

# PARKS FOR EVERYONE

GREEN ACCESS FOR SAN DIEGO COUNTY



San Diego County is widely regarded as a region with great access to the outdoors. From our beaches to the mountains, our regionally interconnected system of parks and natural areas are a model for the preservation of green space for people and wildlife alike. Yet, not all San Diegans can access our great outdoors and the many benefits it offers.

Why do parks matter? Access to green space directly correlates with decreased rates of obesity in adults and children. Many people recognize the benefits of parks to physical and mental wellness. We have also witnessed that parks in a neighborhood contribute to community building and provide a gathering place for celebration. Green space also brings important economic and environmental benefits, raising property values, filtering out air and water pollutants and providing shady oases on a hot day.

The *Parks for Everyone* report is intended to illuminate the disparities that exist in our region with respect to access to green space. We hope that this report will provide a foundation for community dialogue and action to ensure that all San Diegans have an outdoor place to play, rejuvenate, and come together to celebrate what makes our region special.



**David Engel, DDS, PhD**

*Chair, Environment  
Working Group*



**Bob Kelly**

*President & CEO,  
The San Diego Foundation*



**Emily Young, PhD**

*Senior Director,  
Environment Program*



**Marisa Aurora Quiroz, MA**

*Manager,  
Environment Program*

## A MESSAGE FROM ADRIAN AND BETSY GONZALEZ

Betsy and I are proud to be San Diegans and, like so many others in San Diego, understand first-hand the importance of growing up near parks. Parks and green spaces offer places to play, create, reflect, and thrive. They also increase the health of our region and all of our families by providing many options for recreational activities.

We believe every child should have a place to play, which is why we support the *Parks for Everyone* report. We hope it will enhance awareness and appreciation around the many health benefits of our parks, and why it is so important to increase access to them. Together, we can ensure that every child connects with the beauty of nature in San Diego for generations to come.

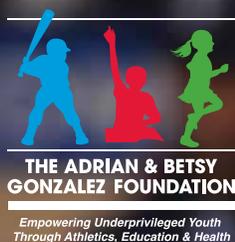
Sincerely,

*Adrian and Betsy Gonzalez*



*Adrian and Betsy have long been committed to supporting underprivileged youth in the areas of athletics, education, and health. The Adrian and Betsy Gonzalez Foundation, held at The San Diego Foundation, focuses on helping families*

*of autistic youth access much needed health resources, scholarships for college-bound youth, and park enhancements along the US-Mexico Border.*



# PARKS FOR EVERYONE

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

The City Project<sup>1</sup> and The San Diego Foundation have partnered to gain a better understanding of the state of green access in the San Diego region. The *Parks for Everyone* report uses geographic, demographic, and economic data to map and assess the overall accessibility of the region's green space, as well as to examine the equity of green access by analyzing whether certain groups of people, based on income level, race or ethnicity, have more or less access to these resources.

Unlike existing maps, which plot green space or population, the maps in *Parks for Everyone* plot green space in relation to population. Because demographic and economic data on visitors to green space is not always available, the analysis uses several other metrics to measure accessibility. In addition to mapping and analyzing the current state of green access, the report presents recommendations for improving green access in the San Diego region.

The study area is the San Diego region, which encompasses the 18 incorporated cities in San Diego County, unincorporated areas of San Diego County, and the 18 federally-recognized tribal reservations within the geographic boundaries of the county.

The *Parks for Everyone* report is a summary of the white paper, "Green Access and Equity for the San Diego Region," which is available on The City Project's and The San Diego Foundation's web sites.

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<sup>1</sup>The City Project is a nonprofit organization based in Los Angeles, CA, that has worked and published extensively on equal access to parks, school fields, rivers, beaches, forests, transportation, and related issues at the intersection of equal justice, democracy, and livability. Please visit their website at [www.cityprojectca.org](http://www.cityprojectca.org) to see more of their work.

## OUR GREEN SPACE IS OUR QUALITY OF LIFE

In addition to its intrinsic value, green space provides many important benefits to San Diego residents and to the natural environment. Green space is a venue for physical activity, which plays a vital role in combating obesity and its associated medical complications, and improving overall physical health.

Physical activity promotes social development, encourages healthy lifestyle choices, positively impacts a student's academic performance, and contributes to psychological well-being. Additionally, green space provides economic benefits to the San Diego region in the form of increased property values, and revenue generation from visiting and using green space. It also offers important environmental benefits, such as helping to offset climate change, increasing storm water absorption, reducing air and water pollution, and providing habitat for animals and plants.





## Defining Green Space and Access

**GREEN SPACE:** “Green space” refers to all parks, natural open spaces, beaches, playing fields, trails, and recreational facilities. The National Recreation and Parks Association, recommends **ten acres of park space per 1,000 residents.**

**GREEN ACCESS:** The presence of green space alone, is not enough. In order to truly benefit from these resources, San Diego residents must have access to green space. Many factors determine the accessibility of green space:

- Location of natural geographic features and walkability
- Proximity to population centers and whether green space can be reached without a car
- Whether or not a park is safe or perceived as safe by local residents
- Physical appearance, condition, and recreational amenities
- Whether it is open to the public, hours of operation, cost of admission, multilingual signage, and available park information
- The planning process for the development of urban parks

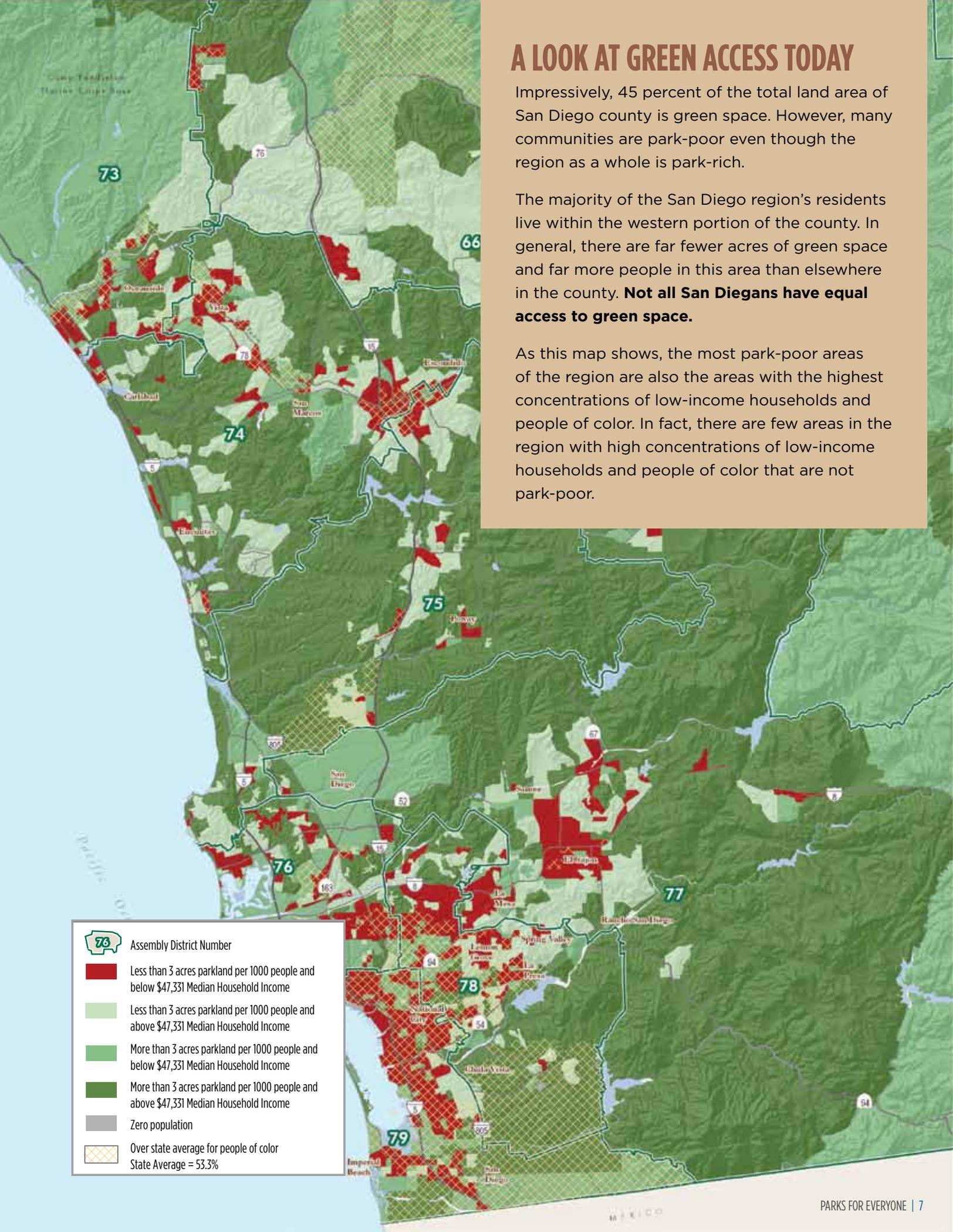
**PARK-POOR:** Refers to any geographic area that provides **less than three acres of green space per 1,000 residents.**

# A LOOK AT GREEN ACCESS TODAY

Impressively, 45 percent of the total land area of San Diego county is green space. However, many communities are park-poor even though the region as a whole is park-rich.

The majority of the San Diego region’s residents live within the western portion of the county. In general, there are far fewer acres of green space and far more people in this area than elsewhere in the county. **Not all San Diegans have equal access to green space.**

As this map shows, the most park-poor areas of the region are also the areas with the highest concentrations of low-income households and people of color. In fact, there are few areas in the region with high concentrations of low-income households and people of color that are not park-poor.



-  Assembly District Number
-  Less than 3 acres parkland per 1000 people and below \$47,331 Median Household Income
-  Less than 3 acres parkland per 1000 people and above \$47,331 Median Household Income
-  More than 3 acres parkland per 1000 people and below \$47,331 Median Household Income
-  More than 3 acres parkland per 1000 people and above \$47,331 Median Household Income
-  Zero population
-  Over state average for people of color  
State Average = 53.3%



Photo Courtesy of WildCoast

## WHY PARKS MATTER:

*Above image: Trails in Otay Regional Park offer a way for families to recreate and stay physically fit.*

# Physical Health and Obesity

The health implications from the lack of green spaces to play in are profound. Nearly one out of three children in San Diego (31 percent) are overweight or obese. The highest concentrations of overweight or obese children are in the most park-poor areas of the region, which also have the highest concentrations of low-income households and people of color.

More than half of the adults in San Diego County (age 18 and older) are overweight or obese, and the rates are higher among populations of color. Children are typically the ones who lose the most by not having access to green space, but inequities in access to parks and recreation adversely affect everyone. Physical fitness levels and rates of obesity are indicators of equity in green access. Parks can encourage exercise and help combat obesity by providing an important venue for physical activity.

### PERCENTAGE OF PHYSICALLY FIT STUDENTS IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY BY ETHNICITY

Race/Ethnicity	5th Grade (%)
White, Non-Hispanic	40.5%
Latino	20.8%
African American	26.4%
Asian and Pacific Islander	40.7%
All San Diego County Students	29.8%

*The above data from 2008 shows 5th graders who meet minimum physical fitness standards.*

## PARK ACCESS AND FITNESS

This map shows that our region's most park-poor communities are also the areas in our region with the highest childhood obesity rates.

These conditions have long-term implications on the health of these populations and can also become an economic burden to the region's health care system.

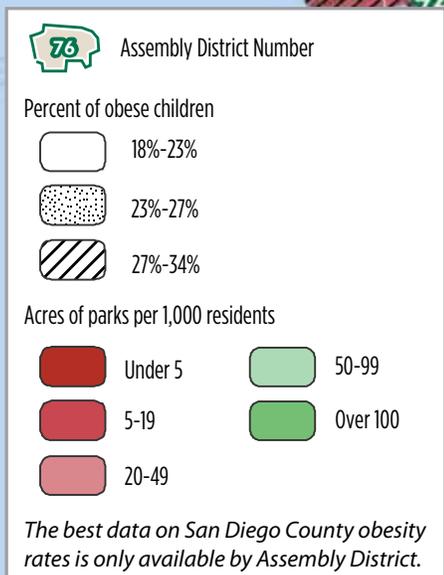




Photo Courtesy of WildCoast

## WHY PARKS MATTER:

*Above image: Volunteer groups help create the next generation of environmental stewards.*

# Psychological Health and Development

Green space provides needed reprieve from the everyday pressures that lead to mental fatigue. This improves the health of adults and children by reducing stress and depression and improving focus, attention span, productivity, and recovery from illness. Evidence shows that spending time in parks can reduce irritability and impulsivity, such activity can also promote intellectual and physical development in children and teenagers by providing a safe and engaging environment to interact and develop social skills, language and reasoning abilities, as well as muscle strength and coordination.

Researchers have found associations between contact with the natural environment and improvements in the functioning of children with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). People living in public housing who have contact with natural environments, such as trees, are more likely to make choices that will

improve their lives. Several studies have found that school children who regularly participate in physical activity have improved academic performance over their peers who do not. Increasing physical activity can yield improvements in academic performance similar to additional time in the classroom.



## WHY PARKS MATTER:

# Recreation Builds Character

Fun is not frivolous; children have the right to the simple joys of playing in safe parks and green spaces. Parks provide a place for social support and an opportunity for self-determination—both important factors in lowering anxiety and improving a person’s overall mood.

This is true for children and adults, and it is particularly significant for older adults. Social support is derived from the friendship or companionship that comes from the shared experience of participating in activities in a park with other people. The psychological benefits of self-determination come when a person voluntarily chooses to visit a park. By being in a recreational setting, that person is exercising the freedom to decide how to spend their time. People that lack easy access to a park do not

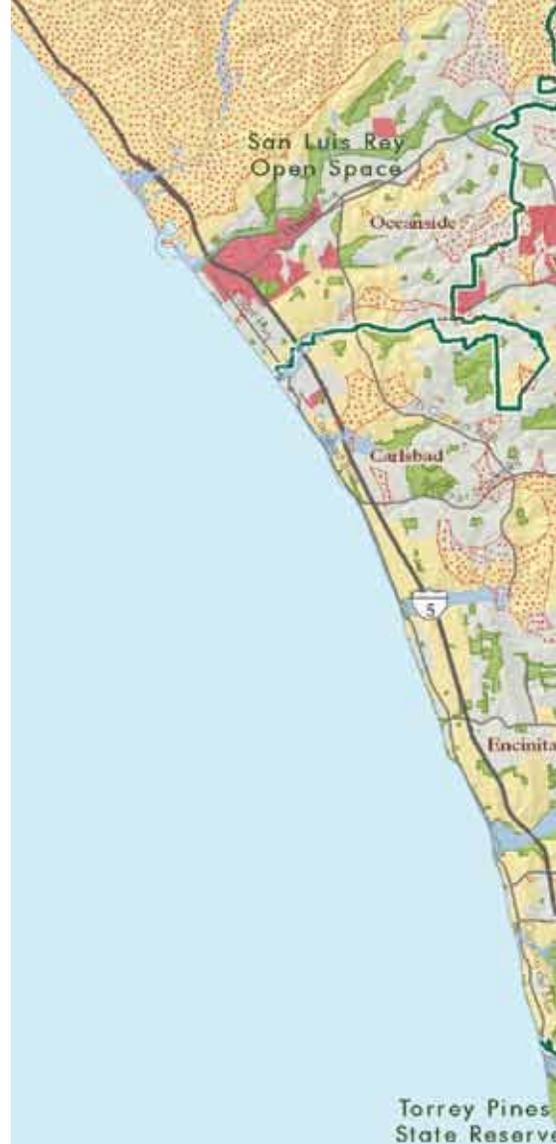
have the same opportunities for social support and self-determination as people who do have access to parks. Youth recreational programs, including active recreation and team sports, promote positive choices and have been shown to help reduce youth violence, crime, drug abuse, and teen pregnancy. Sports and recreation provide life-long lessons in teamwork and help to build character.

# WHAT TRULY CONSTITUTES USABLE PARKLANDS AND GREEN SPACE?

Determining the total amount of accessible green space in San Diego County is challenging. Available green space data includes schoolyards, public golf courses, and cemeteries.

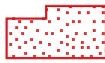
These spaces are generally not accessible to those residents most in need of usable recreational areas. For instance, a schoolyard may be closed to the public for safety reasons, and the cost of using a golf course may make it prohibitive for some to use it.

As seen in red on the opposing page, there are many park-poor areas in San Diego County. These areas also have higher youth populations and poverty when compared to other parts of the county. When looking at opportunities for increasing public access to green space, it is important to understand the potential use for the space, as well as its limitations. Consequently, in some already park-poor communities, they have even less usable green space than would appear on the map.

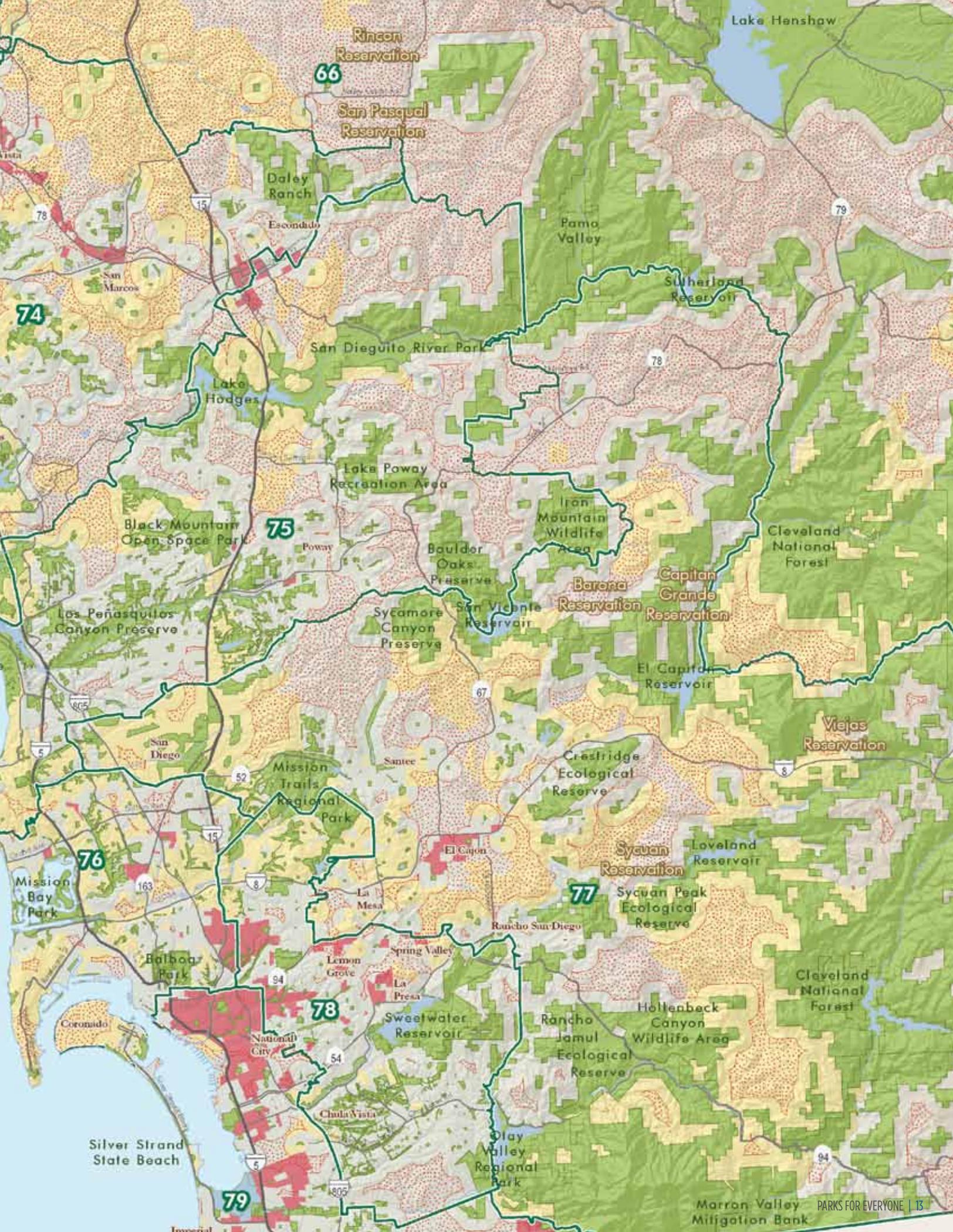


 76 Assembly District Number

Park Access:

-  Existing Park/Green Space
-  Over half-a-mile from a park
-  Exceeds San Diego county average\*
-  Below San Diego county average\*
-  Within San Diego county average\*

*\*Average in terms of proportion of youth, racial/ethnic diversity, poverty status, and lack of car access in relation to the population at large.*



Lake Henshaw

66

Rincon Reservation

San Pasqual Reservation

Daley Ranch

Escondido

Pamo Valley

79

78

67

74

75

San Dieguito River Park

Lake Hodges

Lake Poway Recreation Area

Iron Mountain Wildlife Area

Black Mountain Open Space Park

Cleveland National Forest

Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve

Boulder Oaks Preserve

Sycamore Canyon Preserve

San Vicente Reservoir

Barona Reservation

Capitan Grande Reservation

El Capitan Reservoir

Viejas Reservation

5

15

52

76

163

94

54

5

805

79

Mission Trails Regional Park

Santee

Crestridge Ecological Reserve

El Capon

Sycuan Reservation

Loveland Reservoir

77

Sycuan Peak Ecological Reserve

Mission Bay Park

Balboa Park

La Mesa

Lemon Grove

Spring Valley

La Presa

Chula Vista

Sweetwater Reservoir

Rancho San Diego

Rancho Jamul Ecological Reserve

Hollenbeck Canyon Wildlife Area

Cleveland National Forest

Silver Strand State Beach

Clay Valley Regional Park

Marron Valley Mitigation Bank



## WHY PARKS MATTER:

# Community Pride and Cultural Heritage

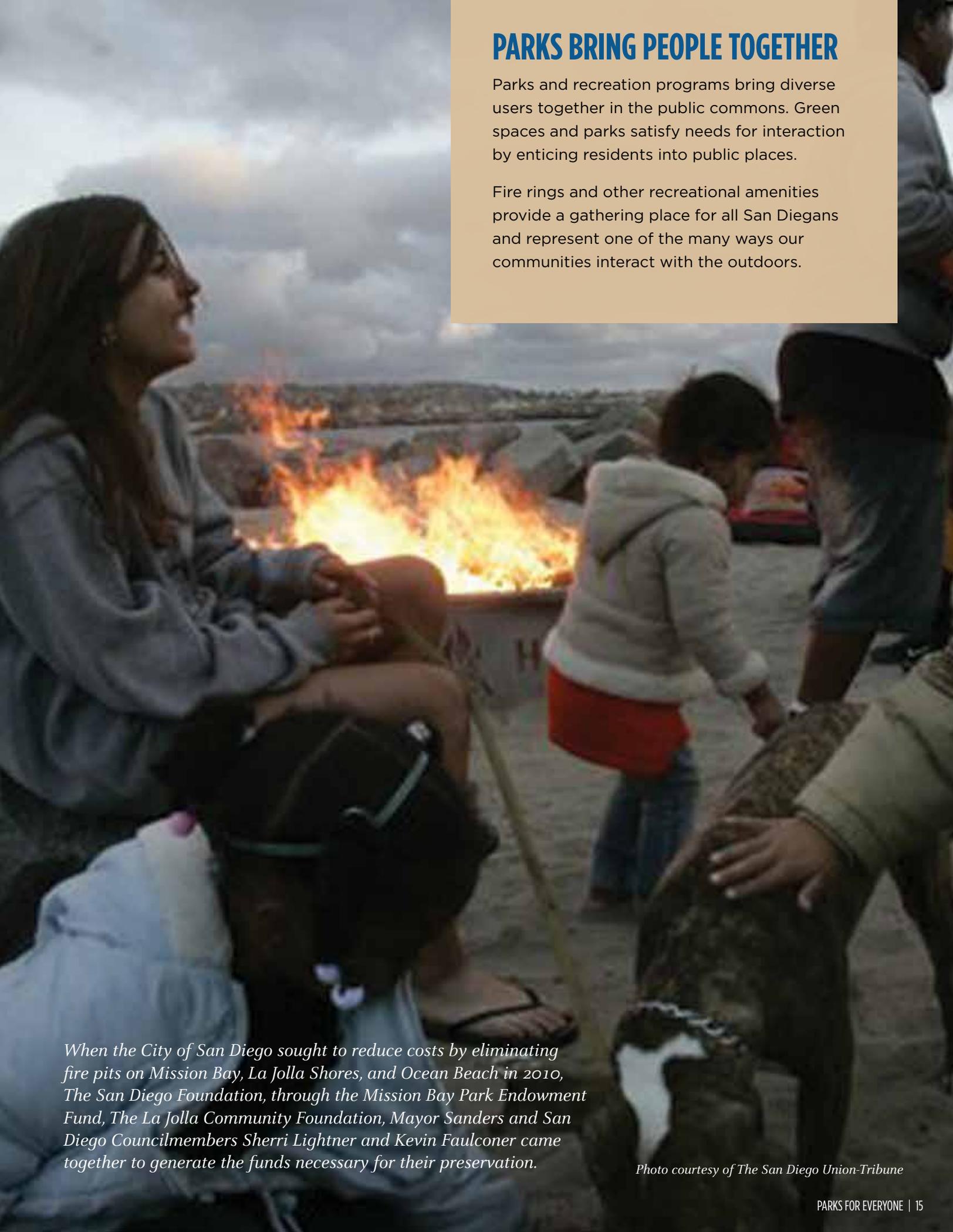
Parks satisfy our need for social interaction by enticing residents into public spaces with trees, greenery, and venues for sports and active recreation. Parks become a source of community building, pride, and inspiration for further neighborhood improvements and revitalization. Social interaction and neighborhood spaces have been identified as key facets of healthy communities.

Parks provide important places to celebrate diverse culture, heritage, and art, and should reflect the diversity of a place and its residents. The Azalea Park Water Conservation Garden, in the Mid-City/City Heights community, is a demonstration of how neighborhood residents can unite to build green and open spaces that educate, inspire creativity and cultivate community. The nine-acre parkland owned by the City of San Diego and maintained by Azalea Park neighborhood volunteers, is a whimsical recycled art garden landscaped with hundreds of

drought- and fire-resistant species. Similarly, Chicano Park in Barrio Logan, home to a collection of Chicano murals, is an example of how parks can acknowledge the contributions and interests of many cultures. Areas that are park-poor have a deficit of green space and the many opportunities it provides to reflect and build local community pride.

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*Above image: On June 30, 1970, the City of San Diego and the State of California officially authorized the construction of a park after residents organized, and persuaded the City to preserve the land underneath Coronado Bay Bridge as a 1.8-acre public park. While Chicano Park represents an important victory for equitable green access, much greater access to parklands is needed in this and other park-poor neighborhoods in South San Diego County.*



## PARKS BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER

Parks and recreation programs bring diverse users together in the public commons. Green spaces and parks satisfy needs for interaction by enticing residents into public places.

Fire rings and other recreational amenities provide a gathering place for all San Diegans and represent one of the many ways our communities interact with the outdoors.

*When the City of San Diego sought to reduce costs by eliminating fire pits on Mission Bay, La Jolla Shores, and Ocean Beach in 2010, The San Diego Foundation, through the Mission Bay Park Endowment Fund, The La Jolla Community Foundation, Mayor Sanders and San Diego Councilmembers Sherri Lightner and Kevin Faulconer came together to generate the funds necessary for their preservation.*

*Photo courtesy of The San Diego Union-Tribune*



Photo courtesy of REI

*Above image: Green space helps moderate hot summer temperatures.*

## WHY PARKS MATTER:

# Climate Resilience and Conservation

Local climate scientists from Scripps Institution of Oceanography have tracked rising temperatures in the San Diego region since the 1970s. Their climate projections for coming decades indicate a trend toward hotter and drier regional conditions. Other projections suggest that rising temperatures will contribute to dirtier air, as more hot and sunny days increase ozone air pollution.

Public health researchers at the University of Southern California have found that low-income communities of color will be most significantly impacted by warmer weather and dirtier air. These communities already experience higher rates of mortality during heat waves, as well as asthma and other respiratory illnesses associated with air pollution. Many native plants and animals are also particularly vulnerable to climate change, and may be unable to adapt to the rapid ecological changes brought about by hotter, drier regional conditions.

Green space can help to offset the adverse effects of a warming climate. A canopy of trees, for example, provides shade and cooler temperatures that moderate the effect of asphalt, concrete, and other man-made building materials that trap heat. Trees and other vegetation filter out harmful pollutants, improving the air we breathe. A network of nature preserves across various landscapes and elevations in our region would help animals and plants to relocate and adapt to a changing climate.



Photo Courtesy of Walter Uri

## WHY PARKS MATTER:

*Above image: Living near a park improves quality of life.*

# Economic Vitality

When cities create urban parks, property values rise, local businesses benefit, and jobs are created, positively contributing to the local, state and national economies. Creating new parks and improving green access also offers economic benefits for low-income communities of color in the San Diego region.

One recent study of the San Diego region found that being located near open space adds between five and ten percent to the total value of a home, in both high-income and low-income communities. Green infrastructure projects, such as developing, expanding, and enhancing parks, can be a source of green collar jobs for local workers in San Diego. Giving priority in the contract selection to local small businesses, particularly those which are woman-owned, veteran-owned, or owned by a disadvantaged community member, can help ensure that benefits are fairly distributed.

Likewise, training investments, bridge programs, and apprenticeship programs that focus on creating career ladders allow workers to access higher-skilled jobs. A network of parks in every neighborhood contributes to the economic well-being of our entire region.

Access to existing green spaces can often be improved by providing transportation options beyond cars, such as public transit or walkways and bicycle paths. Developing infrastructure that people can use to get to parks without a car creates jobs, reduces transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions, and improves local air quality.



## Opportunities for Improving Our Green Space

The San Diego Foundation is helping to create an interconnected system of parks and natural areas throughout San Diego County by providing support to local land trusts, conservation organizations, and “friends” groups. Over the past decade, these groups have preserved over 28,000 acres of land that provide a home to native plants and animals.

Through the public’s support of The San Diego Foundation’s Environment Program we have funded projects that enhance access to parks and natural areas, promote volunteerism, and provide opportunities for people of all ages to get involved in protecting our precious green space.

To contribute or find out more, please visit [www.sdfoundation.org](http://www.sdfoundation.org).

# How you can help:

There are a growing number of nonprofit organizations working in partnership with local governments and businesses to increase community access to green space throughout San Diego County. Some ongoing local community efforts include:

## Transit to State Parks and National Forests

It costs approximately \$150 for a child to participate in a weekend excursion to Anza Borrego State Park or Cleveland National Forest through local nonprofit programs dedicated to connecting kids with nature.

## Interconnected Regional Canyon Park System

Our canyons are a unique feature in many urban neighborhoods, and efforts are currently underway to restore canyons and create a managed park system that links all of the canyons together. It costs approximately \$2,500 to support a community service day dedicated to canyon restoration and enhancement.

## Otay Valley Regional Park

The 13-mile long Otay River Valley traverses one of the most park-poor areas in the San Diego region. A number of nonprofit organizations are working to create a 9,000 acre park. A donation of \$5,000 or more can support the work of these nonprofits.

## Chollas Creek Restoration

The 32-mile area encompassing Chollas Creek winds through some of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in our region. A donation of \$5,000 or

more can support local efforts to build an Earth Corps of youth to clean and create an urban park around the creek.

## San Diego River Park

The 52-mile San Diego River has a long and rich history of human habitation, extending back 8,000 years. A network of groups is working – from the Cuyamaca Mountains to the Pacific Ocean – to create a river park which will include trails, community facilities, picnic areas, and signage. A donation of \$5,000 or more can support the work of these nonprofits to complete this river park.

## Community Gardens

Currently, there are many efforts underway in the San Diego region to increase access to locally-grown, healthy foods. Community gardens offer a way to improve local health and increase green access. Olivewood Gardens in National City and the New Roots Community Farm in City Heights are two great examples of how communities come together to promote civic engagement around healthy eating and connecting children and families to nature. A donation of \$5,000 or more would support the work of nonprofits currently working to increase the amount of community gardens in the region.





## **MAKING GREEN ACCESS A PRIORITY IN THE SAN DIEGO REGION**

Green space, including parks, schoolyards, rivers, beaches, forests, mountains, and trails, provides the essential infrastructure for healthy and livable neighborhoods. It is now time for citizens and political leaders to work together and ensure that every community in the San Diego region has access to green space.

By prioritizing green space projects in communities that are both park-poor and income-poor, we can reduce the disparities in access described in this report. Applying physical, psychological, and social health criteria to public infrastructure investments can help to improve the health and quality of life for everyone, especially children and youth of color and others in low-income communities.

The health and well-being of our children and communities depends on our actions today.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO NOW?

- Contact your mayor, city councilmembers, and county supervisor to encourage policies, plans, and investments in your neighborhood that support increasing access to green space and send them a copy of this report.
- Share this report with your family, friends, and co-workers. Download a copy from The San Diego Foundation's web site at [www.sdfoundation.org](http://www.sdfoundation.org).
- Get involved in community efforts to keep green spaces clean, build trails, plant community gardens, and restore natural habitats. Enlist the help of your neighbors and friends to deepen their connection to and build a shared sense of stewardship for the nature in their backyards.
- Support community-based projects by giving to The San Diego Foundation's Land & Watershed Conservation Fund. This fund supports a variety of nonprofits working in partnership with local governments, neighborhoods, and businesses to improve access to green space and enhance the amenities provided to all communities.

# PARKS FOR EVERYONE

## JOIN THE DIALOGUE

The intention of this project is to highlight the importance of green access and to provide baseline information on the state of green access in the San Diego region. It is critical that green space is accessible to all San Diego residents, irrespective of race or ethnicity or economic standing. The status and equity of green access in the San Diego region are constantly evolving, and this report is an important step in understanding how well San Diegans are able to benefit from the region's green space. We hope *Parks for Everyone* will be used by concerned citizens, community groups, elected officials, planners, funders, and all other stakeholders to inform and prioritize actions and decisions that positively impact green access.

This report was made possible through the generous contributions of REI and donors to The San Diego Foundation, including the Fletcher Family Fund and the Hattie Ettinger Conservation Fund. Such contributions enable The Foundation to provide leadership and strategic response to the ever-changing needs of the San Diego region.



Founded in 1975, The San Diego Foundation's purpose is to promote and increase effective and responsible charitable giving. The Foundation manages nearly \$500 million in assets, almost half of which reside in permanent endowment funds that extend the impact of today's gifts to future generations. Since its inception, The Foundation has granted more than \$700 million to the San Diego region's nonprofit community.

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Paul Eichen

William K. Geppert

Benjamin Haddad

Thomas Hall

Conny Jamison

Connie L. Matsui

Paul I. Meyer

Hollyce J. Phillips

Barbara A. Sawrey, PhD

Nancy Spector

Carisa M. Wisniewski

James Ziegler

## The San Diego Foundation's Environmental Working Group Members:

David Engel, DDS, PhD, Chair  
*Retired Professor*

Diane Coombs, Vice Chair  
*Community Volunteer*

Allison Alberts, PhD,  
*Zoological Society of San Diego Institute  
for Conservation Research*

Patricia Butler, *BRG Consulting, Inc.*

Myrian Solis Coronel,  
*REI, Inc.*

Vicki Estrada, *Estrada Land Planning*

Joaquin Fletcher, *Pechanga  
Development Corporation*

Keith Greer, *San Diego Association of  
Governments (SANDAG)*

Conny Jamison, *The San Diego  
Foundation's Board of Governors*

Peggy Lauer, *WELL Network*

Andrew Lissner, PhD, *Science  
Applications International Corporation*

Tom Oberbauer, *County of San Diego*

Susan Randerson, *Community Volunteer*

Diane Rosenberg, *Community Volunteer*

Tomás Torres, *US Environmental  
Protection Agency*

## Green Access Report Contributors:

Eric Bowlby  
*San Diego Canyonlands*

Anahid Brakke  
*Community Volunteer*

Janie DeCelles  
*Community Volunteer*

Vicki Estrada  
*Estrada Land Planning*

Kathleen Ferrier  
*Healthy Equity By Design*

GreenInfo Network

Ellee Igoe  
*International Rescue Committee*

Richard Kiy  
*International Community Foundation*

Cheryl Moder  
*San Diego County Childhood  
Obesity Initiative*

Susan Randerson  
*Community Volunteer*

Myrian Solis Coronel  
*REI, Inc.*

Ann Tartre  
*Equinox Center*

David Varner  
*San Diego Canyonlands*

Dick Rol  
*San Diego Canyonlands*

Katie Westfall  
*WildCoast*

Chris Zirkle  
*City of San Diego  
Open Space Division*

## The City Project Staff:

Robert García  
*Executive Director and Counsel*

Seth Strongin  
*Policy and Research Manager*

## The San Diego Foundation's Staff:

Bob Kelly  
*President & CEO*

Emily Young, PhD  
*Senior Director, Environment  
Program*

Marisa Aurora Quiroz, MA  
*Manager, Environment Program*

