



Seattle  
Parks & Recreation

# Connecting to (Urban) Nature

## Healthy Environment Stories



Summer for many families means trips to the national parks, vacations to far off countries, and waterskiing at the lake cabin. Yet for some families experiencing food insecurity and childcare challenges, summertime recreational opportunities are more limited. For these members of our community, recreational opportunities must be more accessible in location and in cost in order for them to participate.

Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR) is uniquely positioned to support residents from all backgrounds, particularly those with the greatest barriers, in accessing the benefits of nature right here in our city. Seattle has nearly 500 parks in 6,414 acres including many natural areas and greenspaces. We are also lucky to have almost 100 miles of trails that provide access to our urban forests and wetlands, as well as a small but dedicated staff of environmental educators and naturalists offering educational programming to explore Seattle's parks and natural areas.

Our environmental education team provides programs all year long, reaching nearly 17,000 people in 2017 in parks around the city. Recognizing the desire and need for more opportunities in the summer, our staff ramps up programming during that time, so everyone has a chance to get outside and enjoy the Evergreen City. Working with multiple community partners helps our efforts go further and allows our team to be true public servants.

### Summer in the Parks

SPR's environmental education team provides engaging nature play and learning activities in parks throughout Seattle in partnership with the Summer Food Service Program, operated by Seattle's Human Services and Education departments and the Seattle School District. This collaboration ensures that not only are children receiving healthy food, they are also learning about the plants, animals, and habitats in our city and how to care for them. In the summer of 2018, we provided environmental education programs to 234 children at six parks.

"Environmental education in local parks is important for many reasons," says SPR educator Anne Bentley. "The exposure to science concepts and vocabulary helps to address the gap in academics many children experience during the summer months. In addition, children attending these activities see positive role models in the field of science, which helps them build a connection to, and ideally to become stewards of, their environment. Finally, through hands-on STEAM-based activities children are provided the opportunity to interact with the natural world around them, have fun, learn new skills around observing this world, and give voice to their wonder."

### Seattle World School Summer Science Academy

For the last eight years the Seattle World School, in partnership with the Refugee Women's Alliance, SPR, Project RISE (formerly the Vietnamese Friendship Association), and the Seattle School District, has provided a five-week summer

science academy for an average of 100 immigrant and refugee high school students representing 17 different languages. The intent is to provide low-ratio, high-rigor instruction to increase English language proficiency and retention through engagement with the natural world and science. Staff use integrated environmental education in the classroom and corresponding field trips led by Seattle Urban Nature Guides from SPR.

The Seattle World School serves one of the highest-need populations in the Seattle school district, with 96% of the students coming from low-income households, as measured by free and reduced lunch status. The summer academy ensures students retain the English they have learned, and improve their language skills, as well as expand their understanding of the world around them.

“It is a joy to watch students fully engage in learning when they have the opportunity to succeed in an outdoor space,” says Penny Rose, SPR’s Public Education Program Specialist. “This excitement, success and community is then reflected in their academic work within the classroom.”

## Camp Out at Camp Long

Many families have not had the experience of camping and may not feel welcome or have the resources to travel to national or state parks. At Seattle’s Camp Long (a 68-acre City of Seattle park with cabins in West Seattle), however, they can have a similar experience that opens the door of opportunity to the natural world. For ten years, SPR has worked with the National Wildlife Federation and the Delridge Neighborhood Development Association (DNDA) to host low-income families from the nearby High Point neighborhood for free immersive nature experiences through the Summer Camp Out. This summer, 262 people (46 families) stayed in the cabins at Camp Long, went on beach and forest walks (even a night hike), tried out rock climbing, and made s’mores at the campfire.

Yeggy Michael, from DNDA, notes that “One of the things that stood out to me while talking to some of the families who attended the Camp Out for the first time was how surprised they were that this type of place existed in their neighborhood. They were so surprised to find this wonderful place hidden in West Seattle, stating that they could not imagine that a place like this existed. Some of the families asked how they could bring their families at other events or reserve a space for their families in the future. I think the experience left a positive impression on the kids as well as the parents.”

### Learn more

[www.seattle.gov/parks/find/environmental-education-and-outdoor-learning](http://www.seattle.gov/parks/find/environmental-education-and-outdoor-learning)

## Connecting Children to Nature



In 2018, Seattle joined a national cohort of cities seeking ways to increase equitable access to nature, and the benefits it provides to health, education, and community. The *Cities Connecting Children to Nature Initiative* is a partnership between the National League of Cities and the Children & Nature Network.

The first step in the initiative is to engage with the community and conduct research to understand the barriers to equitable access to nature. Seattle Parks and Recreation is currently collaborating with the University of Washington’s EarthLab to conduct two research studies to learn about barriers to nature access in Seattle, which will inform any implementation decisions in the future.

SPR is also leading a citywide effort to bring the many great organizations and agencies working on nature access together to develop a community of practice. The goal is to identify collaborative priorities and align our efforts to make transformative change in our community.