



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

In partnership with:



## VALUE OF NATURE BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19: Survey Summary



In mid-May the Children & Nature Network, in collaboration with dozens of partners, disseminated a non-scientific survey to better understand how COVID-19, and resulting restrictions, have influenced the value their constituents place on nature as well as how their constituents view changes in the value society places on nature.<sup>1</sup>

About 500 people, mostly nonprofit leaders and formal or informal educators, responded to the survey. They were 78% female, 84% white and primarily from western and midwestern cities and suburbs; 43% reported household incomes over \$100,000 per year.

In examining the survey data, we felt that it was important to consider the responses in the context of who responded: primarily white, affluent women working in the environmental education and nature connection field. *Please note that the comments included below come directly from the survey, were not edited by us, and do not necessarily reflect our views.*

As we read this report, we asked ourselves how this demographic might perpetuate the predominance of white people engaging in nature-based activities and of white women working in this field. How do affluent white women's experiences of nature and their/our implicit biases influence the culture in and around these spaces? In what ways do race, gender, and income level work together and separately to inform how the respondents view nature? Are there lessons that can be taken from this survey that provide clues about the work that we need to do to make the outdoors a place that is free of racism and truly inclusive and welcoming for everyone, especially Black, Indigenous, Latinx and other people of color?

While we do think there are some clear implications for the field, we don't have all the answers and look forward to hearing your thoughts, ideas and reflections on survey results and what they mean for equity and inclusion in our field.

<sup>1</sup>As this is not a scientific survey, significance levels of the reported pre-post pandemic changes are not reported

## THE VALUE OF NEARBY NATURE

When asked if the value they place on nature near their homes has shifted since the pandemic, 47% now place much more value, and 37% place somewhat more value, on nearby nature. They also believe that society values nature more since the pandemic: 34% believe society places much more, and 51% believe somewhat more, value on nearby nature. Many respondents reported observing more use of the outdoors:<sup>2</sup>

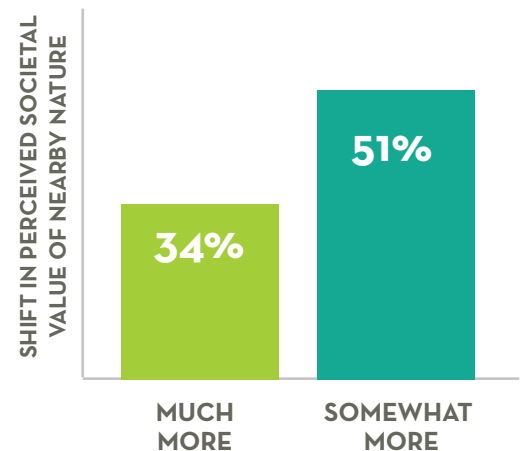
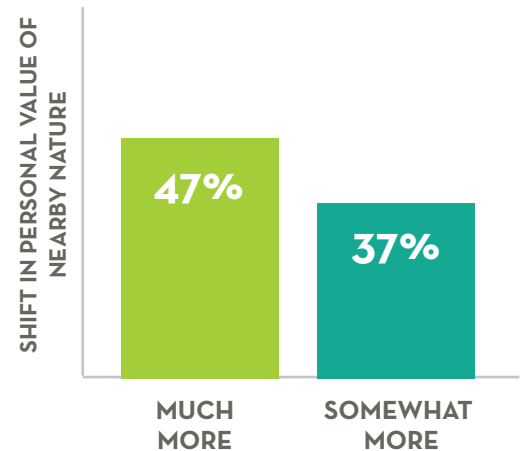
“ I see so many more people out at our local park since the pandemic. Instead of a rush hour of cars at 5pm, I see a rush hour of pedestrians, joggers, bikers, etc getting outside and enjoying the greenspace.

Although respondents offered these observations as evidence of increased recognition of the value of nature, some expressed concern about whether increased interest would be sustained after the pandemic. Importantly, some also expressed concerns about the behavior of some outdoor space users:

“ Those that didn't, may value it more for now but it won't continue.

“ I feel like people WANT it, not that they VALUE it. This is a big difference. People have NOT been taught to value these things. They are just USING them because they don't have other options. I would love to say this has changed attitudes, but all I see is wealthy white people getting pissed that other people are using the trails, and trail users being disrespectful and leaving, literally, tons of garbage. I'm sad right now. Very, very sad.

“ The amount of trash makes me so sad. These are not people that respect and value nature and typically you would not see in our green spaces.



<sup>2</sup> In contrast, preliminary results from a scientific survey by North Carolina State University of 500 representative US parents and their children indicated that they are spending slightly less time outdoors now compared to the same time last year (statistical significance of the difference is not known at this time)

## INEQUITY

Although 22% did not feel that they had become any more aware of social inequities as a result of COVID, their comments revealed that many felt they were already quite aware.

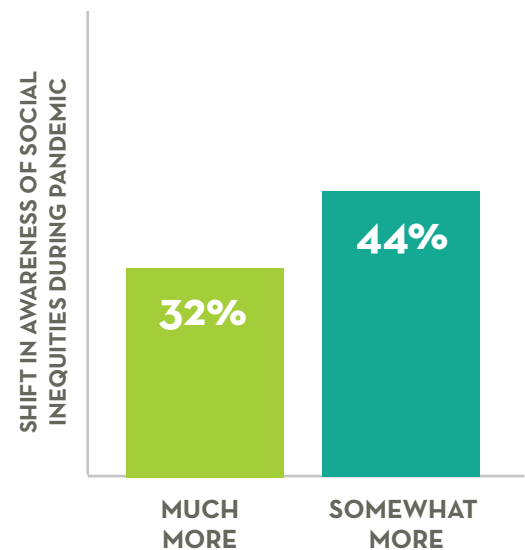
**However, a few respondents said they don't believe inequities exist.** Of those whose awareness has shifted, 32% said they were much more aware and 44% said they were somewhat more aware of inequities since the pandemic. As one respondent comprehensively stated:

“Everyone is recognizing that it is the same individuals that are faced with a high number of health disparities, they are the same individuals that cannot social distance, they are the same individuals that cannot walk in their neighborhood, much less go to a park or hit a trail, it is the same population that is experiencing a higher rate of Covid-19 cases. Yet nothing has changed.

When asked if they had observed strategies or policies during the pandemic that were aimed at addressing such inequities, a majority of respondents noted that they had observed a number of strategies to increase access to nature during stay-at-home orders, but that these strategies were not intended to address equity, and in fact, have exacerbated the inequities. For example,

“People in under-resourced communities typically have less access to green space and the “stay at home” orders exacerbate that lack of access.

Numerous respondents articulated that strategies such as closing streets to cars near parks, for example, to increase walkability near natural areas – in combination with rules about avoiding traveling to seek out nature – effectively preserved the right to nature only for residents who live near those natural areas; these individuals are typically more advantaged.

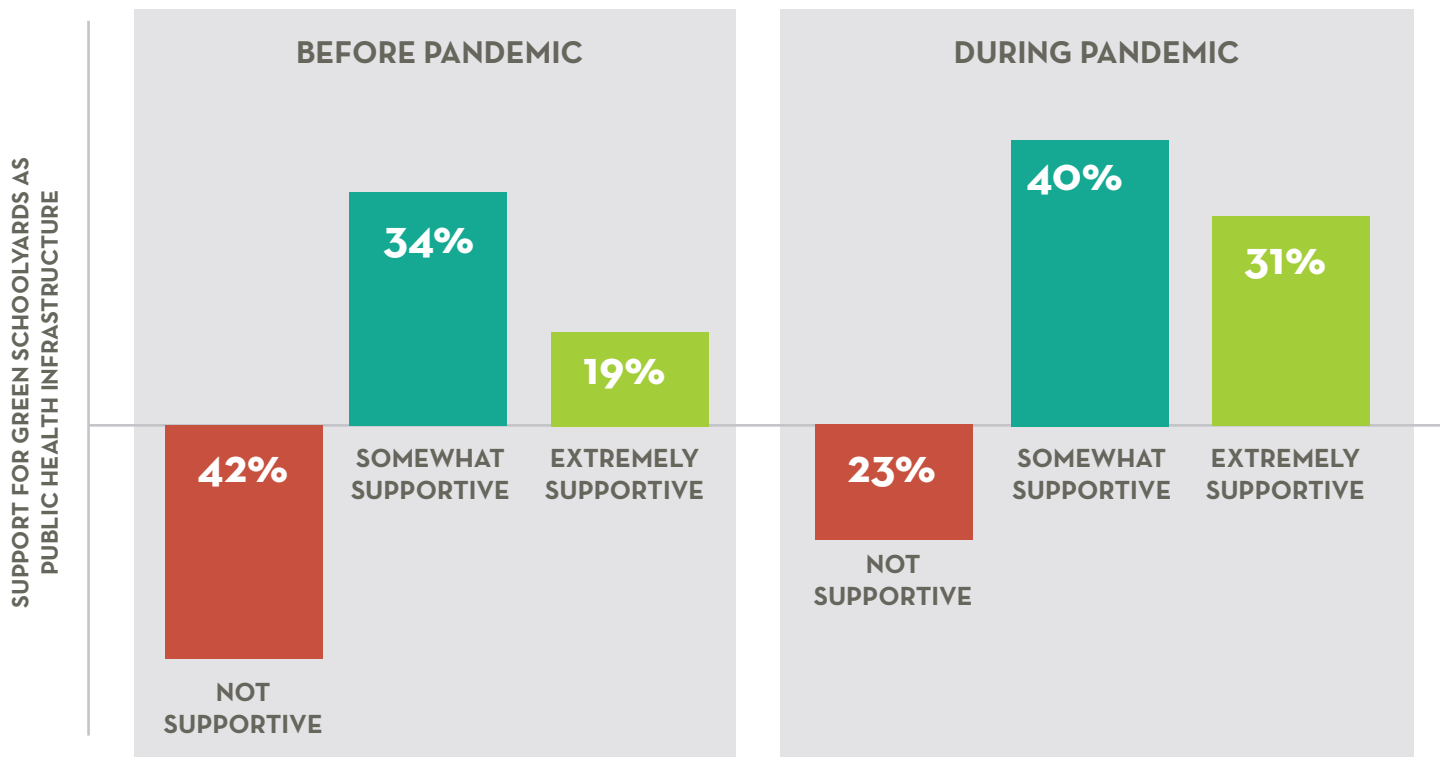


## SCHOOLYARDS AND EDUCATION

42% percent of respondents said that prior to the pandemic they were not using or advocating for use of schoolyards as an important part of our infrastructure to support community health and wellbeing. When asked about whether the pandemic had shifted their support for such a strategy, the percent somewhat in support shifted from 34% to 40% and the percent who strongly support the strategy shifted from 19% to 31%.

Optimism about the value of environmental education/outdoor learning was less clear. Seven percent believe that society places much more value and 34% believe that society places somewhat more value on these forms of education. However, 28% believe that the pandemic has not changed society's perceptions of EE/ outdoor learning. For example, one respondent noted,

“ There doesn't seem to be any call for outdoor education in response to all the time kids are spending in front of screens.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Note that since this survey was completed, numerous articles and social media posts have called for use of nature-based learning upon return to school for both physical and mental health. Even more recently, several organizations, including C&NN, have emphasized that academic benefits are also likely.

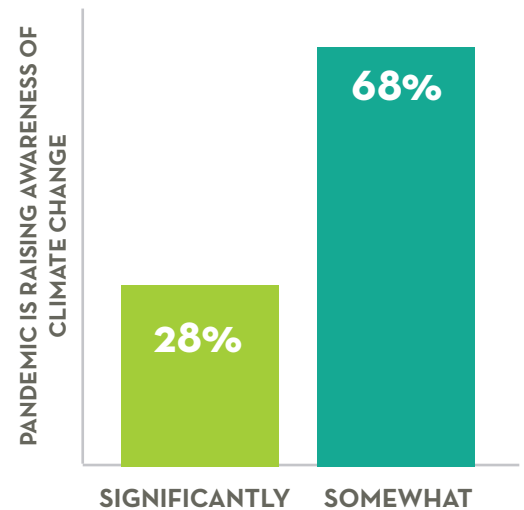
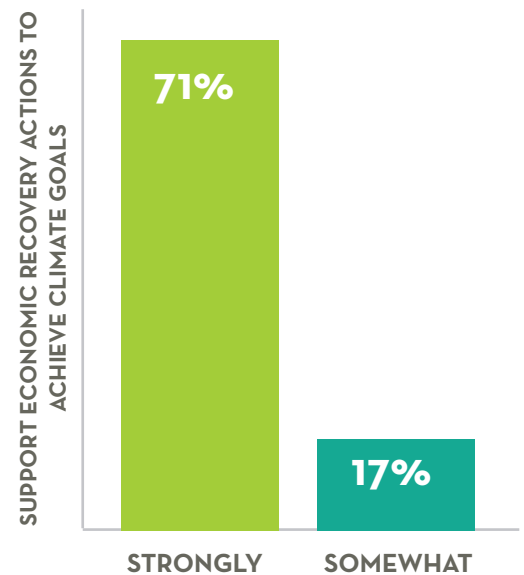
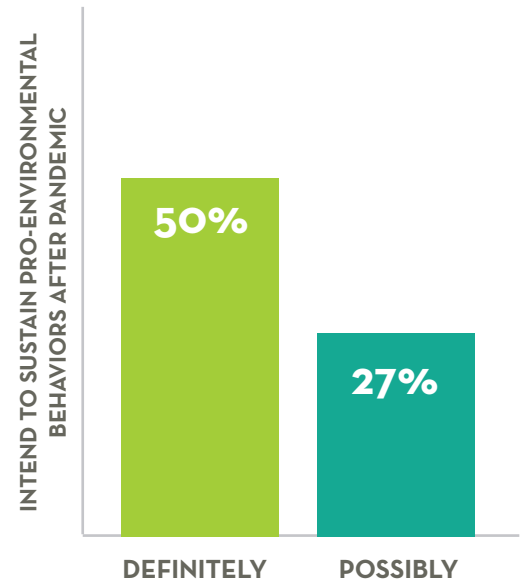
## ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOR

Respondents were asked if they had made behavior changes because of the pandemic that are also pro-environmental and if they intend to sustain those behavior changes after pandemic restrictions ease. Nearly 50% said they definitely would, and 27% said they possibly would. Recognizing that environmental action must happen at multiple levels, 71% of respondents strongly support leveraging economic recovery actions to achieve climate goals; 17% somewhat support this strategy.

Although many respondents live in areas that have not implemented useful innovations, many other respondents noted innovations that they'd like to see continue. Most commonly, respondents noted that street closures, encouragement to reduce car trips, working from home and reduced air travel have many benefits for the environment and should be continued.

Although many respondents' comments evidenced sadness and frustration about issues of equity and misuse of natural spaces, and only 28% believe that the pandemic is significantly raising awareness of climate change, 61% believe the pandemic is at least somewhat raising awareness. Balancing some of the cynicism about individuals' motivations for using outdoor spaces and their lack of care for nature, some respondents offered messages of hope, such as,

“ I think of COVID 19 as tied to a much larger environmental picture, habitat loss and climate change. If society recognizes this - and we should do everything in our power to encourage holistic thinking of environmental issues - it will translate into the preservation of more green space. Society has an opportunity here.





## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

Because this was not a scientific study, we cannot draw any definitive conclusions. That said, we have these observations from the data and recent conversations within the field:

- 1. Need for anti-racism training for the field** There were a number of responses that demonstrated a bias that parks and green spaces are white spaces. Given the demographics of survey respondents, some white women in our field believe that Black, Indigenous, Latinx and other people of color don't know how to behave in shared outdoor spaces and that they need to be taught how to care for the natural environment. We believe it is important to acknowledge that these views exist and contribute to Black, Indigenous, Latinx and other people of color not feeling welcome in outdoor space or in environmental organizations. Anti-racism training would help to uncover implicit biases and serve as a first step to making the outdoors more inclusive and welcoming.
- 2. Focus on outdoor learning** Recent discussions in the field suggest growing recognition that integrating outdoor learning as a regular part of public education is both a good idea to keep students safe from contracting and spreading COVID-19 and as a long-term strategy to ensure equitable access to the benefits of nature.
- 3. Some permanent pro-environmental behaviors seem likely** As a result of the pandemic, more people are likely to continue working from home and decrease the amount that they drive and fly for work. There seems to be increasing support for creating communities that allow for more biking and walking. There also is increasing support leveraging economic recovery actions to achieve climate goals.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information or details of survey results contact:

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