

Outdoor Afro

Reconnects reluctant families to nature



Founder, Rue Mapp

Whether it's biking, hiking or fishing if you're an outdoor enthusiast, or someone who wants to be, you need to know about Outdoor Afro.

What is Outdoor Afro?

Outdoor Afro is an online community created to reconnect African Americans with the great outdoors. It's made up of individuals from all backgrounds who use digital media to not only share their outdoor experiences, but also explore barriers they may face participating in outdoor activities.

Founder Rue Mapp says Outdoor Afro started as a personal expression

of who she is—an African-American mom who loves the outdoors, loves to share adventures with her three children, and a person who is enthralled with technology.

Oakland-based Mapp grew up enjoying things like hunting, fishing, camping, rock climbing and her favorite—bicycling. She loves exploring the backcountry on bike because “you get to experience things you normally wouldn't get to experience.” But over the years, Mapp noticed was that there were very few African Americans participating in these activities.

For some African Americans, the idea

of the outdoors doesn't create warm and fuzzy feelings within, especially those whose grandparents and great-grandparents were forced to work the land as slaves. Enjoying the outdoors for recreational or pleasure wasn't encouraged back then, and in some cases, still isn't. Mapp has made it her mission to change that. She not only



already outdoor enthusiasts as well as those of us who are slowly getting on board. Recently there was a post about Barbara Hillary, the first African-American woman on record to reach the North and South Pole

Through digital media and public speaking, Mapp inspires her audiences to think about recreational participation in innovative ways. Most recently she was a presenter at the American Camp Association conference in San Diego and discussed the benefits of family camping and cultivating and recognizing diversity in family camping. Mapp has also been involved in First Lady Michelle Obama's fitness initiative, the "Let's Move Campaign," where she was a part of a think tank of organizations that gathered together to discuss how to roll out the campaign.

Barriers to Enjoying the Outdoors

For many, it's not that they don't want to participate in outdoor activities, but there are various barriers that prevent them from enjoying the outdoors. Here are a few suggestions for dealing with potential barriers.

Health or Disabilities—According to Outdoors Without Limits, "Nearly 250,000 people each year stop pursuing outdoor passions due to illness or accident." Outdoors Without Limits is a national organization that educates those with disabilities and pairs up people with disabilities with those without disabilities, helping them enjoy things like fishing, horseback riding, archery, kayaking, camping and more. So don't let your health or disability stop you from doing what you love!

Fear—Don't let fear of the outdoors prevent you from exploring and trying something new. Mapp suggests that you "Start where you are."

Take small steps to get into the activity you desire to do. Find someone who is doing it, and tag along. Don't know anyone? Check out Outdoor Afro's website to find others in your area who are doing the activity that you want to do.

Local San Diego Outdoor Resources

With its perfect weather, San Diego is the ideal city for those who enjoy nature and sports. Forbes.com ranks San Diego in the top ten best cities for the outdoors.

Outdoor Adventure Center & Gear Rental

www.mwrtoday.com/Sandiego/outdoor

San Diego Skydiving

www.sandiego-skydiving.net/index.php

The University of San Diego- Experiential Learning & Adventure Center

www.sandiego.edu/explore

San Diego Convention and Visitors Bureau

www.sandiego.org/nav/Visitors/WhatToDo

believes that African Americans can become healthier by spending time in the outdoors, but also more in touch with their environment, which in turn will encourage them get more involved in their communities.

Making the Connection

Though Outdoor Afro was originally created for the African American community, Mapp encourages people from all backgrounds to get involved. Through Outdoor Afro's website, blogs, Facebook and Twitter, people are able

to connect with others who share their interests. Using social media, Mapp has created a vehicle designed to bring people together, raise awareness and assist them in experiencing new adventures. Mapp says that Outdoor Afro believes in "supporting people where they are. Some people like to RV and that makes them no less [an outdoorsman] than someone who's out in the backcountry of the Sierras."

From hikers to surfers, Mapp profiles African Americans in her fascinating blogs, which touch on those who are

Don't let high cost stop you from enjoying the outdoors.—Find activities that have a minimal expense or better yet, are free! Walking along the beach, hiking or fishing are just a few things that are often free. Or check out the state and local parks. You can often spend the whole day enjoying the outdoors for free. Note: Each locality offers something different for visitors.

Concerned about the cost of equipment?—No worries! Shop on sale, borrow or consider renting items, especially if you're not sure an activity is for you. Many sporting goods stores have rental programs, like REI. Contact an REI near you to find out which rental gear is offered by that store. There are also retail stores that specialize in used equipment, such as Play It Again Sports.

Lack of Time—You always make time for things you really want to do!

Top Five Tips for Enjoying the Outdoors as a Family—As a family, determine what everyone enjoys doing. Look at the local and regional parks' calendars. You'll find that they offer many things for free. Mapp says there are "national parks in urban cities that people don't know about."

Join a club where people get together to participate in various outdoor activities.

"Approach new activities with an open mind and participate at your own level. Know what you like and know your limits," Mapp suggests.

When asked if Outdoor Afro is what she envisioned, Mapp says, "It has turned into so much more." Mapp truly believes in her mission and says, "We all have the laptops, televisions and smart phones, but if we incorporate the outdoors within those interests, we'll have a more than rich life."

If you're interested in having Mapp speak to your group or want to learn more about Outdoor Afro visit www.outdoorafro.com. You can also follow Mapp and Outdoor Afro on Twitter and Facebook. ❖

Sharon C. Cooper is a wife, stepmother of two, freelance writer and virtual assistant.