

New Jersey Hills Media Group



Highlands Highlight: Unplug, Explore, Advocate!

Zachary Cole - August 24, 2021

No one needs to read another opinion article about how great the outdoors are. We all know how good fresh air, exercise, or five minutes in nature can be for us. There are even scientific studies linking time spent outdoors to reduced anxiety and depression, and improved mental health.

It's also not news that culturally we have become increasingly dependent on our mobile devices and that according to the Kaiser Family Foundation children ages 8-18 will typically spend more than seven hours in front of a screen. Doubtless this amount of time is higher among adults!

At the same time, interest and participation in outdoor recreation: hiking, camping, paddling, cycling, fishing, and more is increasing. Even before the gyms, malls and other places people used to visit closed, or travel to exotic foreign destinations was restricted, visitation numbers to our public parks and open spaces has been steadily growing.

For so many people the local park has become a universal medicine for helping our communities tackle the concurrent climate, public health and economic crises - to say nothing of the pandemic! These open fields, or pockets of woodland are oases of peace and calm in an otherwise pretty chaotic world.

Reported statistics for the year 2020 suggest 69% of Americans turned to the outdoors for its ability to combat the mental and physical impacts people felt over and through the series of lockdowns we experienced. Camping saw a 28% increase year-over-year with more people than ever choosing to take their vacations domestically; and 8.1 million more Americans are hiking than in the previous year.

For myself, a trail run through a local park or a ramble through one of our incredible state forests is time to slow down, reflect on my surroundings and draw inspiration for my work at the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.

Now it is important for me to note that all these extra people discovering our open spaces are having an impact on the landscape and adding strain to those charged with stewarding these places so that we, and future generations, can continue to enjoy them.

There are plenty of resources both online and through your local hiking groups to learn basic skills so you can enjoy the outdoors safely and responsibly. Chief among them are the Leave No Trace principles developed by the *Center for Outdoor Ethics*. These principles outline the most important practices people should follow to remain safe and mitigate their impact on the natural environments they are visiting. The key takeaway from these principles is to recreate responsibly looking after yourself, other park visitors and the natural environment.

As we welcome more people into our community, it is crucial that we lead by example, fostering an inclusive and safe environment for those just starting their adventure outdoors. It is just as important that as a community we stand united to advocate for outdoor spaces. Trails occasionally need a little TLC, and park facilities need to be maintained. Access to the outdoors, particularly the spectacular opportunities available to us in the New Jersey Highlands, is a privilege we can all recognize and enjoy.

All this being said, there are still significant barriers for some people to reap the benefits of the outdoors. Access to a park is a privilege, also time constraints and other responsibilities are very real complications for individuals to set aside time for themselves or their families.

The best advice I have for people who are looking to make time for themselves is to schedule that time into your day. Plan ahead to eat your lunch somewhere outside, or enjoy your morning coffee on your front porch before you log on to your devices.

At the weekend, or on your days off, you can be more ambitious. Plan ahead, search online for local nature walks, or research hikes suited to your level. Hint: hikes with any waterfalls, lakes or along rivers are excellent outings to start with, especially for a young family.

Before setting out, check you know your route and have a map handy, either paper or downloaded to your device before you start. Dress appropriately for the weather and the activity, and always carry water and a snack. I always carry a waterproof jacket to make sure the sun stays out!

Invite a friend or family member to join you so you can share the experience with them, and make sure to tell someone where you are going, and let them know when you are home.

This fall I hope to begin leading hikes again and sharing some of the Highland's spectacular open spaces. These outings are open to everyone at any level. To find out more about these and to see our favorite Highlands outings, check out our Highlands Coalition website: www.njhighlandscoalition.org.

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