

Designing a SAFE, Green

Schoolyard

Why green infrastructure is critical to bringing racial and health equity to communities

By Barton Robison

When Art Ochoa looks out across the fields behind Chiloquin Elementary School in Oregon, he sees more than dead grass and dilapidated monkey bars. “I see my home. This was my childhood.”

As a member of the Klamath Tribes, who have made their homes in the region since time immemorial, Ochoa’s connection to the place goes back before his childhood. Growing up, he sat in these same classrooms and played on this same equipment. “It probably looked a little bit newer back then,” he says with a wry chuckle. “But it was what we had.”

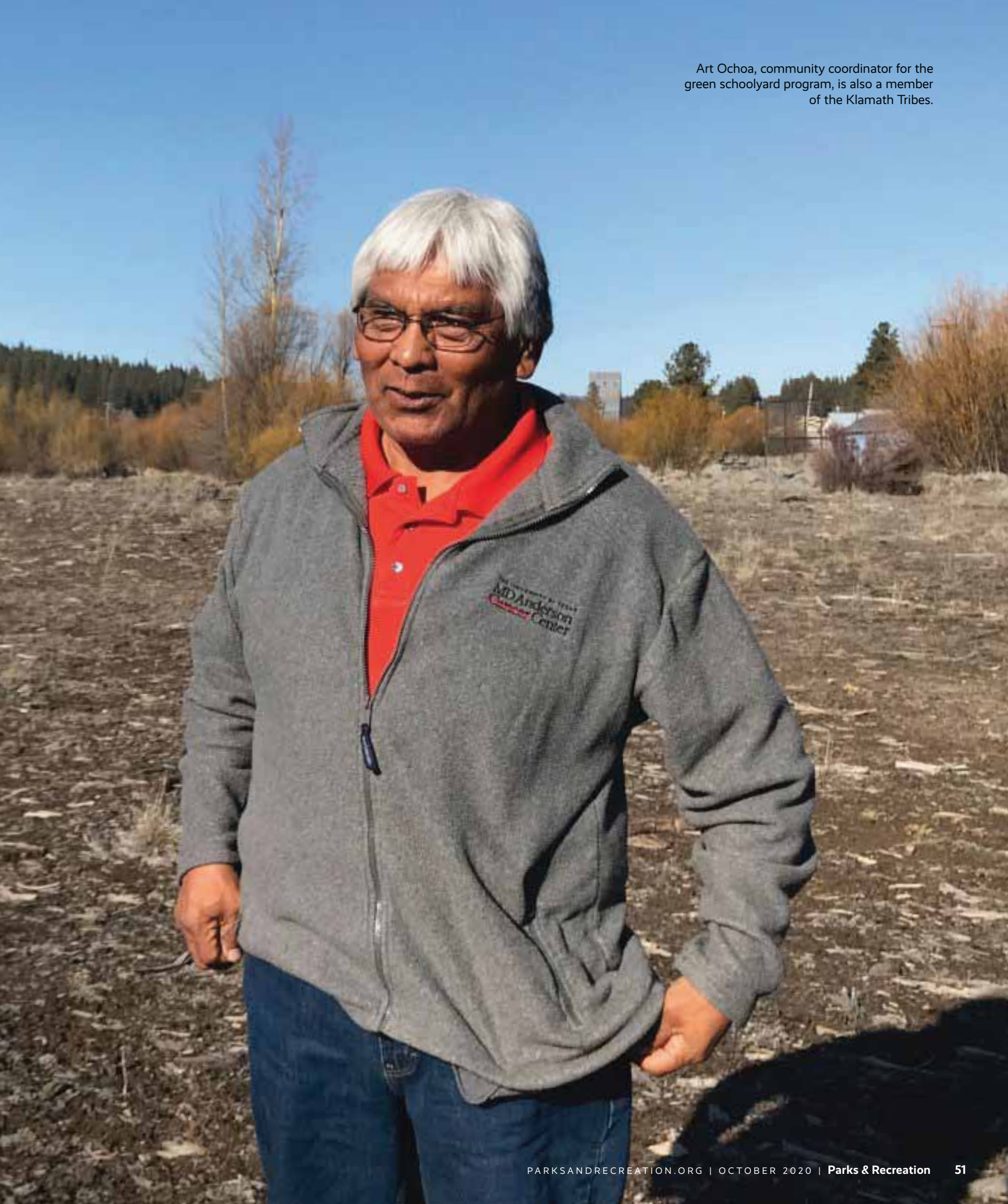
Now, 50 years later, Ochoa and The Trust for Public Land are leading a collaborative network to build a green schoolyard at Chiloquin Elementary. The old play-

ground equipment will be replaced by new, nature-based elements designed to inspire the imagination and encourage physical activity, the cracked blacktop will be resurfaced, and a blacktop cover will be added to ensure kids can still get out and play during the snowy winter months. During non-school hours, the schoolyard will double as a public park that is open to the community and serves as a safe space for socializing and gathering.

The intention is to create a safe place for kids to recreate, and project partners have higher hopes for the schoolyard, too. In a community that has faced systemic racism, economic collapse and stark health disparities, the green schoolyard represents a step toward a healthier, more equitable future.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KRISTINI KOVALIK, THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND

Art Ochoa, community coordinator for the green schoolyard program, is also a member of the Klamath Tribes.



Community Health and Parks

In the United States, health experts believe that your zip code can help them better predict your health outcomes than your genetic code (tinyurl.com/y9l7tgdx). The social determinants of health — things like air and water quality, access to healthy foods and steady employment — follow trends at neighborhood levels (tinyurl.com/y3xdjrd5). If you live close to a busy freeway with only a few trees to help collect particulate matter from the air, you and your neighbors are more likely to develop

asthma and breathing issues than people across town who live in tree-lined suburbs.

That's a significant problem in a country with a long history of segregation and discrimination. In fact, our history is precisely what has created these disparities in our communities. Redlining in the early to mid-20th century kept white and nonwhite residents segregated from each other, and the planning and development that occurred during this time created two separate realities in many major cities across the United States.

Neighborhoods that were red-

lined have fewer parks and green spaces, meaning residents of those neighborhoods have a harder time accessing the physical and mental health benefits of time in nature. These are the same neighborhoods where city planners and local governments put their factories, freeways and other pollutants that white neighborhoods were largely protected from (tinyurl.com/y97wy9u8). These racist planning decisions mean that communities of color are disproportionately affected by harmful environmental factors across the United States and experience health disparities that

Old playground equipment like these swings and hanging bars will be replaced with new, nature-based play equipment.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KRISTIN KOVALIK, THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND





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can reduce life expectancy by as much as 20 years when compared to neighborhoods across town (tinyurl.com/yyo48mrj).

Racism has shaped Chiloquin in very specific ways. A small, rural town, it's the ancestral homelands and current administrative center of the Klamath Tribes. During the mid-20th century, the federal government began a campaign to terminate many Native American Tribes in order to assimilate them into mainstream U.S. culture and cancel their treaty-mandated responsibilities to support tribes with government services. Congress terminated the Klamath Tribes in 1954, which shrunk their reservation land from 1.8 million acres of productive timberland to almost

nothing. Losing their land base and the government services that were promised to them in perpetuity was tragic; the community continues to feel the effects today. Though the Klamath were reinstated as a Tribe in 1986, their reservation is now slightly more than 300 acres. And being a rural community, Chiloquin experiences challenges similar to other comparable-sized communities across the country, with no local hospital and limited access to medical services.

Parks as a Tool for Health Equity

Parks and green spaces provide an opportunity to heal, and the green schoolyard in Chiloquin is an example of how green spaces and

A view of the Klamath Basin from the west of Chiloquin, Oregon.

public parks can be intentionally designed to improve community health equity. Play structures will be designed to encourage physical activity, helping reduce childhood obesity and associated diseases. In addition, the schoolyard will heavily feature natural elements like native plants, wood-based structures and greenhouses. In general, just being in nature offers mental health benefits like reduced episodes of depression and restored mental focus. Research has even shown that exposure to nature positively affects academic outcomes in places where students have windows that

look out onto these green spaces.

In addition to the health benefits of the new space, the project also will improve the local environment. The design incorporates native plants and other features that require less water to maintain than grass fields. Nearly every summer, local water use is limited to reserve water for the lakes that provide habitat for endangered suckerfish and more than 350 species of birds. By designing for low-water use, the schoolyard can keep up an attractive appearance year-round, and the native plants will help create new habitat for local wildlife.

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Park and recreation agencies, city planners and even school districts can use park development as a tool to combat systemic racism and improve community health equity by understanding a community's specific needs and designing spaces that reflect the community's values. Especially through centering community voice in the decision-making process, park development can give power to people who have historically been silenced or ignored when it comes to making choices about their own communities.

Building Support on a Community Scale

Community support for projects like this is paramount to a project's success, so one of the first steps should be finding out what your community *actually* cares about.

In 2019, the Chiloquin City Council completed a community survey to understand what their residents cared most about. Having a new park made the list, but the number one concern for the community was safety. "The one tiny park in town now isn't a place I'd feel safe sending my kids to go play because of some inappropriate behaviors being made by some older teens and adults who use the park," says Ochoa. Even though community members wanted a new park, they were much more concerned about safety.

To build broader community support for the green schoolyard, the team emphasized the safety aspects of the new space. "It's on school property, so during the day you know that it's being watched and that kids are safe there," Ochoa says. And, since it's located on a school site, the space really is ideal for children to utilize during afterschool hours — something parents will appreciate. Ochoa adds that the green schoolyard is being billed as "a safe space for kids and families," and the community has responded with widespread support.

Messaging around the project also describes the other benefits of the new space. Kids will still reap the mental and physical health benefits of a green schoolyard, and the district won't need to worry about dry, dead grass during the hot summer months. And, research shows that these types of greening projects can have the biggest mental

health impact on people facing the worst outcomes, which can have a marked effect on community health equity. But by leading with the public's number one value in messaging, the core team of partners has been able to drum up widespread community support for the project in ways that "a new playground for the school" all by itself wouldn't have done.

Values-based messaging, or leading with a community's values in your communications, is a skill that park and recreation professionals can use to build support for projects in your own communities. Learning what your community cares about is an important step in community engagement that can help make your projects more valuable, and it's an important step in the project design process, too. If your community's values don't align with the project you're trying to create, then it's probably not the right project.

Once you know what your community values, you can find messages that connect your project to those values. NRPA's *Greener Parks for Health Advocacy Toolkit* is one tool that park and recreation professionals can use to craft values-based messages for various audiences in their own communities.

In Chiloquin, values-based messaging has been critical to increasing public support for a project that was already led and designed by community members. In February, community supporters spoke about the importance of the project in front of the Klamath County School Board. Ochoa led by explaining the difference having a safe space for their kids would make to the community. Three elementary school students talked about how a green schoolyard

Ochoa and The Trust for Public Land are leading a collaborative network to build a green schoolyard at Chiloquin Elementary School in Oregon.



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would make them more active and give them places to play and exercise, and about what it would mean for their families to be able to take them someplace outside on the weekends.

The following week, the school board voted unanimously to support the project.

Bringing It Home

In a pandemic, having a safe outdoor space for recreation is more important than ever before. However, economic uncertainty and decreased state revenues almost certainly mean that projects like the one in Chiloquin will require broad public support to compete for resources.

In addition to the *Greener Parks for Health Advocacy Toolkit*, NRPA created a *Greener Parks for Health*

Communications Toolkit to help park and recreation professionals explain the health, economic, social and environmental benefits of greener parks to a variety of community stakeholders. The final tool in the *Greener Parks for Health* library is the *Greener Parks for Health Policy Action Framework*, a national policy agenda for local, state and federal leaders that will make it easier for projects like Chiloquin to come to fruition. Taken together, these three resources can help other communities build support for local park projects.

In Chiloquin, partners are just starting to raise money to build the green schoolyard, with hopes for construction in summer 2021. And even though kids won't be physically returning to school in

2020, they're staying engaged with the project through take-home activities that encourage them to get outside and explore.

"This is something the community wants for our kids," says Ochoa. "We've faced challenges before, but we're resilient. We can make it happen."

Visit healthandoutdoors.org/Chiloquin to learn more about the Chiloquin Elementary School Green Schoolyard Project, and check out nrpa.org/GreenerParksForHealth to access NRPA's *Greener Parks for Health Resource Library*. You can learn more about The Trust for Public Land's Green Schoolyard program at tpl.org/Schoolyards. 🌿

Barton Robison is Director of the Willamette Partnership's Oregon Health & Outdoors Initiative (robison@willamettepartnership.org).