

Representative Geran Tarr
Alaska State Capitol
Room 128
Juneau, AK 99801

April X, 2021

RE: HCR 4 - Urging the Governor to establish the Office of Outdoor Equity

Representative Tarr,

I am writing to you today to express my support for House Concurrent Resolution 4, “Urging the Governor to Establish the Office of Outdoor Equity.” This resolution not only acknowledges the serious inequities in outdoor activity participation but provides a potential solution for this issue: the Office of Outdoor Equity.

Outdoor recreation activities are critical for many people’s mental and physical health, especially for the vast number of Alaskans who depend on subsistence activities to support their families. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the important nature of our public outdoor recreation areas – as our trails, parks, beaches, and ski hills were one of the few venues where people could safely recreate in a socially-distant way. Outdoor recreation also boosts civic engagement, environmental awareness, and even cognitive function in children.

However, a study conducted by the US Forest Service showed that, despite an increasingly diverse population, there is a significant underrepresentation of racial/ethnic minorities in park visitation statistics. For example, in the Pacific Southwest region, despite having a minority population of 49.7%, they only represented 21.5% of visitors to our national parks. The same study showed that this is not due to some inherent difference in outdoor interest, it is due to constraints such as perception of safety, cost, and transportation.

The federal government and many state legislatures have recognized this disparity as a key equity issue. New Mexico and California have enacted programs similar to the proposed Office of Outdoor Equity, Wyoming and Montana have enacted cost-reduced programs for new hunters, and in 2019, Congress passed the Every Kid Outdoors Act, which allowed fourth graders and their families to enter federal parks for free.

In summation, every Alaskan deserves the right to visit our unparalleled outdoor recreation areas, especially considering the continued public health and financial impact of COVID-19. No one in our communities should feel unwelcome or unsafe in our outdoor recreation areas based on their identity/background, and no one should be barred from a hike due to cost. With the establishment of the Office of Outdoor Equity, there may finally be some formal effort to fund projects that increase access to our parks, trails, beaches, cabins, and ski hills, especially in regards to communities that have been historically shut out of these activities. Additionally, with the growth of Alaska’s outdoor recreation industry, we must ensure that these economic opportunities are distributed equitably as well.

In closing, thank you to Rep. Tarr for putting this legislation forward, and I urge all of Alaska’s legislators to support this resolution.

Sincerely,

Maya Lapinski