

# THE SKINNY ON NUDISM IN THE U.S.

Jennifer Hile  
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People who do stuff in the buff say there are a lot of misconceptions in U.S. society about what they are doing and why.

There are nude cruises, camping grounds, tennis courts, and motorcycle rallies across the country. There are at least three nude summer camps just for teens and about 260 clothing-optional family resorts in North America—nearly twice the number of ten years ago, according to the American Association for Nude Recreation.

"Naturists" say the benefits to sloughing off both clothes and convention include a sense of freedom and a better self image.

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## Clothing Optional

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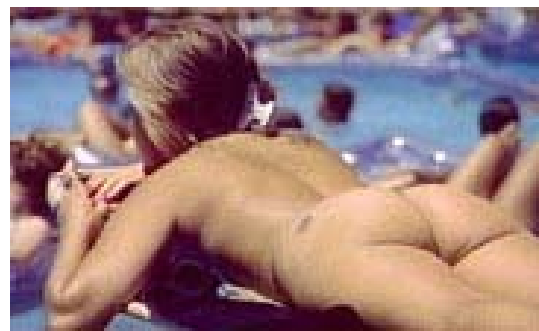
"I've taken lots of friends to nudist beaches, both men and women," said Mark Storey, an editor of *Nude and Natural* magazine and a philosophy professor at Bellevue Community College in Washington State. Storey is also the author of *Cinema au Naturel: A History of Nudist Film*.

"Some of them walked away thinking it was great, some walked away thinking it was boring. But they all walked away thinking, Most people look somewhat like me."

Storey, like most naturism activists, points to most media portrayals of the human body as inaccurate distortions of what people really look like. "There are very few model-perfect people out there. At a nude beach, you get a more realistic perception of what humanity really looks like."

Nicky Hoffman, administrative director of the Naturist Society, said part of her group's mission is to promote an environment of body acceptance. "For girls especially, there is so much pressure in our society to be a perfect size. As a result, there is a whole generation of people killing themselves to meet a standard that is impossible. Part of living a naturist lifestyle is accepting your body and regaining a normal body image."

Hoffman further argues that when clothes are off, social distinctions shrink, creating a more level playing field for human interactions. It's hard to tell a



This naturist sunbather was photographed in Palm Springs, California. Although going naked in public is taboo in most parts of the U.S.—and people who do so in inappropriate situations risk being sent to jail—the number of nudist resorts has increased in the past decade, according to naturism activists.

Photograph by Jodi Cobb, copyright National Geographic

bus driver from a lawyer without the social and professional markings of their dress.

"People will hide and mask themselves in a number of ways to look prettier, tougher, or to establish their social rank," Storey said. "But if you are buck naked chatting with someone, you'll be chatting with the real person. When you get past the fear factor and the initial embarrassment, you realize it allows for a more authentic human interaction."

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## Taboo in America

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"Nudity is a taboo in America because we primarily equate nudity or nakedness with sexuality and we have taboos about sexuality," said Matthew Westra, a psychology professor at Longview Community College in Missouri, in the National Geographic Channel documentary *Taboo: Extreme Living*. "A lot of it has to do, I think, with the Puritan and Victorian heritage that we have, which says that any kind of temptation will lead you into hell."

Modern strip clubs and pornography also strengthen the association between nudity and sex, a link that naturism activists are constantly trying to break.

"At nude beaches, we swim, we play volleyball, we lay in the sun. We do the same things everyone else does at the beach—we just prefer to do it without clothing," Hoffman said. The rules: no touching, no gawking, no inappropriate behavior. "It's a very family-friendly environment."

Nonetheless, a broad movement embracing the benefits of social nudity didn't appear in the Western world until the early 20th century. It started in Germany, where it blossomed as an alternative to the stress of industrialized, urban life. By 1929, the movement made it to the U.S., where it has struggled to become part of mainstream culture ever since.

"Americans are still severely bothered by nakedness. See a bit of Janet Jackson's breast on national television and it's a fiasco. But all of the violence on television—that's accepted. To me, it's bizarre," Storey said.

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### **In the Courtroom**

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In order to live a clothing-optional lifestyle, naturists form their own communities and have their own resorts. It protects them from prying eyes and keeps "textile" neighbors, as nudists call the rest of the world, from feeling overexposed.

But naturists argue that, as a part of the taxpaying community, some public space should be set aside for them. A recent national Roper poll, one of the two largest independent polling companies in the U.S., said 80 percent of the U.S. public agrees that it is okay to have a nude beach, as long as it is marked by a sign. 25 percent of adults polled said they'd gone skinny-dipping in mixed company at least once in their life.

"Naturists do not divide neatly down political boundaries," said Bob Morton, the executive director of the Nacurist Action Committee (NAC), based in Austin, Texas. "No true conservative would suggest compromising civil liberties, so it's not a conservative-versus-liberal issue. Naturists span the entire political spectrum."

The NAC monitors legislative activities at the city, state, and national level, lobbying on behalf of naturist interests and filing briefs in the courthouse to protect the naturist way of life.

"It's been very trendy lately to try to put skinny-dipping on the list of sex offenses for which you have to register with the state. It's already passed in 13 states," Morton said. "That's ridiculous. Go to any nude beach and you will understand that in ten minutes. But people confuse nudity and sex all the time. They don't bother to distinguish between the two, and that's the root of a lot of our problems."

Some states, like Montana, are bringing down the hammer on their clothing-optional residents. A first offense for skinny-dipping means six months in jail; a second offense garners one year; a third offense, a hundred years. "It causes you to sit up and say, My gosh, who thinks these kinds of prison sentences make sense?" Morton said.

While naturists continue to struggle for acceptance in the United States, in Europe it's usually a nonissue. "France has more clothing-optional beaches and campsites than you can possibly number. Croatia has nude beaches up and down the coast. So does Italy

and the southern coast of Spain. Germany has large city parks where you can hang out naked. I could go on and on with other examples," Storey said. "The United States is the only Western country that is still struggling to figure this issue out."

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For related news, watch *Taboo in the U.S.* on Wednesday, July 21, at 9 p.m. ET/PT on the National Geographic Channel.

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