



Earth Day

with

Detroit Now + Then

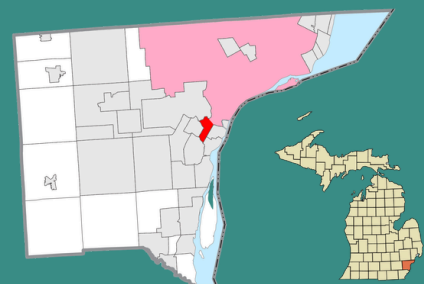


It's hard to ignore the environmental problems, injustices, and changes we are constantly going through in 2026, from extreme weather to pollution all around us. Over the last month, we took some time speaking with different community members around Detroit, who have been fighting and educating people on these environmental issues while bringing the Black community outside to enjoy Mother Nature. We wanted to share some of these community member stories and celebrate **Earth Day** with you.

Countries all over the world have been celebrating Earth Day on April 22nd since 1970. Earth Day was proposed by Senator Gaylord Nelson to hold a nationwide teach-in. It became the birth of the modern environmental movement. Decades leading up to this event, Americans were subjected to the consequences of inefficient automobiles that spouted massive amounts of smoke and sludge. Many Americans were oblivious to the harm and environmental pollution, and how threatening it was to humanity. With America's prosperous growth post WWII, air pollution was blindly accepted as the smell of prosperity and production. Decades of propaganda had many Americans believing that was a good thing, right? It wouldn't take many years at all for Detroiters (and many other Americans) to let you know that it, in fact, was NOT a good thing.



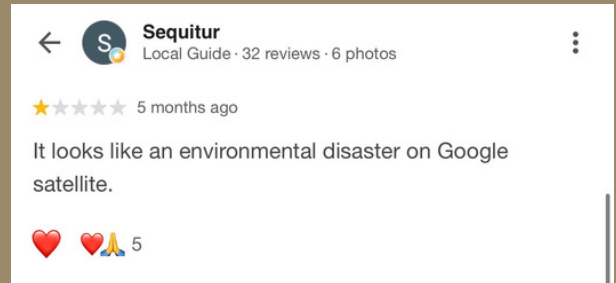
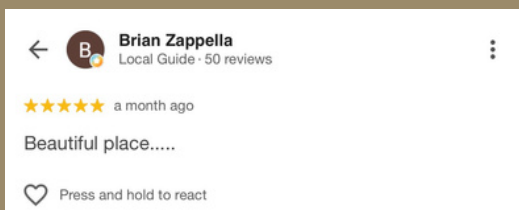
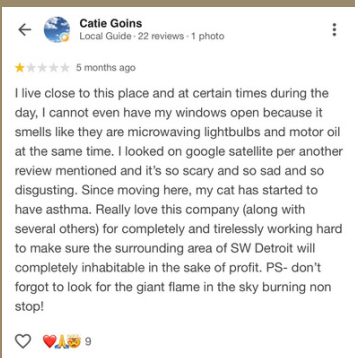
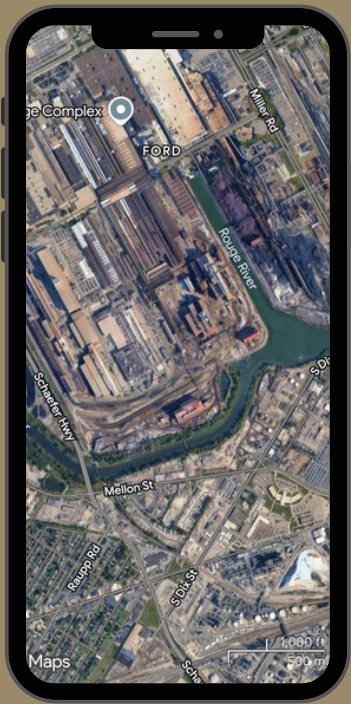
If you have ever been to Southwest Detroit near the border of River Rouge and Melvindale or along I-75 South, you've probably seen or smelled the industrial area that exists there. Many of our beautiful Detroiters live with that industrial hellscape right in their backyard. The 48217 zip code has consistently ranked as the most polluted zip code within the entire state of Michigan. The 48217 zip code is home to the overly industrialized complexes that look like something out of a dystopian movie and the Boynton and Oakwood Heights neighborhoods.



Theresa Landrum is a lifelong Detroit resident and has been one of the most outspoken community activists and organizers fighting against the environmental injustices within the area. Theresa currently serves on the Michigan PFAS Action Response Team board, appointed by Governor Whitmer to the Michigan Advisory Council on Environmental Justice board, helping to develop legislative policies. She's also the current President of the Original United Citizens of Southwest Detroit and the Community Education Specialist for the Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition's Clean Air Council. In 2021, she was awarded the Climate Action Award from the Michigan Climate Action Network for her years of advocacy, educating, and organizing. Theresa's persistence and knowledge speak volumes through her resume and accomplishments. We were lucky enough to hear her passion firsthand when we spoke with her.



I was first introduced to Theresa's activism through my roommate, who had previously worked at the Kemeny Recreation Center on Fort Street in Southwest Detroit. Theresa has led groups of community members, legislators, and others on a "Toxic Tour" that begins at this recreation center in her childhood neighborhood. The bus-driven tour drives its passengers through the frontline communities that are devastatingly impacted by the industrial pollution. Unfortunately, I am a little too familiar with the horrific pollution, living two or so miles north of the industrialized area. I had constantly joked that you could not really open your home windows or drive with your car windows down, because the air smelled like someone was microwaving lightbulbs and motor oil at the same time. It was a very specific, disgusting smell that saturated the entire surrounding area. I even left a scathing Google review for the company EES Coke Battery that resides on the forbidden Zug Island about the pollution. I only lived in that area for a year, and my lovely cat, Potato, developed asthma during the end of our time there. I can't even fathom the inevitable damage living in these frontline communities long-term can do to our fellow Detroiters...

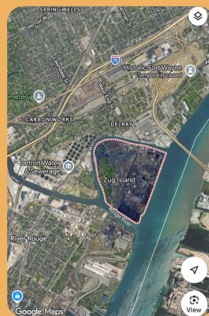




Southwest Detroit, Ecorse, and River Rouge, or “the tri-cities” as Theresa calls them, are the frontline communities directly and most impacted by the pollution. “Most of the (tri-city) area is what they call non-attainment. That means we do not meet the national air quality standards,” Theresa explains. Theresa retold a sad reality she heard Nick Leonard, from the Great Lakes Environmental Law, give as a testimony to the poor air quality; the average 15-year-old in the area has not breathed clean air once in their entire life while living there. Air monitors in Southwest Detroit, Dearborn, and Detroit regularly read above the Environmental Protection Agency’s standard for air

containing particles. Fine matter particles, often called soot, are defined by the EPA as particles that are 2.5 microns or less in diameter (PM2.5). Inhaling these particles is linked to several illnesses, such as heart disease, chronic lung disease, respiratory infections, birth defects, preterm births, and various cancers. “It was not unusual for us to come outside and the air (would) be orange or brown, or black soot all over your car. We have a history of washing our houses down with a hose, washing your driveway off, washing your porch off so your children can sit on it. That’s what we see daily,” Theresa recalls of her childhood memories tainted by pollution. In 2024, the EPA lowered its fine particle matter standard from 12 micrograms per cubic meter to 9. This will likely lead to new restrictions on many of the industrial villains wreaking havoc on nearby residents.

Like many other things, these levels of hazardous air pollution disproportionately impact low-income areas and communities of color. When asked, she navigates the topic of environmental racism. “It’s impossible (to ignore). It goes all the way back to slavery. Once slavery ended, Jim Crow was instituted by the United States government, creating laws that marginalized and discriminated against Black people specifically. Systematic racism is historical to the fabric of America. So when we talk about environmental justice or environmental racism, Black people were redlined and forced to live in areas that were undesirable for white people to live in, like flood zones, areas concentrated with factories, and areas where the land could not produce vegetation or farms. “Black people were forced, it goes way back,” she said. “Environmental racism, environmental injustices have been committed ever since they say America was founded by the white man. The connection cannot be separated.”



Theresa got involved in what we now call 'environmental activism' in the 1980s. "When I got involved, it wasn't called environmental justice, it wasn't called environmental activism, it was just fighting for the right for people to live. Environmental justice is a new term to me that I learned within the last ten years," she said. Theresa stressed the



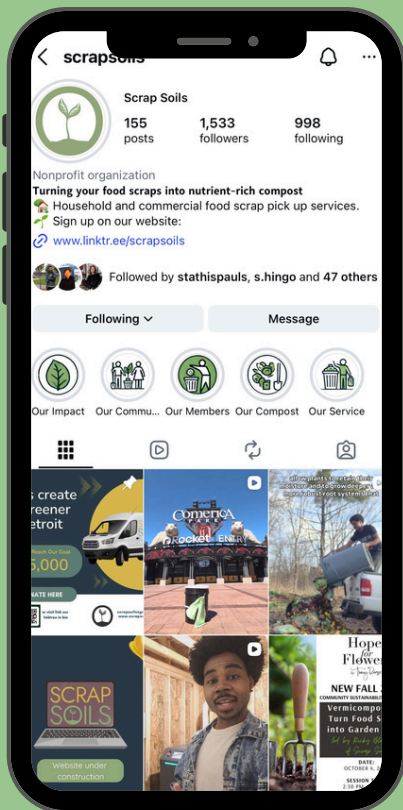
connection between environmental justice and racism: "Environmental justice encompasses everything: housing, health, education, and economic wealth."

I asked Theresa what she would like to see for the future of Detroit, and she immediately said cumulative impact law. Cumulative impacts are defined by the EPA as the totality of exposures to combinations of chemical and non-chemical stressors and their effects on health, well-being, and quality outcomes. "We need a cumulative impact law that looks at all the industries that are around the community, looks at the pollution and harm, the carcinogens that are being emitted from these companies, and looks at them all. If this company has immunity soft from the oxide, that company has this, and this company has that, take it all into consideration and look at it on a cumulative impact level. We don't have that." Each company has its own regulations and restrictions it must abide by, but there is no consideration of how each company's regulations or pollution all cumulatively add together and affect the surrounding community. There are studies that show pollution's impact, but no laws that put it into effect." Cumulative impacts are considered more nuanced than existing laws and regulations; they include contemporary exposures over the span of someone's lifetime, direct/indirect stressors, the context of an individual, geographically defined communities, definable populations, potential state of vulnerability, or resilience of a community.





When I spoke with Theresa, she was getting ready for Air Quality Awareness week, starting May 4th through May 10th. Clear the Air Michigan, a coalition Theresa is a part of, will be hosting several events throughout the week. On May 2nd, from 9:30 am to 12:00 pm, you can join them in planting trees in the 'Filter Forest' in Poletown East. Clear the Air will partner with Southwest Detroit Environmental Vision, Ecology Center, and Trucks Off Our Streets to hand out air quality materials while walking in the Cinco de Mayo parade, moving from Patton Park to Clark Park on Sunday, May 3rd. They'll finish the week with a conversation for clean air hosted at the Eastside Community Network from 11:00 am to 2:00 pm.



While scrolling through Instagram, I stumbled upon Scrap Soils. I spent some time moving between their posts and eventually made it to their website. Scrap Soils began in 2020 and was co-founded by Ricky Blanding, Ruoxi Fu, Liana Li, and Grace Tate. It is a composting nonprofit dedicated to disposing of food waste in a sustainable fashion. It has grown since its origins of creating actual physical compost to offering the weekly food waste pickup service and hauling it to places where they could compost more frequently and on a larger scale.

Now, they offer a weekly food waste pickup service for residents and businesses around the city of Detroit. On Earth Day, I joined co-founder Ricky Blanding on a scheduled drop off at Sanctuary Farms on the east side.

Ricky took me on a quick tour around Sanctuary Farms, starting at the fresh pile of food waste that he had backed his truck up to.

The surrounding plot of land included several mounds of soil and food waste, nesting, piled next to one another. Ricky described the space as "one part of their composting program." Although it seems like a large area, he assured me, "When the growing season starts, there's lots of activity and lots of moving components!" Next on our tour, Ricky showed me a "finished" pile of compost. The finished pile looked like regular soil you would find in a garden, flower bed, farm plot, or inside a bag for sale at the hardware store.

Scrap Soils members are entitled to 15 free gallons of this compost every year. On their upcoming distribution day, all members are invited to come pick up this finished compost. Scrap Soils allows members to contribute to the sustainable disposal of their own food waste and reap the benefits of the finished product.



Ricky Blanding

SCRAP SOILS

Walking through the plots of land, we passed a small pile of soil with several different leaves and small plants

beginning to sprout. Ricky explained how the food waste sometimes contains seed pods, and seeds will grow from these pods during certain seasons. He pointed out a few plants, noting there were parsnips, broccoli, and greens growing in this random pile of compost. It was truly fascinating.

Sanctuary Farms has functioned as one of Scrap Soils' earliest partners. Neither has a physical sole location because they focus more on logistics and hauling food waste. "Our business is on the road, we're coming to your house every week, we're coming to your business!" Scrap Soils also works to educate other farms around Detroit on the composting process, its benefits, and how to do it for themselves. Even Comerica Park recently became one of Scrap Soils' partners, now they make weekly pick-ups from the stadium and bring it to places like Sanctuary Farms to be composted.

Ricky gave me a quick rundown of the process of turning old vegetable scraps, compostable paper products, old flowers, and eggshells into usable soil. They emphasized the importance of having these compostable food waste elements within a soil mixture. "Think of it as rebar in a concrete structure, if it's just concrete it will crumble but if there's an internal structure it'll last years. When our soil doesn't have that rebar it erodes and causes landslides and desertification. This allows roots to be that rebar."



Scrap Soils has been working closely with the city of Detroit's Sustainability office to create "drop off sites" that house bins at farms around the city, where residents can bring their waste. The creation of these bins serves as the next initiative in the Detroit Composting program.

I was pleasantly surprised watching Ricky empty the bins of food waste in the back of his truck. Scrap Soils welcomes vegetables, fruits (no limes and lemons), tea bags, beans, coffee grounds and filters, old flowers, and shredded newspaper. When asked what surprising things can be composted, "People think meat and dairy are not compostable, but this is Scrap Soils' trademark, anything you would have put on your plate and eaten is compostable. We are microorganisms to the cosmos, right? Similarly, microorganisms have a stomach lining and liquids that digest and break down materials into smaller components. That's exactly what we do! So if you can put it in your mouth or it is meant to be digested, it means you can compost it!"



Scrap Soils hosts a monthly volunteer day where volunteers meet onsite at one of the partnered farms, and unload food waste hauls or help build the "lasagna" of layered food waste, composted finished soil. Volunteer days not only act as a nice way for volunteers to be outside, but also "The main educational efforts are at our volunteer days. They are directly learning with us, creating a compost pile, and they modulate that at home or wherever they go."

"I like to think of how flexible it (composting) is," Ricky said. "People think of composting, and they think of a pile of food waste like what you saw there, and they don't realize that there are so many artful ways to change the levels of components to make it work. You can literally let it sit there as long as your materials are balanced proportionally; you will have compost at some point." Ricky is excited not only about the future of composting efforts in Detroit but also about the industry and sustainable efforts as a





whole. "It has the opportunity to create so many jobs, and it's a big financial gain if we really adopt compost as a practice and take care of it. The benefits can be immediate," he exclaims.

The Scrap Soils website presents a very interesting perspective—if food waste were a country, its emissions would be the world's third largest emitter, behind China and the United States. "Food waste is not only the problem, but it's also the solution. The same thing that is the big scary issue, if you just treat it right, it literally becomes the solution," Ricky believes. He also addressed the nuance—composting does not bring us back to zero in regards to eliminating emissions or waste, but it's a great alternative that produces results. Composting also provides people with an opportunity to get outside more often while managing their pile. "I've been outside two times more than I normally would while managing this compost pile. I feel better just from that. I feel better, now at the end of the season, knowing that I took care of this thing and now I get to feed my vegetables, which are growing boundlessly because they have the nutrition to do so."

When asked about the future of the organization, or potential collaborations or partners, Ricky immediately mentioned Detroit Black Farmer Land Fund. "They're someone I've always seen and thought I can't wait to grow and have the bandwidth to reach out to them. I really want to work with them," he shared with me. Ricky stresses the emphasis he has placed on cultivating and growing Scrap Soils alongside organizations like Detroit Black Farmer Landfund in order to make an impact in Detroit. "I had to advocate and be intentional about staying in Detroit. I see how black people on my side of the diaspora treat food and food waste. It's not even a thing to think about. There are farmers and farm organizations that are established and trusted with that demographic, and Scrap Soils wants to align with them." They're excited for opportunities to grow in the community. "We don't want Scrap Soils to be a random plant that grows in the middle of the grass; I want Scrap Soils to be the reason why everything around it grows. I want it to grow in partnership with everything and everyone around it." It was refreshing to hear Ricky talk about the desire to educate and grow with the community around him; it was really aspirational. Ricky and the team at Scrap Soils just received a grant to expand and maintain the organization; however, they are looking to obtain a vehicle and transition out of using Ricky's personal car. With Scrap Soils being so mobile, it is an extremely important component of their work. Sadly, Ricky was rear-ended while driving around making pickups, so they created a GoFundMe aiming to raise funds for a new vehicle, but signing up for their residential pickup service can help support Ricky and the Scrap Soils mission.

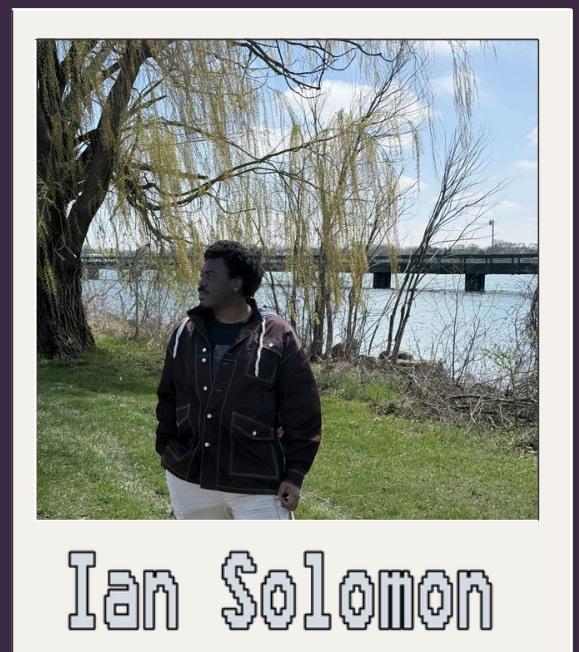




Ricky really presented the idea of sustainability in a way I had never considered before. They suggested people have a more sustainable mindset, outside of focusing on becoming a compostor or a recycler. “Having a clean household, eating healthy, and keeping my body clean. These things are synonymous (with sustainability). I don’t want to marginalize any one of the categories of sustainability, which weakens what it really is. Internalize the concept and work a little deeper. I would like to see more people allowing sustainability to be a principle and let it trickle into every aspect of life,” Ricky explained to me. I hope to take this concept and apply it to my life, and I hope that you’re able to do the same.

As the city of Detroit fully swings into spring, like many people, I’m excited to spend more time outside. Despite Detroit’s status as a city, the opportunities to spend time among the trees, at parks, near the river, or on a trail are endless. I got to spend a nice, sunny Friday afternoon with Ian Solomon, walking through the Woodland Trail on Belle Isle.

You may have seen Ian’s outdoor-centered content on Instagram or TikTok, posted under the name “Ian Outside.” I’ve followed Ian for a few years now. I discovered his account when I came across his TikTok video about Michigan’s historically Black resort town, Idlewild. It was such a fun video detailing the history of an up north vacation spot that was so historically Black. I’d never heard of the city or Ian before this. Ian Solomon is an interdisciplinary artist, community activist, avid outdoorsman, and content creator. Ian has been a fellow at Playground Detroit, attended the Cranbrook Academy of Art for his master’s, and won an Emmy for his role as host in the Great Lakes Now series, “Ian Outside.”

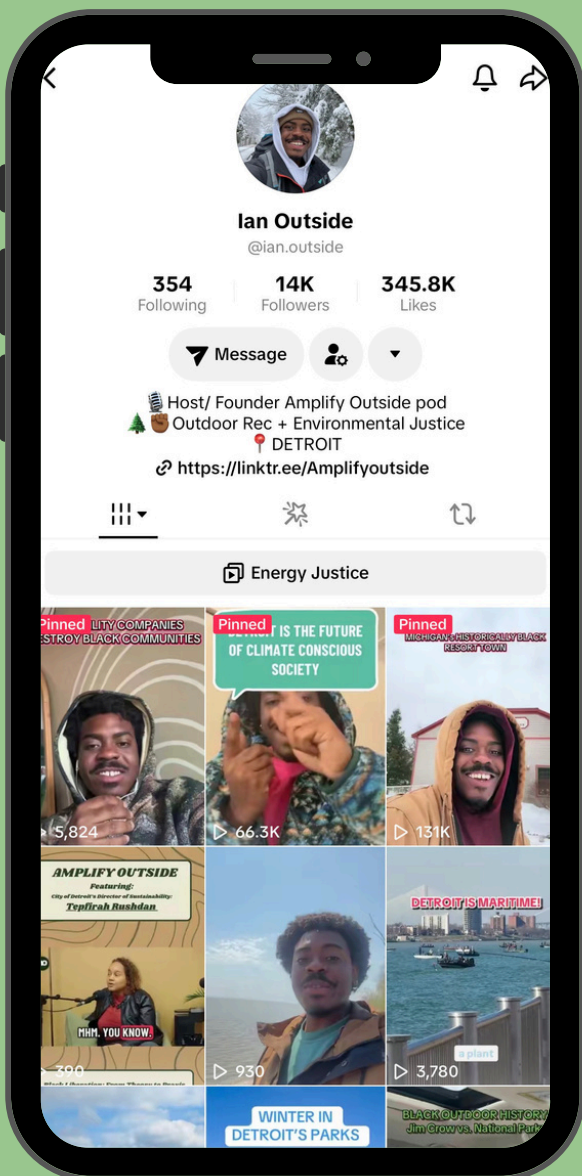


Ian Solomon



He also founded Amplify Outside, an organization based on amplifying Black outdoor recreation. Ian stays booked and busy with community initiatives, creative projects, and continuous content creation.

I was so excited to be able to link with Ian and get to chat with him about his work. Hitting the park trails on Belle Isle and getting to spend some time outside with Ian felt like getting to play basketball with LeBron. Ian got his outdoor content creation and brand started after moving back from Los Angeles in 2021. He began just posting videos of himself going to parks and doing things outside on his personal story. People began constantly asking him where he was going or what he was doing because he was showcasing new places or things. He decided to run with it and get serious about his content, and quickly branded it as Amplify Outside, and the rest is history.



It seemed like people really appreciated a basic breakdown of things in Detroit, like I did X, Y, and Z, and it cost this much—you know, just trying to demystify the spaces,” Ian explains. His content feels warm, approachable, localized, and informative. It almost feels like FaceTiming a friend or receiving a nice voice note from someone you know. Ian is passionate about bringing the Black community outside. Spending time outdoors can sometimes seem expensive or inaccessible; however, Detroit has so many options within its city limits. Ian encourages everyone “to start local. Start with the parks in your city. I think Detroiters maybe don’t think about their parks as places to hike in, but a lot of our parks have really beautiful hiking trails. I mean, we’re here right now,” Ian exclaims. Even though we were in the middle of Belle Isle, it felt like we were in the middle of nowhere, tucked in the middle of a wooded area, birds chirping, and the underlying distant sound of a bass line reminding us we were still in Detroit.

Ian also encourages people to start their outdoor journey by looking at maps. “I’m a big fan of looking

at maps. I love maps. We have these digital maps and digital tools, and the map will have a little tree icon to show you there's a park right there. If you find a park on a map, you should just go to it!" Ian talks about using this method and how he got started in his content creation journey. He was really into looking at Google Earth and would scour it with a friend, looking at parks he had never been to. "We'd find a place where we're like, 'That looks cool and we would just go.'" Ian described this as his first time taking agency in getting outdoors.

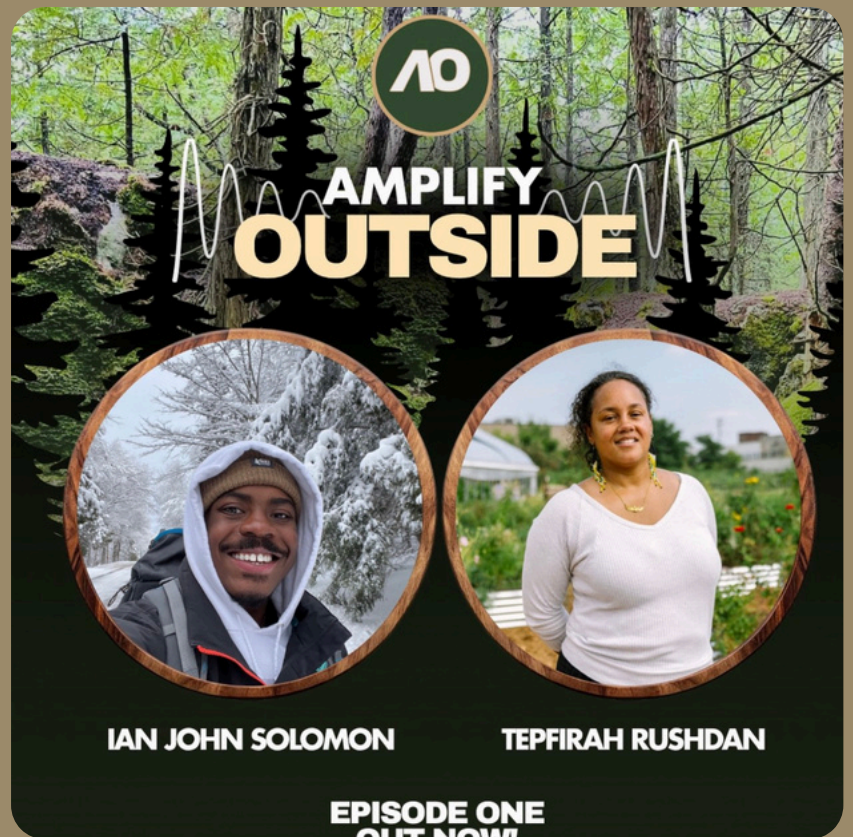


Ian's desire to see new things and his curiosity are what he attributes to his driving motivator to spend time outside. I asked Ian what he would suggest for people looking to get outside or regularly designate more time to being outside. "Gotta get that walk in. Creating a routine of even just a 30-minute walk every day can snowball into larger routines," he exclaimed.

The thing that drew me to Ian's content was his natural ability to tie local issues and events, culture, history, and learning effortlessly. This was exemplified perfectly during our conversation when Ian spoke about the disappearance of whitefish within Michigan rivers. Ian explained their total extinction in these locations due to habitat destruction by the logging industry in northern Michigan. "At its peak, they essentially used the rivers like freeways, destroying the riverbeds where all of these fish spawn. It's not just whitefish; there are other fish, too. There's been a lot of work to put back (fish) in the rivers," Ian assured me. The Nature Conservancy and local indigenous tribal communities have teamed up to repopulate the rivers around the state. "They've been really stressing and focusing on making sure that there's indigenous collaboration," Ian confirmed.



I was excited to hear Ian speak about a podcast he is starting, Amplify Outside, that is supported by the Eastside Community Network. Ian plans to use his podcast to “position Detroit as a place to look to for equitable sustainability.” The podcast launched its first episode on Earth Day and hosted Detroit Director of Sustainability Teffirah Rushdan. Ian plans to “give a nuanced view of the city and, by proxy, give a nuanced view of Black people.” Ian wants to use this project to show Detroit in a new way by featuring organizers, stewards, fellows, artists, and many others. It was refreshing to hear Ian speak about this project’s future by including our community and beyond. “In the future, I want to be an organization that can support other people to make eco media, whether it be stuff like I do, which is content, or fund art projects. Anything that can lend itself to Black environmentalism.”



Not only is Ian an avid outdoorsman and content creator, but also a talented artist. Ian blends all three of these avenues from time to time, and this summer he plans to return to an art residency at Oxbow in Saugatuck, Michigan. The center focuses on metalwork, glasswork, and different mediums tucked in the woods with Lake Michigan as its backdrop. Ian will serve as an outdoor lead for a teen takeover series with Crafting in the Future, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit. The nonprofit prioritizes BIPOC folks involved in several different crafting mediums. Ian will lead the teens on hikes and host talks on how to involve their outdoor experiences into their work.

Ian often features Polaroids in his work, and it's one of his favorite ways to engage with the subject of his work. "The image is developed in the same space that you take it; it kind of makes it an artifact of that space. It was touched by that space, which I think is really important," Ian mentions. This was such a fascinating way to view photography. Ian even furthered this thought by explaining, "Photography is super digital, and sometimes you can't touch it, but now you have this physical object that's seen the space that it's showing you." Ian plans to allow the teens to use field recorders outside in the woods and engage in listening sessions to use sound as the medium. Ian has several of his Polaroid photographs on his website and plans to release some prints framed in his metalwork made of steel.



Ian has such a strong network of artists, environmentalists, organizations, and nonprofits that he has come into contact with through his journey of making content. It was exciting to hear him talk about Black to the Land Coalition when asked who some of his favorites were in Detroit. Black to the Land Coalition has been around for over a decade, doing work to get people outdoors, participating in recreational activities, stewardship activities, and in the community. Ian recently attended an event, Black to the Land, hosted at Rouge Park, making maple syrup. They tapped trees inside a sugar bush inside the park using Indigenous traditions. Black to the Land also heavily focuses on "connecting Black folks in Detroit with Indigenous folks," he explained.

"I think as Black people in Detroit, we are privileged in the fact that we are visible effortlessly. I can't say that's the same for Indigenous folks," Ian said.

Personally, I can't wait to see where Ian goes, not only this summer but over the next few years. It was exciting to hear him place such a high value on building, connecting, and learning about our local Detroit community members and spaces, but also to have eyes on how to connect these strong aspects with communities afar.



It's very easy to get lost and paralyzed by the overwhelming hopelessness you can feel when thinking about the state of the world these days. However, I can't help but feel motivated, curious, and slightly hopeful after reflecting on my conversations with Theresa, Ricky, and Ian. To live in community with all three of these individuals who are doing such valuable work—to either put a smile on our face while we look at our phones, advocate legislators into creating laws that protect our livelihood, take time to educate us and show us how we can change our mindset and everyday actions, or encourage us to go to the park at the end of the street—it's incredibly inspirational to see the work of Ricky, Theresa, Ian, and the organizations and coalitions they work alongside. I hope that hearing their stories can encourage you to make different choices in your life or inspire you to learn more.

Happy Earth Day!

