> Latino Outdoors

<sup>58</sup> “Stories of Possibility,” CHALLENGE ASPEN, accessed April 9, 2025, <https://challengeaspen.org/stories/>

<sup>59</sup> Challenge Aspen

<sup>60</sup> Challenge Aspen

<sup>61</sup> Challenge Aspen

<sup>62</sup> Challenge Aspen

just like Adam’s of helping struggling individuals enjoy outdoor recreation. They continue to strive to break down barriers, foster confidence, and build a supportive community in the outdoors where everyone can thrive.<sup>63</sup> Whether it’s physical injuries like Adam’s or mental challenges such as having down syndrome, Challenge Aspen can be used as a blueprint for outdoor companies to help individuals with disabilities and create moments of joy, growth, and independence in the outdoors.

Another organization providing access to the outdoors for historically underrepresented groups is Outdoor Afro. Outdoor Afro is a national not-for-profit organization, operating from Washington DC, that has become the country’s leading network that celebrates and inspires Black connections and leadership in nature.<sup>64</sup> What first started as a kitchen table blog in 2009 by CEO and founder Rue Mapp has now grown into the leader of DEI in the outdoors with a 60 thousand person participation network, operating within over 60 cities across the country.<sup>65</sup> With the help of their 100s of selected and trained volunteer leaders, Outdoor Afro has put on over 1200 different events nationwide, including hiking meetups in the Midwest and skiing meetups in the Rocky Mountains.<sup>66</sup> Outdoor Afro’s success is largely due to their volunteer leader team. For example, Dr. Wednesday Jones, one of Outdoor Afro’s leaders, when asked in an interview about why she joined Outdoor Afro, mentioned that when she has been out hiking and camping there weren’t too many people who looked like her.<sup>67</sup> When Dr. Jones found out about Outdoor Afro she signed up, went on her first hike, and was immediately hooked.<sup>68</sup> After

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<sup>63</sup> Challenge Aspen

<sup>64</sup> Varma

<sup>65</sup> “Our Story,” outdoorafroorg, accessed May 17, 2025, <https://outdoorafro.org/about/>

<sup>66</sup> “South,” outdoorafroorg, accessed April 16, 2025, <https://outdoorafro.org/places/>

<sup>67</sup> Outdoor Afro, “Outdoor Afro Volunteer Leader Spotlight: Meet Dr. Wednesday Jones,” outdoorafroorg, February 12, 2025, <https://outdoorafro.org/2025/02/outdoor-afro-volunteer-leader-qa-dr-wednesday-jones/>

<sup>68</sup> Outdoor Afro

becoming a leader for Outdoor Afro, she said, “How could I not share this wonderful experience that I got to enjoy.”<sup>69</sup> She also discussed her favorite moment as an Outdoor Afro Leader when she described leading a hike in Shenandoah National Park. There, one of the participants turned to her and said that Outdoor Afro saved her life.<sup>70</sup> Dr. Jones said, “She’s sharing some intimate details with me about the pandemic and how it was a dark time for [her], but she was able to get outdoors in nature. It was therapeutic for her, and it just kinda helped her through those times.”<sup>71</sup> She emphasizes how beneficial it is for people to enjoy and experience the outdoors. It shows how important it is to make the outdoors a safe and welcoming space for everyone. Companies like REI and North Face are now starting to collaborate with programs like Outdoor Afro to showcase their support for diversifying the outdoors.

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<sup>69</sup> Outdoor Afro

<sup>70</sup> Outdoor Afro

<sup>71</sup> Outdoor Afro

## Findings and Discussion

### Marketing example: Merrell

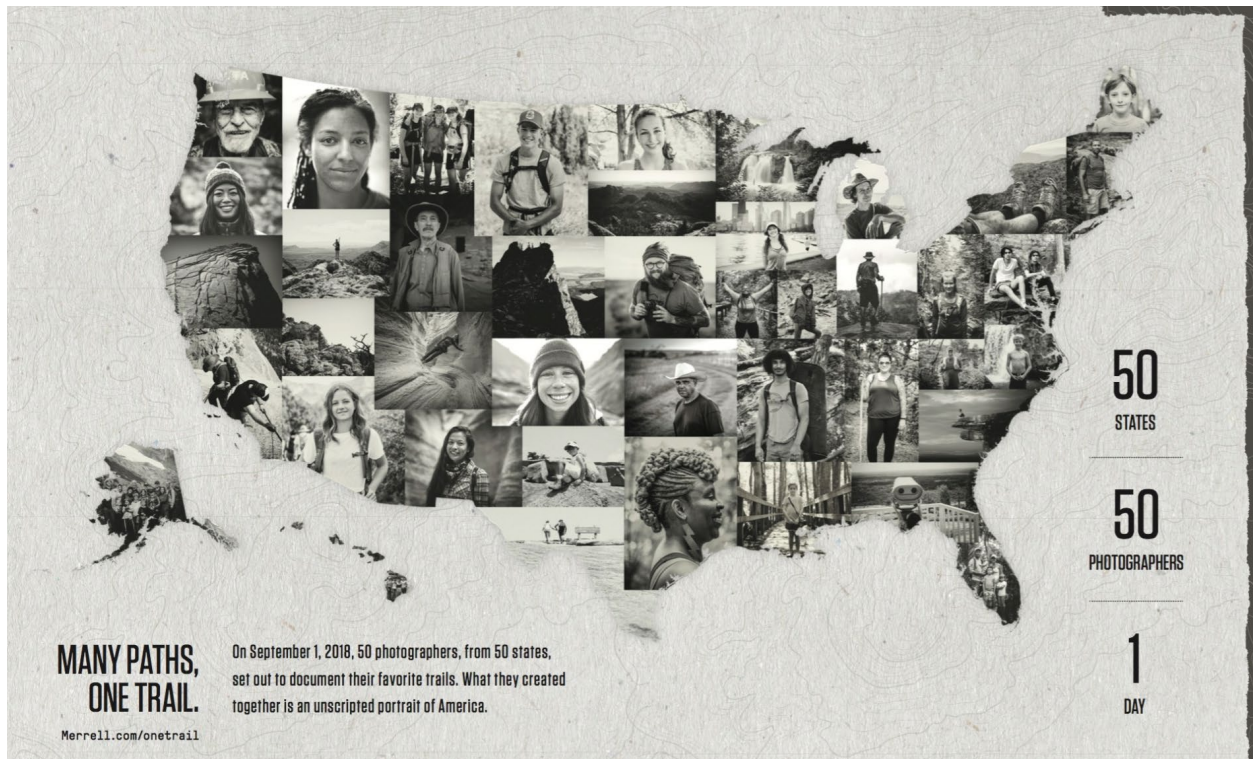
The content analysis of outdoor industry marketing materials revealed clear patterns in representation, as well as significant gaps. Brands like REI and The North Face stood out for their collaborations with organizations such as Outdoor Afro and Latino Outdoors, showcasing intentional efforts to reflect diverse audiences. Furthermore, REI started a Force of Nature campaign which prominently features women of color in outdoor spaces.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, programs like Latino Outdoors and Brown Girls Climb are getting noticed by bigger brands in the industry as they seek further community engagement and representation. Although companies are trying to improve, many big brands continue to fall short as their marketing campaigns feel more performative while lacking any deeper organizational level change. Several outdoor companies lack the visibility of minority groups and diverse body types in their mainstream marketing campaigns. Some campaigns would showcase diversity in the outdoors but fall short and lack consistent ongoing engagement. For example, Merrell, a prominent outdoor apparel company, launched a diversity campaign in 2018 called “One trail.”<sup>73</sup> The One Trail project was a campaign celebrating diversity on the trail and seeking to contemporize attitudes about outdoor participation.<sup>74</sup> The first element of the campaign was a mural of portraits taken on trails across the country of diverse individuals.

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<sup>72</sup> Rei

<sup>73</sup> Merrell, “Merrell Launches ‘One Trail’ Project to Showcase and Celebrate Diversity,” PR Newswire: press release distribution, targeting, monitoring and marketing, November 5, 2018, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/merrell-launches-one-trail-project-to-showcase-and-celebrate-diversity-300743902.html?>

<sup>74</sup> Merrell



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Despite its initial impact of promoting diversity, the campaign ended up being a one time event. After a review of Merrell’s most recent marketing campaigns from 2018 to 2024, findings show there has not been any secondary one trail campaigns in the years following its debut.<sup>76</sup> This raises questions about the authenticity and integrity of the campaigns.

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<sup>75</sup> Merrell

<sup>76</sup> Merrell

## Content Analysis/Interpretation of Findings

While outdoor companies are increasingly aware of the importance of diversity, companies like Merrell fall short in the longevity of diversity campaigns and truly addressing inclusivity. The industry as a whole has taken the initial steps into addressing inclusivity, incorporating BIPOC individuals, women, and LGBTQ+ representation into campaigns and marketing strategies, but often fails to sustain these efforts or extend them internally. As highlighted by the example of Merrell’s “One Trail” campaign, even well-intentioned initiatives can appear performative without follow-through or real structural change. Despite showcasing diverse faces in advertising, many companies remain led and staffed predominantly by white employees, as noted by Kenji Haroutunian’s critique of the disconnect between external messaging and internal culture.<sup>77</sup>

However, big companies such as North Face and REI, show promising improvement through long-lasting partnerships with organizations such as Outdoor Afro and Latino Outdoors.<sup>78</sup> These partnerships demonstrate an authentic approach that is rooted in long term partnerships and community empowerment. For example, in 2022 Outdoor Afro, Inc. and REI Co-op launched a technical hike apparel line.<sup>79</sup> When making these apparel pieces the pioneering co-collaboration between REI and Outdoor Afro considered wide ranges of body types, shapes, sizes, and original graphics to accommodate all types of people, further emphasizing inclusivity, as well as showcasing unique hues like papaya, teal glaze, and shoreline gold.<sup>80</sup> By working

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<sup>77</sup> Martin

<sup>78</sup> “Our Partnerships,” [outdoorafro.org](https://outdoorafro.org/partnerships/), accessed April 30, 2025, <https://outdoorafro.org/partnerships/>

<sup>79</sup> Candace Dantes, “Outdoor Afro’s Corporate Partner, Outdoor Afro Inc., Drops Electrifying Colors with Rei,” [outdoorafro.org](https://outdoorafro.org/2023/07/outdoor-afros-corporate-partner-outdoor-afro-inc-drops-electrifying-colors-with-rei-co-op/#:~:text=and%20original%20graphics,-,Outdoor%20Afro%2C%20Inc.,needs%2C%20Outdoor%20Afro%2C%20Inc), July 18, 2023, <https://outdoorafro.org/2023/07/outdoor-afros-corporate-partner-outdoor-afro-inc-drops-electrifying-colors-with-rei-co-op/#:~:text=and%20original%20graphics,-,Outdoor%20Afro%2C%20Inc.,needs%2C%20Outdoor%20Afro%2C%20Inc>

<sup>80</sup> Dantes

closely with Black people and Black communities to understand outdoor product needs, Outdoor Afro and REI developed an apparel and gear line that preaches inclusivity and solves unmet design needs in outdoor gear and equipment.<sup>81</sup> REI and Outdoor Afro continue this partnership and have continued to create apparel lines and collections promoting diversity and inclusivity. Outdoor Afro founder Rue Mapp said that they are continuing to break design barriers and that “the hike collection co-created with REI Co-op is an extension of previous year’s vibrant colors, functional styles, and fits made with every single body in mind.”<sup>82</sup> Further, addressing the concerns Haroutunian named, in 2021 REI publicly committed to enhancing diversity within its leadership and workforce, acknowledging the need for systemic change.<sup>83</sup> REI announced its goal of becoming a fully inclusive, anti-racist, multicultural organization.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, REI’s Force of Nature campaign, for example, also went beyond surface-level marketing by investing over \$1 million into programming, product design, and nonprofit partnerships aimed at supporting women in the outdoors.<sup>85</sup> REI helped support organizations such as Camber Outdoors, GirlTrek and the YMCA’s BOLD/GOLD initiative.<sup>86</sup> These types of multi-layered initiatives reflect a more comprehensive and credible commitment to DEI.

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<sup>81</sup> Dantes

<sup>82</sup> Dantes

<sup>83</sup> Rei, “Rei Co-Op Announces Commitment to Becoming a Fully Inclusive, Anti-Racist, Multicultural Organization,” REI, September 5, 2023, [https://www.rei.com/newsroom/article/rei-antiracist-multicultural-fully-inclusive-commitment?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.rei.com/newsroom/article/rei-antiracist-multicultural-fully-inclusive-commitment?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>84</sup> Rei, “Rei Co-Op Announces Commitment to Becoming a Fully Inclusive, Anti-Racist, Multicultural Organization,”

<sup>85</sup> Rei, “Rei Launches Force of Nature to Reset Perception of the Outdoors,”

<sup>86</sup> Rei, “Rei Launches Force of Nature to Reset Perception of the Outdoors,”

## Opportunities for Improvement

To move toward genuine inclusion, outdoor companies must expand their efforts beyond one-off marketing campaigns. Outdoor companies can continue and increase their involvement or partnerships with organizations like Outdoor Afro, Latino Outdoors, Challenge Aspen, and more. This can help companies ground their marketing in authentic, lived experiences while also building trust with underrepresented communities, similar to what REI has been doing with Outdoor Afro. These organizations already have roots in underrepresented communities and have built trust by providing safe, culturally relevant, and empowering outdoor experiences for those communities. By forming long-term partnerships, instead of one-off sponsorship events or advertisements, prominent outdoor companies can co-create marketing campaigns, programs, or events that are authentic and informed by BIPOC individuals.

Such collaborations also provide invaluable insight into the specific needs, values, and challenges faced by these communities, ensuring that marketing is not only inclusive in imagery but also in tone, messaging, and intent. By investing in the work of these community led groups, outdoor brands can help scale impactful grassroots initiatives while demonstrating a real commitment to equity and inclusion. For example, Brown Girls Climb has been instrumental in creating inclusive spaces within the climbing community. Through partnerships with big companies such as The North Face and Mountain Hardwear as well as local climbing gyms, Brown Girls Climb is able to put on different events such as community meet ups and workshops.<sup>87</sup> Climbing can be complicated for minority athletes. Climbers of color face many barriers to entry including price of gear and gym memberships, lack of access to national parks,

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<sup>87</sup> “Partners,” Brown Girls Climb, accessed May 7, 2025, <https://www.browngirlsclimb.com/partners/>

or often, they're exposed to racism while climbing.<sup>88</sup> For example, Melissa Utomo, a climber and advocate, highlighted the issue of racist and misogynistic route names in climbing areas such as routes called Slant Eyes and Lynch Mob.<sup>89</sup> As a result, in recent years, Black and Brown athletes have been transforming the climbing scene by creating safe spaces where underrepresented climbers can learn, heal from discrimination, and engage in a supportive community.<sup>90</sup> The events hosted by Brown Girls Climb help challenge the historical racism and underrepresentation that have long existed in many outdoor sports. When well known companies such as The North Face and Mountain Hardwear partner with them it shows support and helps continue to push for more diversity and inclusivity in the outdoors.

To create lasting change, more outdoor companies need to deepen their investment in BIPOC organizations long-term partnerships that extend beyond surface-level support. This approach not only amplifies underrepresented voices but also builds sustainable pathways for inclusion within the outdoor industry. Rather than relying on performative campaigns or temporary sponsorships, companies should prioritize co-creating programs, marketing campaigns, product lines or events with these programs. Deeper partnerships would allow companies to shift from being passive supporters to active collaborators. Additionally, by sharing resources, infrastructure, and marketing platforms, brands can help scale the reach and impact of these groups, ensuring that the work of inclusion extends beyond just symbolic gestures and towards real structural change.

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<sup>88</sup> Melissa Hellman, "'I Don't Have to Code-Switch': How Black and Brown Rock Climbers Are Revamping the Sport," *The Guardian*, January 25, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2024/jan/25/brown-girls-climb-black-poc-rock-climbing?>

<sup>89</sup> Anaheed Saatchi, "How Mountain Project Stole from a Woman of Color & Spent Years Defending Hate Speech in the Climbing Community," *Melanin Base Camp*, December 9, 2021, [https://www.melaninbasecamp.com/around-the-bonfire/2020/7/6/how-mountain-project-stole-from-a-woman-of-color?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.melaninbasecamp.com/around-the-bonfire/2020/7/6/how-mountain-project-stole-from-a-woman-of-color?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>90</sup> Hellman

## Recommendations

Building on these findings, the following recommendations outline actionable steps that outdoor companies can take to promote lasting diversity and inclusivity in the outdoors. The following strategies aim to create meaningful and sustainable change across the outdoor industry.

- 1) To build authentic connections with underrepresented communities, outdoor brands must adopt marketing strategies that go beyond representation to actively reflect and celebrate diverse experiences. Companies should create marketing materials that genuinely represent diverse communities, moving beyond tokenism to showcase real stories and experiences. For example, REI's Force of Nature campaign featured real women of color sharing their personal outdoor journeys.<sup>91</sup> By highlighting these real stories and centering underrepresented voices, REI moved beyond surface-level representation to create a campaign that felt relatable and empowering to diverse audiences, something that more outdoor companies should do. Companies can use REI's Force of Nature campaign as a blueprint to promote these authentic stories. The Force of Nature campaign has been very successful, raising over \$1 million dollars to support organizations that connect women and girls to the outdoors.<sup>92</sup> Another prime example is North Face's explore fund which committed \$7 million in 2021 to help further diversify the outdoors.<sup>93</sup> These examples show outdoors activism is about much more than hiring diverse models for campaigns.

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<sup>91</sup> Martin

<sup>92</sup> Martin

<sup>93</sup> Bella Webb, "How Outdoor Brands Can Widen Their Appeal," Vogue Business, March 1, 2021, [https://www.voguebusiness.com/fashion/how-outdoor-brands-can-widen-their-appeal-the-north-face-merrell?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.voguebusiness.com/fashion/how-outdoor-brands-can-widen-their-appeal-the-north-face-merrell?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

- 2) Outdoor companies should form partnerships with grassroots community programs. Advocates are calling for meaningful collaborations that invest in and support grassroots communities, and a renewed commitment to DEI inside brands.<sup>94</sup> REI's partnership with Outdoor Afro or The North Face's partnership with Brown Girls Climb can serve as models for other companies in the industry to follow. These partnerships lead to the co-creation content and initiatives that resonate with underrepresented communities, such as the REI x Outdoor Afro hiking collection where REI made sure to use inclusive language and feature diverse imagery to reflect the broad spectrum of outdoor enthusiasts. Using vibrant hues and unique designs in the collection while collaborating with Outdoor Afro resonated with the diverse audiences they were trying to reach. When marketing the collection, REI featured athletes from diverse backgrounds and minority groups to further provide representation in the outdoors. A lot of what REI has done with Outdoor Afro can be used as a blueprint for other companies to develop authentic campaigns to promote diversity and inclusivity in the outdoors.
- 3) Companies should engage directly with underrepresented communities through partnerships, events, and educational initiatives which are essential for fostering a more inclusive and welcoming outdoor culture. The North Face exemplifies this approach through its partnership with Brown Girls Climb. By lending its well-known brand name, The North Face helps Brown Girls Climb attract more donations and secure resources to host events. Having major brands like The

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<sup>94</sup> Webb

North Face visibly support these initiatives, whether at events or featured on their website, creates a more welcoming and validating environment for underrepresented climbers and outdoor athletes. North Face's Explore fund, a key contributor to helping grassroots community organizations, is essential because access to the outdoors can be impaired by inequality.<sup>95</sup> For example, the Explore Fund helped fund North Face's Walls Are Made For Climbing campaign which awarded grants to organizations like Brown Girls Climb and Paradox Sports, which helped disabled athletes participate in climbing.<sup>96</sup> These grants help provide more access to climbing gyms in urban areas. Additionally, the campaign featured exclusive apparel with its logo, as well as a virtual Global Climbing Day hosted by The North Face helping promote diversity in climbing.<sup>97</sup> Events like these are successful because they go beyond one-off advertisements, demonstrating a genuine commitment from these companies to support diversity through meaningful action. Outdoor companies should invest in long-term partnerships with organizations like Brown Girls Climb to help put on more sponsored events promoting diversity and inclusivity. Supporting ongoing events and programs, rather than short-term campaigns, allows brands to build trust and show a real commitment to inclusion. This approach helps create more welcoming spaces for underrepresented communities in the outdoors.

- 4) Increase DEI training to equip companies with the tools to help foster more inclusive marketing. Organizations like DEI Outdoors specialize in partnering

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<sup>95</sup> Pymnts, "The North Face Addresses Inclusion Issue for Outdoor Gear and Exploration," PYMNTS.com, June 3, 2021, <https://www.pymnts.com/retail/2021/the-north-face-inclusion-outdoor-gear-exploration>

<sup>96</sup> Pymnts

<sup>97</sup> Pymnts

with outdoor companies to address DEI in the industry and help transform and innovate companies organizational culture.<sup>98</sup> DEI Outdoors offers different programs for companies to choose from to gain their DEI training.<sup>99</sup> These “pathways” include an organizational assessment, personalized training sessions, consulting services, and monthly support calls to help insure long-term sustainable change.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, companies should set clear, quantifiable goals for DEI within their marketing strategies. Setting feasible and measurable goals embeds DEI into organizational strategy helping sustain the long-term change companies are trying to reach. Organizations like DEI outdoors can help companies track their progress and ensure leadership accountability.<sup>101</sup> Hold leadership accountable for meeting DEI goals by integrating these objectives into performance and company evaluations. This would ensure that inclusivity is prioritized at all levels. For example, The North Face has taken steps to address systemic racism in outdoor activities by co-founding the organization Opening Up The Outdoors(OUTO).<sup>102</sup> OUTO aims to create a diverse, anti-racist community in outdoor pursuits by providing grants and mentoring to “changemakers” who are helping to diversify climbing, -running and hiking.<sup>103</sup> OUTO created a program in which changemakers receive -masterclasses, peer mentoring, business coaching and skilled consulting to increase their impact and support people from

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<sup>98</sup> DEI Outdoors, “Our Approach,” DEI Outdoors, accessed May 12, 2025, <https://www.deioutdoors.com/our-approach?>

<sup>99</sup> DEI Outdoors

<sup>100</sup> DEI Outdoors

<sup>101</sup> DEI Outdoors

<sup>102</sup> James Beal, “The North Face’s Initiative to Tackle ‘systemic Racism’ in Hiking,” The Times & The Sunday Times, March 9, 2024, <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/article/the-north-face-systemic-racism-hiking-jxxqwpvmz>

<sup>103</sup> Beal

ethnic-ally diverse communities.<sup>104</sup> The North Face can track their progress by setting their DEI goals such as tracking the number of BIPOC-led organizations supported annually, the amount of grant funding distributed, or the diversity of participants in leadership training.<sup>105</sup> These numbers are crucial in holding leadership accountable helping promote real change within the outdoor industry. By tying DEI outcomes to tangible metrics and reporting mechanisms, The North Face ensures that their leaders are not only expected to support equity and inclusion in principle but are also responsible for driving real progress. This model demonstrates how outdoor companies can move beyond symbolic gestures or one-off advertisements to create meaningful and measurable change across the outdoor industry. Especially in today's world, where the United States government is trying to mitigate DEI, it's even more critical for companies to take the lead in promoting equity and inclusion.

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<sup>104</sup> Beal

<sup>105</sup> Beal

## Conclusion

The outdoor industry stands at a critical point where its continued growth needs to be met with equally an equal commitment to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. As this thesis has shown, underrepresented communities face deeply rooted barriers to outdoor participation, stemming from systemic inequalities, cultural exclusion, and uninclusive marketing practices. While companies such as REI have made strides to address these inequities through more inclusive marketing and community partnerships with organizations like Outdoor Afro, other companies still rely on short-term, performative efforts that fail to create long-term, lasting change.

Marketing plays a significant role in shaping who feels welcomed in the outdoors, but to truly enhance inclusivity it requires more than just diverse imagery. It requires grassroots partnerships, equitable hiring practices promoting DEI and leadership accountability. When brands create these partnerships with grassroots organizations and start to make internal inclusive and diverse changes within the company, the outdoor industry begins to dismantle the long standing structures that have excluded marginalized groups.

These efforts are especially important now, as DEI faces renewed increasing political resistance from the Trump Administration. The Trump administration has made efforts to restrict or eliminate DEI initiatives at the federal level. This includes rolling back policies aimed at promoting inclusive hiring.<sup>106</sup> Trump even passed an executive order that seeks to eliminate DEI programs across the federal government.<sup>107</sup> These actions not only erode federal commitments to diversity but also set a precedent that may influence private industries, including the outdoor

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<sup>106</sup> ReNika Moore, “Trump’s Executive Orders Rolling Back Dei and Accessibility Efforts, Explained,” ACLU of Washington, March 14, 2025, <https://www.aclu-wa.org/story/trump%E2%80%99s-executive-orders-rolling-back-dei-and-accessibility-efforts-explained?>

<sup>107</sup> Moore

sector, to deprioritize or abandon their DEI efforts. Simultaneously, the Trump administration's policies have impacted national parks, which are integral to outdoor recreation. Many national park facilities, visitor centers, archaeological centers and more have been targeted for closure by the Trump administration.<sup>108</sup> These closures threaten to reduce access to natural spaces, for marginalized communities and for everyone who rely on these facilities for education and engagement with the outdoors.

This thesis provides a roadmap for how the outdoor industry can better serve BIPOC communities, women, and people with disabilities—not only by changing how it markets, but by transforming who it includes, supports, and listens to. In doing so, the industry can expand access to the mental, physical, and emotional benefits of outdoor recreation while creating a culture that is truly inclusive of all.

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<sup>108</sup> Kurt Repanshek, “National Park Facilities from Alaska to Florida Targeted for Closure,” National Park Facilities From Alaska To Florida Targeted For Closure, accessed May 27, 2025, <https://www.nationalparkstraveler.org/2025/03/national-park-facilities-alaska-florida-targeted-closure?>

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