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COMMENTARY

## Opinion: Parks are essential for health. All San Diegans deserve equitable access.



A volunteer carried a trash can overflowing with clippings inside Border Field State Park, Oct. 5, in Imperial Beach. He was one of many who participated in the cleanup of the Tijuana River Estuary. (Howard Lipin/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Many people in San Diego, particularly communities of color, do not have equitable access to the county's beaches, parks, preserves, trails and historic sites.

BY SONIA DIAZ

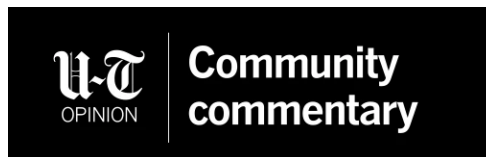
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**Diaz** is the public policy manager for the nonprofit organization [Outdoor Outreach](#) and a resident of Southeast San Diego.

Every young person deserves to experience the healing power of nature. So says 19-year-old Isaac Santos.

Isaac discovered the outdoors through his high school and later graduated from our leadership program at [Outdoor Outreach](#), a nonprofit with the mission to connect youth to the transformative power of the outdoors.



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But these opportunities weren't always accessible to him while growing up in South Bay — an area that has a higher than average incidence of health disparities among children compared to any other part of the county. Individuals' race or ethnicity and where they grow up can mean the difference between having good health or a disease. For example, fewer Latinx elementary students in San Ysidro fared well on the California schools' [physical fitness test](#)

compared to Latinx elementary students in more affluent Del Mar. Not surprisingly, there are more acres of park per thousand people in the north part of San Diego County than in South County.

According to the the San Diego Foundation's 2020 [Parks for Everyone](#) report, many people in San Diego, particularly [communities of color](#), do not have equitable access to the county's beaches, parks, preserves, trails and historic sites. This can have a devastating effect on a child's healthy development. Barriers to the benefits of parks include more than just the lack of parks in a neighborhood. They also include walkability, safety concerns, transportation, cultural inclusion, fees and permits, and considerations of physical disabilities.

Health is a key reason why we need our policymakers to invest in parks. Almost a [third of Californians](#) are experiencing anxiety or depression since the start of the pandemic.

This is especially difficult among the young. As Isaac shares, "Most days I didn't do anything other than stay in my room. I wasn't getting outside, I didn't have a support system that cared about me, and it began to show."



PAID CONTENT

## Blazing New Trails in Drug Discovery at Bristol Myers Squibb

By Bristol Myers Squibb

Imagining the future of medicine and healthcare is one thing, evolving those ideas from science fiction to science reality is quite another. But that's exactly what the Bristol Myers Squibb (BMS) Research & Development site in San Diego is...

Recreational opportunities and access to parks and open space are essential for healthy communities. They give us breathable air, space to exercise, and opportunities to nurture social relationships and community connectivity.

"The outdoors has helped me rediscover myself and what I'm capable of," Isaac says. "I can channel my negative emotions and leave them outside, then come back into everyday life feeling motivated and able to recollect myself."

A connection to parks can provide exposure to career pathways and help build environmental leaders. Now a



The San Diego Union-Tribune

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majority of instructors are program graduates like himself.

Increasing access to the outdoors means opportunities for thousands of youth to find their own sense of purpose and connection.

We need to ensure that today's conservation efforts will carry into the future, by making sure there are people like Isaac in every community who feel connected to — and are invested in caring for — nature. Earlier this month, California Natural Resources Agency Secretary Wade Crowfoot and U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland [unveiled](#) the Outdoor Access for All initiative, alongside an exciting announcement to invest \$548.3 million in grants to put more parks in more than 100 communities across California. These worthwhile investments will help the state meet its ambitious goal to protect 30 percent of lands and waters by 2030, an initiative dubbed 30x30. Making sure

every community in California has access to a park will nurture the next generation of environmental stewards who will carry on the work beyond 2030.

Outdoor Access For All is a huge step forward in addressing equitable access by prioritizing parks in communities that need them the most. Making one-time investments, however, are just the beginning. Our existing parks need ongoing maintenance to address issues of public safety, access, equity and habitat destruction. And we need to ensure functional community access to our parks.

A short bike ride from Isaac's house, Border Field State Park offers a key opportunity for the initiative. One of our region's most important parks, it has high ecological, cultural and recreational value. Yet due to seasonal flooding and a lack of political will, the park is closed to the public for half of the year. California should fund a community access, habitat restoration and climate change mitigation project at Border Field that would meet its 30x30 goals and ensure that nearby South Bay residents can benefit year-round from its trails, beaches and cross-border meeting space, Friendship Park.

Investing in parks is investing in our community's physical and mental health. Prevention is key to shedding the costs of diseases. Taking care of our parks and open space is important for building resiliency in all San Diegans; for communities of color, it is absolutely critical.

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