

Color My Outdoors

Changing the Narrative & Career Pathways in Urban Forestry

1. Organizational Mission and Project History

Color My Outdoors is a grassroots 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to rewriting the outdoor narrative to recognize and celebrate the contributions of People of Color. Founded in Western North Carolina in 2021, we work to dismantle systemic inequities in outdoor access, representation, and leadership for Black and Brown communities in the Southeastern U.S.

Our Work is Driven by Four Key Pillars:

- **Cultivating Leaders** – Expanding access to outdoor careers through training and certification scholarships (e.g., Wilderness First Aid, Wilderness First Responder).
- **Changing Perceptions** – Using storytelling to challenge stereotypes and amplify the voices of People of Color in conservation, forestry, and land stewardship.
- **Building Skills & Confidence** – Helping adults and caregivers develop outdoor skills to foster intergenerational change in outdoor participation.
- **Collaborating Toward Change** – Strengthening networks of diverse-led outdoor businesses, co-hosting events, and advocating for environmental policy.

While all four pillars contribute to racial equity in outdoor spaces, this project will focus on:

- **Changing Perceptions** – Elevating urban forestry professionals of color through storytelling to inspire and expose career pathways.
- **Cultivating Leaders** – Creating career visibility in forestry, conservation, and tree care to connect People of Color to workforce training and employment opportunities.

2. Need for the Project & Intended Outcomes

The Need

North Carolina is home to some of the most ecologically rich forests in the country, yet Black and Brown communities remain excluded from these spaces and the environmental careers tied to them. The urban forestry industry—a \$25.8 billion economic engine in North Carolina—presents a viable pathway to economic mobility. However, People of Color are significantly underrepresented in this sector, often due to a lack of exposure to career pathways, mentors, and culturally relevant engagement. The exclusion of People of Color from urban forestry has profound consequences:

- **Nature Deprivation & Urban Heat Exposure** – Redlined communities in Asheville, NC, are up to 10°F hotter than wealthier, tree-lined areas (NC Climate Office).
- **Environmental Industry’s “Green Ceiling”** – Less than 16% of forestry and conservation professionals are People of Color (Green 2.0).
- **Lost Economic Opportunity** – Forestry generates over 151,700 jobs in North Carolina, yet Black and Brown professionals are vastly underrepresented in this growing sector.

Our Solution

Color My Outdoors will use storytelling to bridge the gap between Black and Brown communities and careers in urban forestry. Research shows that exposure to role models in outdoor and conservation fields increases participation and career interest among young People of Color (Outdoor Industry Association, 2023). Yet, these stories are rarely told. This multimedia initiative will:

- **Increase Awareness & Exposure to Forestry Careers** – We will publish written profiles, video spotlights, and social media content showcasing Black and Brown professionals in tree care, conservation, and urban forestry.
- **Elevate Intergenerational Knowledge** – We will document and share stories of elders, families, and community leaders who have long been stewards of land and forests.
- **Expand Career Pathways & Workforce Development** – Our storytelling will serve as a recruitment tool, promoting urban forestry training programs, mentorship, and job opportunities.

Evidence of impact

- **Content Reach** – At least 12 feature stories, 2 mini-documentary videos, and 24 social media campaigns over two years.
- **Community Impact** – At least 70% of audiences surveyed will report greater awareness of urban forestry careers.
- **Industry Adoption** – At least 5 workforce development programs will engage with our campaign to connect People of Color to training.

3. Project Activities, Partners & Timeline

Project Activities

Color My Outdoors will launch a multimedia storytelling initiative designed to bridge the gap between Black and Brown communities and careers in urban forestry. This initiative will be created by us, for us—featuring Black and Brown photographers, videographers, and writers who capture these stories with authenticity and cultural nuance. Our initiative will center on digital storytelling through:

- **Website & Blog Features** – Publishing career profiles and workforce insights, written by journalists of color who understand the lived experiences of our community ([example](#)).
- **Social Media Campaigns** – Short-form videos, career spotlights, and interactive Q&A sessions produced by creatives of color to reflect our voice and perspective.
- **Video Storytelling** – Filmed and directed by Black and Brown videographers, our mini-documentaries will showcase the experiences of People of Color in forestry.
- **Community Events** – Virtual and in-person events where People of Color share their journeys in their own words to inspire and connect with aspiring professionals.

Project Partners

- Southern Environmental Law Center – Legal and policy advocacy to advance environmental justice in North Carolina.
- The Wilderness Society – Public engagement and visibility for People of Color in conservation.
- Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation – Supporting conservation efforts along the Blue Ridge Parkway and workforce development within the National Park Service.
- Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy – Partnering on land conservation storytelling and urban forestry initiatives.
- Leave No Trace – Promoting responsible outdoor ethics and environmental stewardship.
- Local Workforce Development Programs – Career training and certification pathways.
- HBCUs in North Carolina – Introducing students to forestry and conservation careers.
- Emerging Partners: North Carolina Forest Service & North Carolina Urban Forest Council – Expanding industry training and career exposure.

Project Timeline

Current and Ongoing

- Identify and interview urban forestry professionals and community leaders.
- Publish feature stories, blog posts, and social media content.

Phase 1 (Months 1-6)

- Establish partnerships with workforce programs.
- Identify Black and Brown community members to begin interviewing.

Phase 2 (Months 7-12)

- Expand storytelling campaign with short-form video content and interactive career Q&A sessions.
- Launch in-person and virtual storytelling panels.
- Track engagement analytics and survey impact.

Phase 3 (Months 13-18)

- Expand video storytelling with mini-documentaries.
- Host networking sessions between forestry professionals, workforce programs, and aspiring workers.
- Refine content based on audience feedback.

Phase 4 (Months 19-24)

- Publish impact report on how storytelling influenced career interest and workforce connections.
- Develop long-term sustainability plan.

4. Our Relationship to the Community

We Are the Community

Founded in the South, led by the South. Our founder lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains, just steps from Pisgah National Forest, where she witnesses hundreds of acres of family-owned land sold to developers who clear-cut forests that have stood for generations.

Our Board, staff, and program contractors live in the South, from Asheville to Atlanta. We see the impact of gentrification, tree loss, and urban heat firsthand. In Asheville alone, urban renewal displaced half of the Black population, replacing once-vibrant neighborhoods with luxury developments and heat islands ([WLOS](#)).

We are not just amplifying stories; we are telling them through the lens of our own community. Our photographers, videographers, and writers are Black and Brown creatives who ensure these stories are captured authentically, free from the distortions of outside narratives. This is not just about representation in front of the camera, but behind it—ensuring that every aspect of this work reflects the lived experiences of our people.

We are stewards of this land. We live here, raise our children here, and fight daily to ensure future generations can do the same.

How We Build Resilience

- **Restoring Cultural & Historical Connections to Land** – Making sure Black and Brown communities see themselves in urban forestry and environmental stewardship.
- **Strengthening Economic Resilience** – Connecting individuals to forestry training programs, job pathways, and mentorship opportunities.
- **Increasing Community Involvement in Urban Forestry** – Driving awareness and engagement in tree planting, land conservation, and urban greening efforts.

Color My Outdoors is committed to changing the outdoor narrative and we are uniquely positioned to reshape career pathways in urban forestry and cultivate a more inclusive outdoor culture. By investing in this work, Justice Outside will elevate these stories, increase access to green jobs, and ensure that Black and Brown communities are seen, heard, and employed in the forestry industry.



Together, we can create a future where the outdoors truly belongs to everyone.