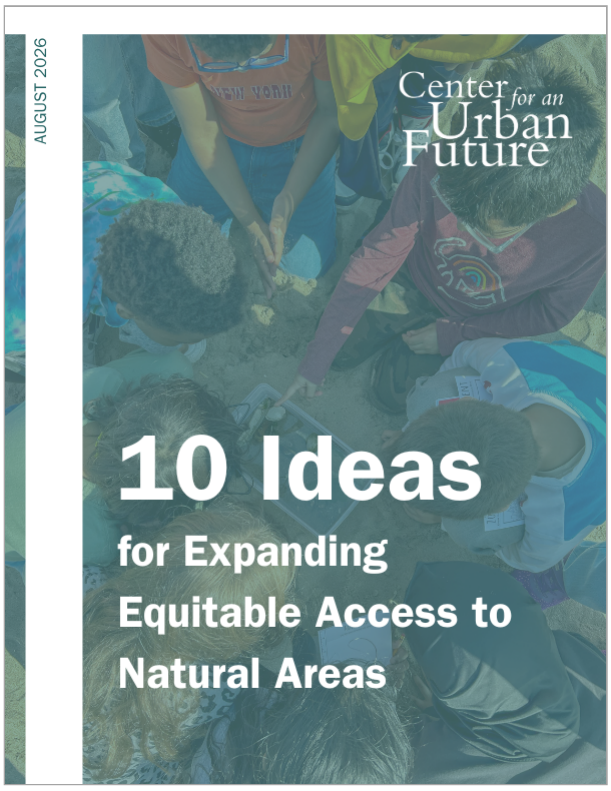


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# 10 Ideas for Expanding Equitable Access to Natural Areas

New York City is teeming with wild spaces. Yet too many New Yorkers remain cut off from these connections—especially in low-income communities. These ten ideas offer policymakers creative and practical options for unlocking the full potential of the city's natural areas.

by John Surico and Eli Dvorkin

- **Read all of the ideas here.**

New York City's five boroughs are teeming with wild spaces, from the wetlands near Orchard Beach in the Bronx to the forests of Staten Island's Greenbelt. Yet too many New Yorkers remain cut off from these vital connections—especially in low-income communities, where transportation barriers, limited programming, and safety concerns make these spaces feel much farther away than they are.

Expanding access to nature can be a relatively low-cost way to improve public health, strengthen communities, and build climate resilience, but it will require greater focus, coordination, and investment from City Hall. The following ten ideas offer policymakers creative and practical options for unlocking the full potential of the city's natural areas.

## 1. Pilot monthly "Nature Days" to bring thousands of New Yorkers into natural areas.

New York City has a wealth of natural areas to explore, but for many residents, they remain out of reach—whether due to long travel times, unfamiliarity, or a lack of programming. These barriers are especially pronounced for families without access to a car or prior experience navigating the city's more remote parks and natural spaces. As a result, many New Yorkers simply never consider visiting places that are technically open to them.

To change that, the city should pilot a bold, highly visible initiative: monthly, citywide "Nature Days" during the warmer

months. On select weekends, NYC Parks—working with the Department of Transportation and the MTA—would coordinate enhanced access through shuttle buses, expanded transit service, guided hikes, and family-friendly events. A one-year pilot would allow the city to test demand, identify high-interest sites, and build the case for permanent improvements to access and programming, while demonstrating support for the community-based partner organizations that are vital to expanding equitable participation in nature-based activities.

### 2. Create an "NYC Youth Conservation Corps" to care for natural areas and create pathways to careers.

Youth unemployment in New York City remains more than double the citywide average and has risen in recent years, even as many young New Yorkers face elevated rates of loneliness, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. At the same time, the city's forests, wetlands, trails, and shorelines need far more hands-on care than current staffing levels can provide. NYC Parks already operates promising youth stewardship programs, including the Urban Park Rangers' Ranger Conservation Corps, a free eight-week environmental conservation internship that serves roughly 200 high school students annually, as well as Natural Resources Group youth and young adult internships supported in part through the city's Summer Youth Employment Program. But these efforts remain far smaller than the scale of the opportunity.

The Mamdani administration and City Council should build on these foundations by leveraging the city's more than $200 million annual Summer Youth Employment Program to create a larger "NYC Youth Conservation Corps," with paid placements focused on trail building and maintenance, tree care, horticulture, habitat restoration, shoreline stewardship, and visitor engagement. Participants could be placed with NYC Parks, conservancies like the Natural Areas Conservancy, and community-based partners across the five boroughs. Corps members could also help introduce more young New Yorkers to the city's natural areas through peer-to-peer outreach and social media campaigns—something like "Trail Teens of TikTok"—spotlighting nearby hikes, waterfronts, forests, and volunteer opportunities in ways that feel authentic to their generation. The strongest programs would not end with a summer paycheck: they would connect participants to year-round jobs, apprenticeships, college programs, and industry-recognized credentials in forestry, horticulture, ecological restoration, landscape management, and natural resource careers. By scaling proven models and linking immediate work experience to advancement opportunities, New York City could build the next generation of stewards for its natural areas while creating meaningful pathways to economic mobility.

### 3. Make outdoor learning universal with "Nature for All NYC."

Exposure to nature at a young age is one of the strongest predictors of lifelong engagement. Yet today, only a fraction of New York City's students regularly experience the city's natural areas, reflecting broader inequities in access to outdoor learning. While the Department of Education has made progress on sustainability education, much more can be done.

The city should commit to ensuring that every public school student participates in a nature-based experience each year. A "Nature for All NYC" initiative would do just that through expanded field trips, increased Ranger and educator visits—including sending Rangers to visit public school classrooms—and support for partnerships with nonprofits and other agencies. The city could start with fourth graders, mirroring the federal Every Kid Outdoors initiative, and work with New York City Public Schools to develop a nature curriculum with an outdoors component. This initiative could build on the success of a current Parks-Schools partnership, Swim for Life, which focuses on teaching second graders how to swim. Over time, this would make outdoor learning a regular part of every student's experience, helping to build familiarity, confidence, and long-term engagement.

### 4. Launch "Explore Forever Wild NYC" to raise awareness of the city's natural areas.

Too few New Yorkers are aware of the 12,000 acres of forests, wetlands, and streams available to them, often just a short distance from where they live. In interviews for this report, lack of awareness emerged as one of the most consistent barriers, even among longtime residents who had never visited nearby natural areas. Without a coordinated effort to raise visibility, these spaces will remain underused.

The city should launch a five-borough awareness campaign—“Explore Forever Wild NYC”—to promote natural areas across subways, buses, LinkNYC kiosks, schools, and digital platforms. Working with Empire State Development, NYC Parks should tap into existing state tourism dollars and align messaging with the “I Love NY” campaign. This effort should be paired with improved wayfinding, updated trail maps, and digital tools to help residents navigate the city’s 300 miles of trails.

### 5. Create library-based "Nature & Culture Hubs" to help New Yorkers discover nearby parks, trails, waterfronts, and cultural programs.

Public libraries are among the most trusted and accessible institutions in the city, with locations in every neighborhood and strong relationships with residents. Yet they remain an underutilized asset when it comes to connecting New Yorkers to nearby nature, outdoor recreation, and cultural life. With the right resources and partnerships, libraries could serve as neighborhood gateways to parks, trails, waterfronts, gardens, cultural organizations, performances, public art, historic sites, and other low-cost opportunities close to where New Yorkers live.

City leaders should work with the three public library systems to fund and launch a network of “Nature & Culture Hubs” at libraries, particularly in underserved communities. These Hubs could start with a simple but important function: providing clear, accessible information about local nature-based activities, nearby access points, transit routes, volunteer opportunities, free and low-cost cultural events, and neighborhood arts and heritage programming. Over time, these Hubs could also offer lendable equipment, small grants for programming, and partnerships with local organizations to expand access. They could support community co-design of programming, ensuring that activities reflect local cultures and needs while helping residents feel a stronger sense of ownership over nearby natural and cultural assets.

### 6. Plan for natural areas care at the scale required—and unlock private, philanthropic, and state support.

For years, the capital and expense dollars committed to the city’s natural areas have not kept up with maintenance needs or rising demand, even as these spaces face mounting pressures from climate change and increased usage. Today, about 100 staff care for more than 12,000 acres of city-managed forests, wetlands, and streams—despite natural areas making up roughly one-third of all parkland. As a result, large portions of the system go uncared for each year, leaving trails degraded, ecosystems vulnerable, and many spaces effectively inaccessible to the public.

The Mamdani administration and City Council should commit to growing the natural areas budget and workforce over the next five years, expanding from about 100 staff today to at least 140, increasing annual funding by approximately $10 million, baselining that funding, and converting seasonal roles into full-time positions—to begin closing the gap between current staffing levels and what is needed to care for more than 12,000 acres of natural areas. Given the city’s fiscal constraints, this effort should also leverage public-private partnerships, philanthropic support, and state tourism and environmental funding streams. Together with the Urban Forest Plan and Environmental Justice NYC Plan, City Hall should publish a five-year investment roadmap with clear targets for staffing, acreage maintained, and participation—aligning public and private resources to support a new era of access to nature.

### 7. Bring nature closer to where New Yorkers live to "Rewild NYC."

A quarter of New Yorkers live in neighborhoods without access to natural areas, and creating large new parks is often impractical in dense parts of the city. But the benefits of nature—cooling, biodiversity, positive mental health, and more—can still be delivered through smaller, distributed interventions. Cities around the world are experimenting with ways to integrate natural systems into the urban fabric.

New York City should launch a bold interagency initiative—“Rewild NYC”—to expand access through pocket forests, native plantings, and micro-natural spaces. This could include transforming vacant lots, dead-end streets, and roadway medians; expanding Greenstreets; and incorporating natural elements into schools, libraries, and public housing. These smaller-scale interventions can bring meaningful environmental and public health benefits to neighborhoods that currently lack access. The proposed NYC Youth Conservation Corps could help maintain and steward these newly greened spaces, giving young New Yorkers paid, hands-on experience while ensuring these investments are cared for over time.

### 8. Reassess and modernize the city's 300-plus miles of trails.

Trails are essential to making natural areas accessible, providing safe pathways through ecologically sensitive environments and helping visitors navigate unfamiliar terrain. But a larger trail network is not always better. Across the city’s more than 300 miles of trails managed by NYC Parks and other entities, some routes are poorly maintained, difficult to find, informal, or ecologically harmful—contributing to erosion, habitat fragmentation, and damage to sensitive landscapes.

The city should conduct a full reassessment of its existing trail system, building on recent legislative initiatives and the Natural Areas Conservancy’s trail planning work. This effort should identify which trails need sustained maintenance, improved signage, formalization, rerouting, or closure, while also exploring carefully targeted opportunities to improve access where trails can be added without harming natural areas. At the same time, NYC Parks should partner with private-sector firms and nonprofit experts to modernize trail maps, digital navigation tools, and wayfinding, making it easier for residents to discover and explore the city’s natural spaces safely and responsibly.

### 9. Increase safety and visitor confidence through a stronger ranger presence and dedicated natural areas safety teams.

Safety concerns remain a major barrier to visiting natural areas, particularly for women and people of color. Many of these spaces are lightly trafficked and lack a consistent public presence, reinforcing perceptions that they are unsafe or unwelcoming. Expanding access will require more than enforcement alone: it will take a regular, visible presence from staff who can welcome visitors, lead programming, answer questions, and help New Yorkers feel comfortable exploring these spaces.

New York City should strengthen the capacity and role of Urban Park Rangers in natural areas, baselining funding year over year and enabling Rangers to spend more time building public confidence, guiding visitors, leading programs, and supporting safe use. NYC Parks should also explore creating a dedicated natural areas safety team, with consistent assignments in forests, wetlands, trails, and waterfront spaces. Together, a stronger Ranger presence and a specialized safety team could increase visibility, build familiarity, and help break the cycle of underuse that keeps many natural areas feeling isolated.

### 10. Build the stable jobs needed to care for natural areas—and launch an "NYC Nature-Based Jobs Coalition."

New York City is training hundreds of residents each year for jobs in natural areas, but has far fewer stable positions to

absorb them. This mismatch reflects a lack of long-term capacity in the work itself, not a lack of interest or training. Without more stable roles in maintenance, stewardship, restoration, and programming, the city will continue to fall short of both the workforce needed to care for these spaces and the jobs needed to make training a meaningful pathway to economic mobility.

The city should start by expanding in-house staffing at NYC Parks and reducing reliance on short-term contracts, ensuring that more of this work is supported by stable, long-term positions. At the same time, City Hall should launch an “NYC Nature-Based Jobs Coalition,” building on the work of Forest for All NYC and Just Nature NYC, to better coordinate training, apprenticeships, credentials, and hiring across the growing field of natural areas stewardship. The coalition should align training programs with apprenticeships, industry-recognized credentials, degree pathways, and real hiring needs—especially for roles like arborist, horticultural technician, trail specialist, and natural resource manager, where hands-on experience is essential. By organizing clearer routes into these roles and better matching training to hiring demand, New York City could build a workforce that supports both environmental goals and economic mobility.

**10 Ideas for Expanding Equitable Access to Natural Areas** is a publication of the Center for an Urban Future. Researched and written by John Surico and Eli Dvorkin. Edited by Dorian Block and Irene Connelly. Data analysis by Rachel Neches. Additional research by Harry Frahn, Zamira Frost, Bella Hung, Nora Lewis, Yona Litwin, Lina Mazioui, Julia Ross, and Samuel Weidman. Designed by Stislow Design.

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