



Trail Map

For Rural Development in America



Executive Summary: Key Opportunities



The Trail Map for Rural Development provides guidance for public, private, Tribal, philanthropic, and nonprofit partners across sectors that work with rural communities about the most impactful strategies to support outdoor recreation economy development. Below are key takeaways from our research.



Education

For outdoor recreation to earn a seat at the economic development table, leading organizations must **make the case with new data and stories that are centered on outdoor recreation as a driver of quality of life, resilient economies, and connected communities** to resonate with leaders at the federal, state, Tribal, and local levels.

These success stories should **address outdoor recreation's role in addressing concurrent trends and challenges for rural America** including outmigration, offshoring of industry, wealth extraction, declining physical and mental health, polarization, and disconnection from the natural world.



Community Vision

The best and most durable plans for outdoor recreation as an economic driver should be **created, motivated, and stewarded by community champions**.

Future investments should **enhance and expand the ability of rural leaders and communities to define their own success** and path forward through outdoor recreation.



Financing and Implementation

Investors in and funders of outdoor recreation projects in rural communities should think beyond just construction of outdoor recreation infrastructure — **to operations and maintenance, resilience to extreme weather, creation of local wealth and stable housing, and capacity building for rural development hubs and backbone organizations** — and develop innovative models to capture new value and revenue streams that accrue due to increased recreation access.

Additionally, those who benefit from outdoor recreation — hotels, restaurants, transportation services, healthcare providers, and more — should **come to the table with ideas to help embed new value creation into the community**.



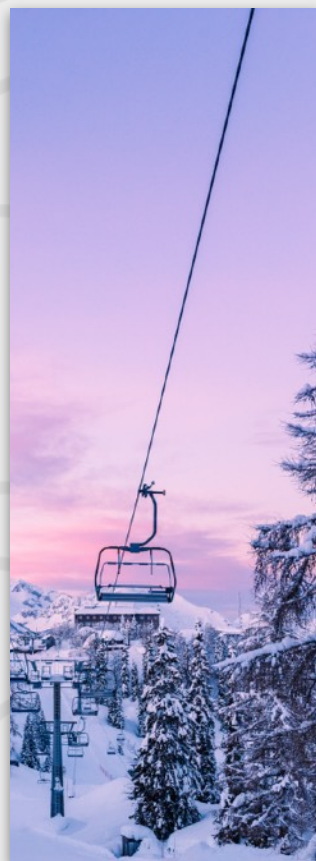
Resilience

Partnering organizations should come together at a local and regional level with new research, policy, and partnerships to **connect outdoor recreation to existing visions and priorities for community vitality** including public health and addiction prevention, education, resilience to extreme weather and emergency response, workforce development, housing and infrastructure, and arts and culture.



Innovation

Leading organizations should **build new strategies, seek partnerships with colleges, universities, trade schools, and outdoor businesses and associations, and develop new models of impact measurement** to foster the same innovation and entrepreneurship in rural recreation communities that have powered the United States economy as a whole.



Executive Summary: Next Steps

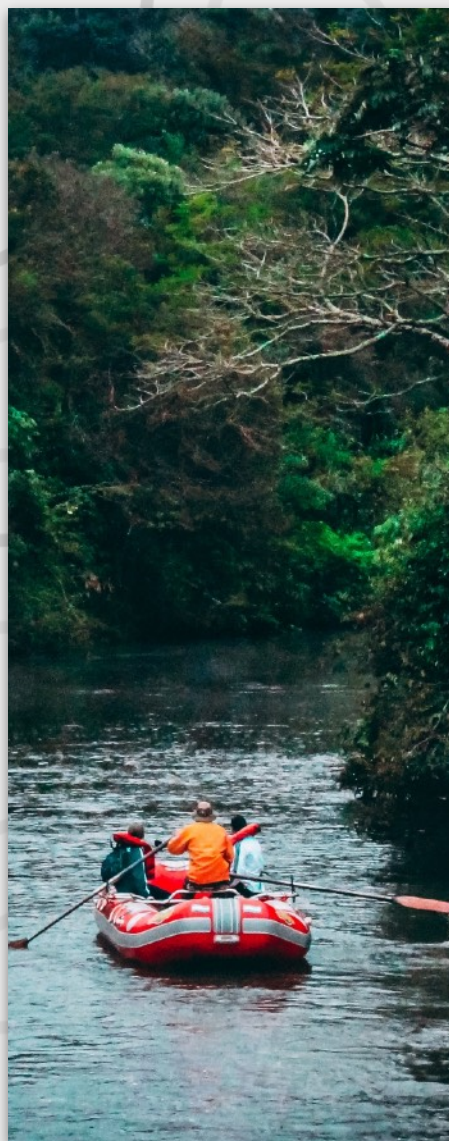


Below are suggested next steps—research, initiatives, tools, and resources—to put the themes on the prior page into practice and help rural communities around the United States reach their fullest potential through the benefits of outdoor access and high-quality infrastructure.



Education

- **Expand professional knowledge about the outdoor recreation economy** and its role in quality of life in rural America.
- **Partner with colleges and universities** on new research to share data, learnings and best practices from rural recreation economies.
- **Build cost-effective and replicable models** to calculate the economic impact from outdoor recreation at the county and local level.
- **Expand existing technical assistance programs** to serve rural recreation economies.



Financing and Implementation

- **Build new public-private project partnerships** between the outdoor recreation industry and rural communities.
- **Invest in rural development hubs and backbone organizations.**
- **Include funding for operations and maintenance** of recreation infrastructure from the start.
- **Define “Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure and Capacity Building” as a qualified funding category** in federal, state, tribal, regional and local grant programs.



Resilience

- **Prepare outdoor recreation communities** for the next natural disaster.
- **Build big, durable regional outdoor recreation visions** through partnerships.
- **Prioritize housing today, tomorrow, and for years to come.**
- **Invest in Indigenous Leadership.**



Community Vision

- **Support rural leaders in crafting their own visions and coalitions** with free and accessible resources on outdoor recreation’s role in rural economies with data, advice, and messaging.
- **Build “Outdoor Recreation Plus” coalitions** with leading members including organizations and businesses outside the outdoor recreation sector.
- **Incorporate historical assessments** into outdoor recreation planning efforts.



Innovation

- **Create a new national measurement framework** for healthy recreation economies.
- **Scale new K-12 curricula and technical degree programs** to connect rural youth to outdoor recreation workforce opportunities.
- **Expand access to rural outdoor recreation entrepreneurship support services.**

Introduction

Outdoor recreation and its benefits to healthy individuals, communities, and economies offer a unifying and resilient opportunity for rural America. At a time when millions more Americans than ever before are getting outside, outdoor recreation provides a powerful path forward for rural economies that improves quality of life and public health, retains youth and families, preserves local heritage and values, attracts new talent and businesses, connects communities, and stimulates innovation and entrepreneurship rooted in place.

As hundreds of rural towns, cities, and counties around the country lean into the \$1.2 trillion outdoor recreation economy as a driver for economic diversification and resilience, **the time is right for public, private, philanthropic, Tribal, and nonprofit partners to coalesce around a vision for outdoor recreation** informed by community expertise, motivated by a broad conception of vitality and wellbeing, and inspired by a future where economic development and outdoor recreation work hand in hand to connect Americans to cherished lands and waters.

Outdoor Recreation Roundtable (ORR) is the



nation's leading coalition of outdoor recreation trade associations, businesses, organizations, state offices of outdoor recreation, and academic institutions representing the \$1.2 trillion outdoor recreation economy.



*“For this outdoor recreation opportunity to benefit the communities who are seeking support and to live up to its potential, **we need to build an understanding of the current state of outdoor recreation in rural economic development and chart a path forward together**—one that guarantees local health, housing, wealth, community benefit, and care for our resources, while fulfilling our desire to grow outdoor recreation and connect people to benefits of the great outdoors.”*

Chris Perkins, Vice President of Programs, Outdoor Recreation Roundtable

National Leadership Forum on Rural Development

In October 2024, a small group of prominent leaders in outdoor recreation, economic development, conservation, and from rural American communities convened at the offices of the Richard King Mellon Foundation in Pittsburgh, PA to chart a path forward for rural development through outdoor recreation across the United States. The **Pennsylvania Office of Outdoor Recreation and Pennsylvania Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship** also supported the hosting and contents of the convening.

Those conversations inform the contents of this Trail Map for Rural Development through Outdoor Recreation in America.



Tawny Wilson (Oweesta)

Photo: Runway Productions, LLC



Top: Whitney Potter Schwartz (ORR)



Middle: Larry Selzer (The Conservation Fund), Janice Ikeda (Vibrant Hawai'i), David Lipsetz (Housing Assistance Council)



Bottom: Attendees at ORR's Forum

Photos: Runway Productions, LLC

About this Trail Map

About

This Trail Map pairs with Outdoor Recreation Roundtable's (ORR) seminal rural development research contained in the [ORR Rural Economic Development Toolkit](#).

While the **Toolkit's primary audience is community leaders and practitioners** seeking to build authentic, diversified, and resilient outdoor recreation economies, the **Trail Map's primary audience is leading organizations including federal, state, Tribal, and local agencies, philanthropic foundations, local recreation agencies and state recreation associations, outdoor businesses, and nonprofits** focused on the health of rural America and is intended to inform investment and research priorities.



Outdoor Recreation
Roundtable Rural
Economic Development
Toolkit

BEGIN

June 2025

ORR Releases Trail Map for
Rural Development

The Trail Map contains five sections: **Education, Community Vision, Financing and Implementation, Resilience, and Innovation**. Within each are opportunities in policy, practice, and research/resource development identified by diverse experts from around the United States to ensure that rural communities thrive by harnessing the power of the outdoors.

January 2021

ORR Launches *First Edition* of Rural Economic Development Toolkit

2022-2023

ORR Presents Toolkit Research to National Audiences

October 2024

ORR Hosts National Leadership Forum on Rural Development

August 2022-2023

ORR Distributes Implementation Grants to Rural Communities Nationwide

January 2024

ORR Launches *Second Edition* of Rural Economic Development Toolkit

May 2025

ORR Awards Hurricane Helene Rural Recovery Grants

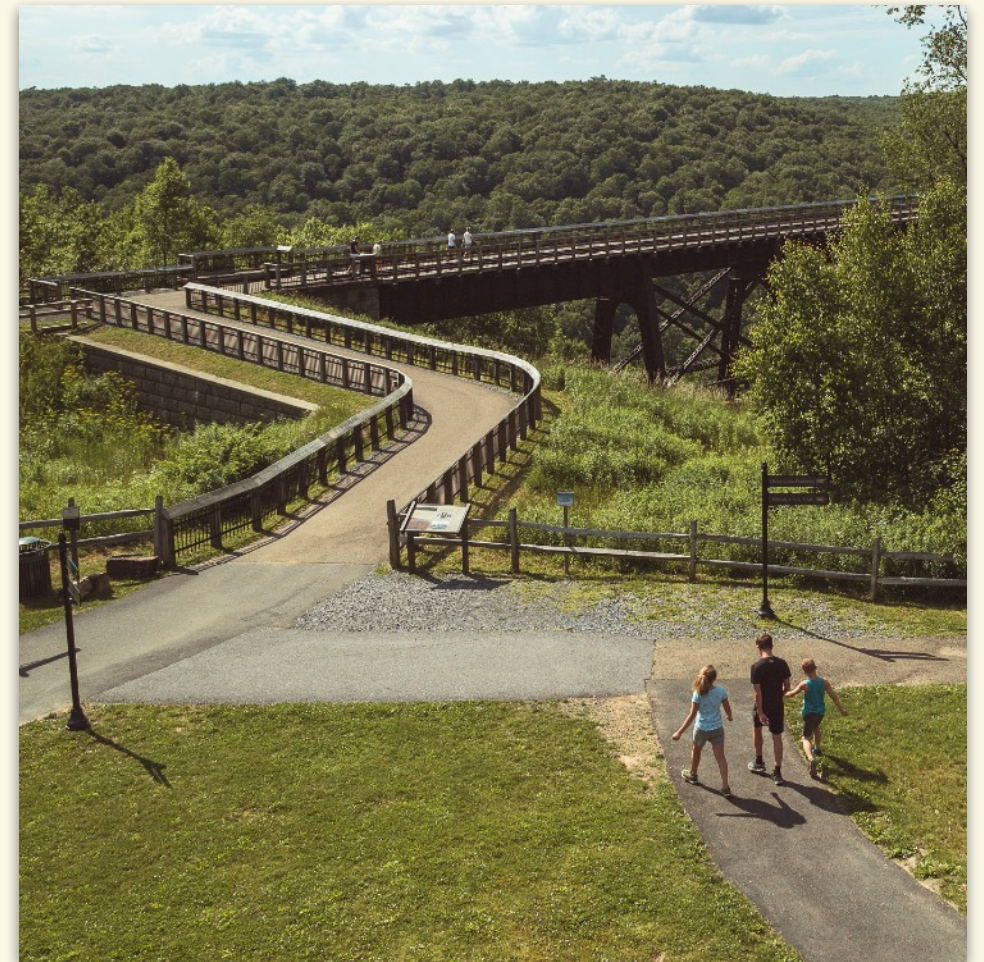
The Outdoor Recreation Economy in Rural America

The Outdoor Recreation Economy in Rural America

Rural communities provide the backbone for the outdoor recreation economy. In parks, marinas, campgrounds and on multi-use trails, ski hills, and so many other recreation destinations, millions of Americans from within rural communities or just passing through rely on high-quality infrastructure, stable housing to support a local workforce, thriving main streets and more to ensure lifelong relationships with the outdoors. In the face of offshoring, industrialization, and conglomeration, rural communities have recognized the opportunity to improve quality of life and make their economies more diversified and resilient through the outdoors.

And the strategy is bearing fruit: data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics highlighted by the Daily Yonder show that *"rural counties where the recreation industry is a big part of the local economy are more likely than other types of rural counties to have regained the jobs they lost during the pandemic."*

This fits into a broader shift toward quality of life as an economic driver. As the Brookings Institution noted in a recent report, *"there is compelling new data that traditional economic development tools may be ineffective compared to investments in quality of life and place. Community amenities such as **recreation opportunities**, cultural activities, and excellent services are likely bigger contributors to healthy local economies than traditional 'business-friendly' measures."*



Kinzua Bridge, Pennsylvania

Photo: Hunter Casilio



Photo: Runway Productions, LLC

*"We work in a region that, like much of Appalachia, has for decades, seen an aging and declining population **due to macro forces like globalization, digitization, urban migration** — a place that has struggled with under-investment. **We can use outdoor recreation to help us counter this defining issue** and create a more hopeful story for our future."*

Ta Enos, Founder and CEO, PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship

The Outdoor Recreation Economy in Rural America

Despite these tailwinds, the adoption of outdoor recreation as an economic development strategy is under-researched and underfunded by public, private, nonprofit, Tribal, and philanthropic organizations causing it to lag behind its potential, especially compared to other well-known strategies for economic development. Additionally, rural communities achieving success at developing outdoor recreation are **managing related challenges related to affordability, housing, healthcare, and other basic life supports.**

To maximize outdoor recreation's role at the core of thriving communities, and prevent challenges around affordability, housing, and maintaining community character, we need to **prioritize new policies, investments, research, and resources from across the country** to fulfill our obligation to connect more Americans to the outdoors while building robust, authentic, and community-oriented rural economies.

Outdoor
Rec



Attendees at ORR's National Leadership Forum on Rural Development look out over Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

Photo: Angelique Herring

Key Opportunities

01 Education

Opportunity:

For outdoor recreation to earn a seat at the economic development table, leading organizations must **make the case with new data and stories that are centered on outdoor recreation as a driver of quality of life, resilient economies, and connected communities** to resonate with leaders at the federal, state, Tribal, and local levels.

These success stories should **address outdoor recreation's role in addressing concurrent trends and challenges for rural America** including outmigration, offshoring of industry, wealth extraction, declining physical and mental health, polarization, and disconnection from the natural world.



Forum Participants visit the Quemahoning Reservoir outside Johnstown, PA.
Photo: Angelique Herring



Photo: Runway Productions, LLC

*“Interest from local officials in outdoor recreation took off as the government put out their figures of outdoor recreation’s economic impact, and community leaders said, **“We’re paying attention and recognize we should be trying to engage, but we don’t know where to start.”***

*We shared with them that they’ve probably already started and don’t even know it. **They probably have high-value outdoor assets in their community that are very popular with their residents and already have an economic ripple effect for local businesses.** They just haven’t framed the conversation that way.”*

Silas Chamberlin, Founder, Firefly Outdoor + Economics



Tony Pipa (Brookings Institution) and Lucas St. Clair (Trust for Public Land)
Photo: Runway Productions, LLC

*"I think it's really important to understand how to stay in community. In our community, counselors initially voted against a proposal to increase outdoor access. We took them up to see the visitor contact station and said, **"Look at this place. See how close your community is if they take this new road and how you would benefit from it."***

*And at the end of August, there was another vote and they voted unanimously to support it. So, there's the ability to change and change thinking. And I think, rather than this polarized nature that can exist in rural places—what are we doing to bring people together and not create a us versus them mentality, which is really easy to do. **Partnership versus polarization, without a doubt."***

Lucas St. Clair, Board Chair, Trust for Public Land

"Some of the best outdoor stories are happening in places that we know the least and have preconceived notions of from one side or another.

It doesn't have to be this dramatic shift. It's still farming, but it's maybe regenerative. Sometimes we think about transitioning economies, and that word 'transitioning' scares a lot of rural communities.

*There has to be a better term for that. **It's more about what's happening already and continuing your lifestyle, or what your family used to do, what you know best, but in a way that's more sustainable. And outdoor recreation fits into that conversation."***

Jessica Wahl Turner, President, Outdoor Recreation Roundtable



Photo: Runway Productions, LLC





Expand professional knowledge about the outdoor recreation economy and its role in quality of life in rural America.

Provide training at federal and state agencies, leading nonprofits and service providers, and other regional and local economic development organizations to expand staff expertise on the \$1.2 trillion outdoor recreation economy and best practices to expand outdoor recreation as a tool for economic development in communities of all sizes. For example, the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) gained new authorities to fund outdoor recreation in its 2024 reauthorization and should be prioritized.



Partner with colleges and universities on new research to share data, learnings and best practices from rural recreation economies.

Rural leaders seeking to build sustainable communities around outdoor recreation will benefit from studies outlining best practices and observed impacts, provided that they are presented in digestible, relatable, and educational formats. Higher education partners (especially land-grant universities given their existing interface with rural stakeholders) can help build significant data and storytelling solutions for rural communities.

Going Further Down the Trail:

- [Innovative Travel, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation Awards](#), National Governors Association
- [Do-It-Yourself Economic Impact Program](#), Wisconsin Office of Outdoor Recreation



Build cost-effective and replicable models to calculate the economic impact from outdoor recreation at the *county and local level*.

The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account releases new data annually on the economic impact of outdoor recreation, but only drills down to the state level. Regions wanting to measure the economic impact of outdoor recreation at a county or local level have to pay for expensive and bespoke economic impact studies, which presents a prohibitive barrier for rural communities.



Expand existing technical assistance programs to serve rural recreation economies.

The [Recreation Economy for Rural Communities](#) program is the best current example of federal technical assistance but is administered by a small team and limited in scope and impact to a handful of communities every couple years.

Other federal programs provide inspiration for the scale of support—e.g., the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which employs over 200 biologists in all 50 states and territories to support landowners in conserving and improving wildlife habitat, or the Natural Resources Conservation Service at USDA, which provides assistance to farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners to improve their practices for environmental quality and efficiency.

Federal and state governments can play an important role to link community leaders to outdoor recreation grant, loan, and technical assistance opportunities as well as education on best practices for rural economic development through outdoor recreation.



Opportunity:

The best and most durable plans for outdoor recreation as an economic driver should be **created, motivated, and stewarded by community champions.**

Future investments should **enhance and expand the ability of rural leaders and communities to define their own success** and path forward through outdoor recreation.



Participants in a Made X Mountains Rural Community Workshop, North Carolina.

Vision



Photo: Runway Productions, LLC

“Outdoor recreation, as well as any effort around rural community economic development, needs to be about residents first. Creating a community that's good for the people who live there now will really make it a place that people want to visit and where businesses want to locate.

And that means bringing people to the table who've been left out in the past. We ask the question, “Who's not here?” and then keep asking that question again and again. You start to figure out who really needs to be at the table who's not been in the past.”

**Steph Bertaina, Program Lead, Recreation Economy for Rural Communities,
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency**

“A lot of rural America is a little pissed off the system hasn’t been working for them, and they’ve seen industry come in and be that extractive entity. They’ve seen the federal government further that, and they don’t trust it. Towns in Ohio and West Virginia are very different places than they were when I grew up in them because of that, right? So, there is a trust element of working with the community.

This can be the industry that can present itself and come in and say, “We are stewards of the culture and the people, not just the trees and the streams that we’re going to invest in, but also that the local people get ahead, and the folks in a small town get the wealth.”

David Lipsetz, President and CEO, Housing Assistance Council

“We have massive resources in rural development, but those resources can do very little unless there are people on the ground with the solutions and the ideas. And what we say in rural development is that we don’t come into communities and tell communities what to what to do. We actually invest in solutions that come from the communities, helping them achieve their goals and their objectives.”

Dr. Basil Gooden, USDA Under Secretary for Rural Development



Glenn Hughes (ASA), Marc Berejka (REI), Shauneequa Owusu (ChangeLab Solutions)
Photo: Runway Productions, LLC

“The first thing where we start, and what we ask people is, “Did you engage the community?” And then we press a little bit more. Good community engagement never stops, or you won’t really know what’s going on. Think about building bike lanes, for example. “Oh, you want to work together to lay some bike lanes. Wonderful. What will that mean for the businesses that are involved? What will that mean for the residents that are there? Will folks have access? Are we talking about a protective link? What does that look like?”

Shauneequa Owusu, Chief Strategy Officer, ChangeLab Solutions



Support rural leaders in crafting their own visions with free and accessible resources on outdoor recreation's role in rural economies with data, advice, and messaging.

Rural communities have extensive wisdom and expertise but limited bandwidth and resources to advocate on their own behalf. Tools that supply these leaders with easily accessible data, advice, and messaging (like ORR's [Rural Economic Development Toolkit](#)) can help maximize the ability of local champions to pull their communities together and make the case to local leaders.



Build “Outdoor Recreation Plus” coalitions with leading members including organizations and businesses outside the outdoor recreation sector.

Many organizations share interests in the health, economic, and community benefits of outdoor recreation. By including rural health providers, public land managers, school districts, farmers and ranchers, and other leading employers in a community (to name a few) from the outset, communities can ensure that recreation assets are utilized effectively to achieve collective strategic goals.



Incorporate historical assessments into outdoor recreation planning efforts.

When crafting new economic development strategies, partnering organizations are often unaware of the history of industry in community and its impact on local institutions, as well as specific events or policies that may have contributed to today's attitudes and relationships about the outdoors.

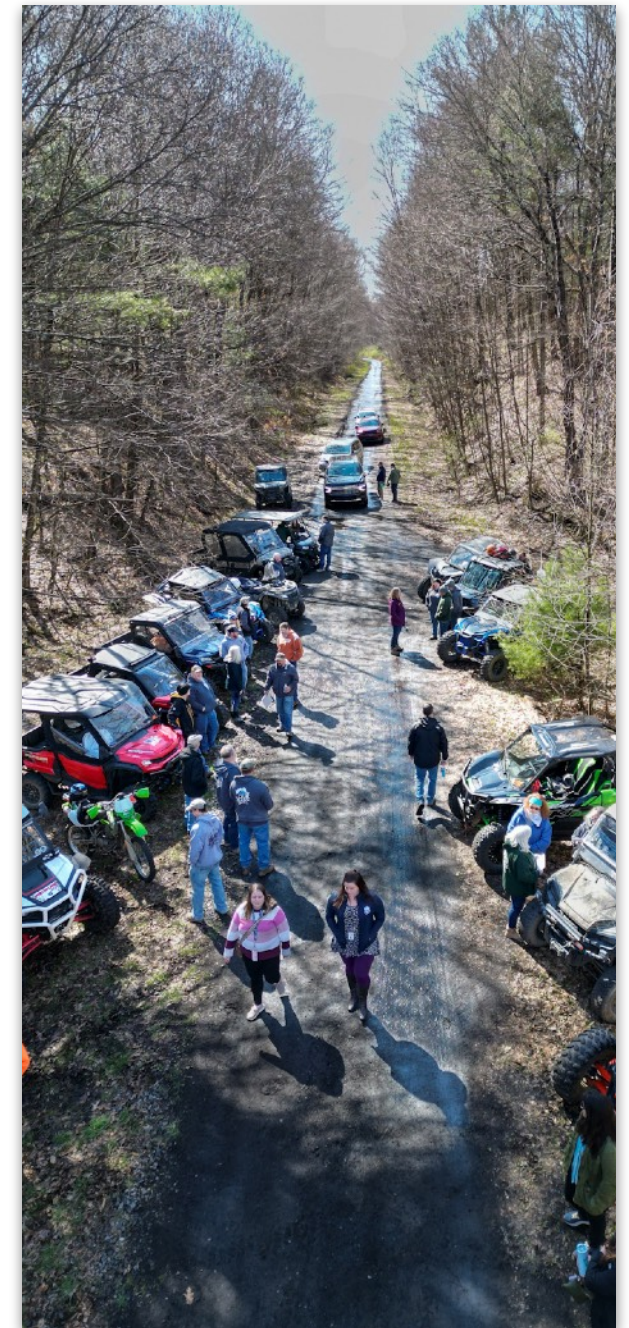
These attitudes and impacts can be more acute for communities who have been underserved in or excluded from outdoor recreation (for instance, Tribes, communities of color, people with disabilities). Historical assessments can help inform better planning efforts and strategies informed by community needs and learnings from past economic drivers and their positive and negative impacts.

Vision



Going Further Down the Trail:

- [Recreation Economy for Rural Communities](#), U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- [OREC Rural Technical Assistance Program](#), Colorado Outdoor Recreation Industry Office
- [Developing From Within: Old Fort's Black Community is Creating Outdoor Recreational Areas to Rejuvenate Their Home](#), WNC Magazine



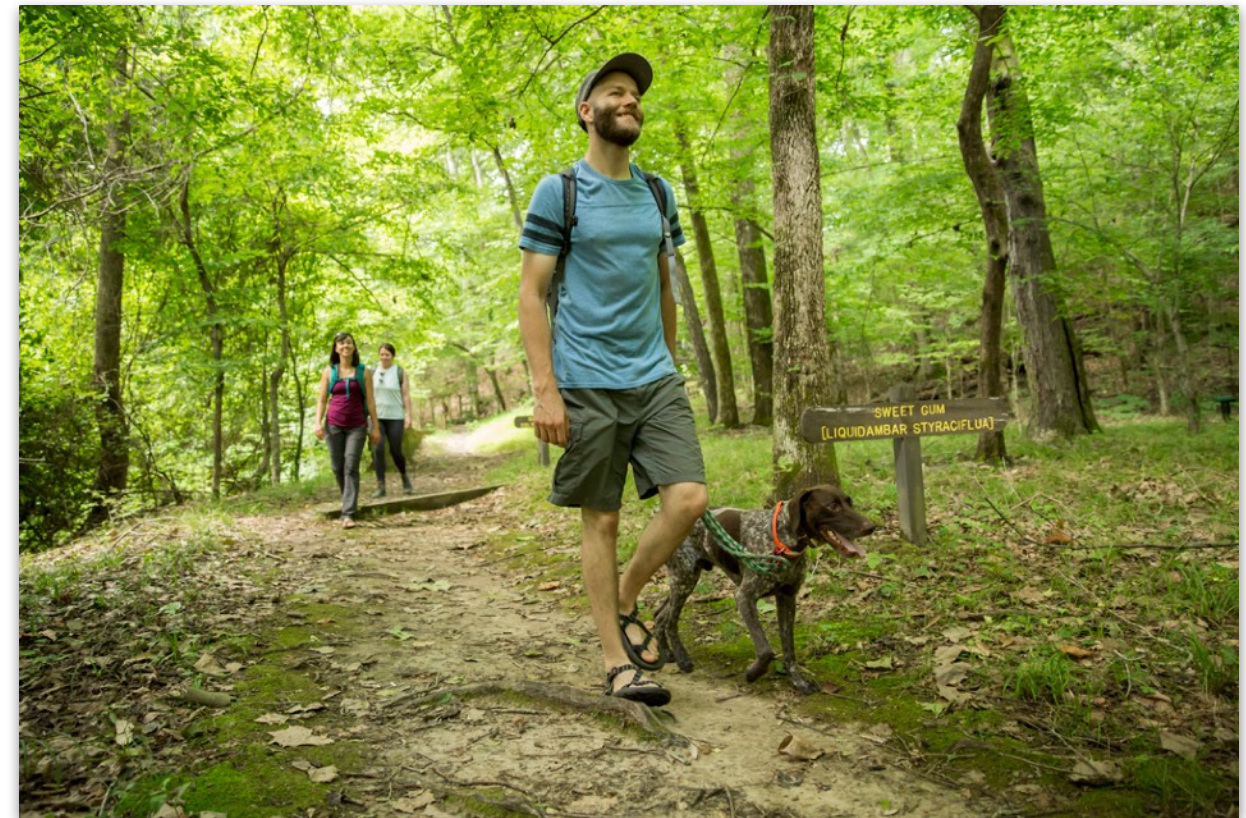
Local residents convene at the recent announcement of nearly \$1M in trail investments along the Piney Rail Corridor in PA.

03 Financing and Implementation

Opportunity:

Investors in and funders of outdoor recreation projects in rural communities **should think beyond just construction of outdoor recreation infrastructure — to operations and maintenance, resilience to extreme weather, creation of local wealth and stable housing, and capacity building for rural development hubs and backbone organizations —** and develop innovative models to capture new value and revenue streams that accrue due to increased recreation access.

Additionally, those who benefit from outdoor recreation — hotels, restaurants, transportation services, healthcare providers, and more — **should come to the table with ideas to help embed new value creation into the community.**



Financing



Photo: Runway Productions, LLC

“There are big challenges related to maintaining infrastructure and operations and maintenance. There are sections of our trail system that are now 45 years old, and the problems are intensifying with aging infrastructure exacerbated by climate change and more frequent landslides and flooding.

If we can't deal with those issues, then that's going to impede the economic benefits that that resource provides. So this is another sort of bottom line: In order to sustain the economic benefits of outdoor recreation investment in rural communities, we have to deal with and invest in the operations and maintenance challenges as well.”

Tom Gilbert, President and CEO, Pennsylvania Environmental Council

*“If I could lift up one thing to philanthropy, **the most important opportunity and bang for the buck is capacity building.** That’s the thing that prevented rural communities that needed funding the most from getting access to those federal dollars that were coming out well intentioned and well designed in many cases, but just really difficult in a short time frame with a lot of complexity for those communities to take advantage of.”*

Chris Estes, Co-Director, Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group

*“Undergirding a great project is a **long-term vision for financing and funding through blended or braided capital,** where we’re bringing in grant capital, investment, maybe concessionary types of instruments, through CDFIs and otherwise, and then bringing in commercial investments as well. That alongside an ambitious goal – **a north star that everyone can get behind,** with leaders who are visionary and committed to the cause, who can leverage partnerships on the ground and make partners feel a sense of ownership.”*

Curan Bonham, Program Officer, Richard King Mellon Foundation



Photo: Runway Productions, LLC



Chris Estes (Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group)

Photo: Runway Productions, LLC



Build new public-private project partnerships between the outdoor recreation industry and rural communities.

Outdoor recreation businesses and rural communities have a mutually beneficial partnership: each relies on the success of the other. Outdoor companies can prioritize rural communities in their philanthropic portfolios—even small grants of \$10-\$20K can be catalytic for rural leaders trying to get plans off the ground. Outdoor companies can fund recreation infrastructure as well as main street revitalization and housing development projects and enjoy the reputational benefits that come with being an engaged partner in a thriving rural community that enables increased use for its products and/or services.



Invest in rural development hubs and backbone organizations.

In many regions, organizations are able to achieve strong results for communities with few resources by taking learnings back to a distressed, low-capacity regions and implementing them on the ground to convene committed and diverse stakeholder groups and connect national to local efforts. Strategic investments in these regional intermediaries can help advance progress substantially.



Include funding for operations and maintenance of recreation infrastructure from the start.

Too many communities have seen thousands of dollars and hours of blood, sweat, and tears go into the development of new recreation infrastructure like parks, trails, marinas, and campgrounds, only to see the infrastructure decay over time without dedicated funding. Recreation infrastructure should be treated like any other asset with long-term operations and maintenance costs to extend its lifetime.



Define “Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure and Capacity Building” as a qualified funding category in federal, state, tribal, regional and local grant programs.

Many existing government grant programs for economic development, conservation, and industry development have existing goals supported by the outdoor recreation economy, but without identifying outdoor recreation as a qualified funding category. The USDA Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant program is one such example of a program that could be tapped for outdoor recreation with an adjustment to its language.



Going Further Down the Trail:

- [Travel, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation Grant Fact Sheet](#), U.S. Economic Development Administration
- [State Funding Mechanisms for Outdoor Recreation](#), Headwaters Economics
- [Current Projects](#), The Great Outdoors Fund



Opportunity :

Partnering organizations should come together at a local and regional level with new research, policy, and partnerships to **connect outdoor recreation to existing visions and priorities for community vitality** including public health and addiction prevention, education, resilience to extreme weather and emergency response, workforce development, housing and infrastructure, and arts and culture.



Photo: Runway Productions, LLC

“It’s critical that we take a more holistic approach to outdoor recreation that benefits residents and visitors. This includes addressing the negative impact of short-term rentals and second homes that increase the cost of and reduce availability of housing for the very people who ensure the community can provide outdoor recreation experiences – healthcare providers, non-profit and municipal workers, teachers, and many more. We need to site trails from centers of towns and bring those connections between land and the heart of communities closer, where people can access vital services and trails. It’s overdue that we think about the unintended impact of outdoor recreation on the very places we love.”

Rob Riley, President and CEO, Northern Forest Center

“Our research noted a few core things that challenge these amenity towns. There's limited buildable land—they're hemmed in by mountains, rivers, public lands, all the things that make them great places to live. They have a limited labor force—they don't have the skilled labor that can actually build housing, and housing that exists has to do double duty to house residents and accommodate visitors. Then you are dealing with rapid growth and folks coming in paying cash for properties, things that really can drive exponential growth in housing prices.

And then there is this umbrella of the impacts of natural hazards. These communities are on the front lines for wildfires, for flooding, and they're at much higher risk.”

Megan Lawson, Economist, Headwaters Economics



*“Indian Country in general suffers from a lack of investment. We work really hard to bring capital into the reservation, both in the form of funding small businesses and mortgages, **but it's hard to fight a lot of persistent issues that that we see across all reservations**, like brain drain, systematic poverty, under and unhoused people, food deserts, transportation challenges, healthcare access and just general lack of basic infrastructure.”*

Alexandra Calloway-Nation, Economic Recovery Corps Fellow, U.S. Economic Development Administration

*“The more that we call folks together with the question of not “what's the problem and what needs to change?” but rather “**what can I contribute towards this vision that we have about a thriving, abundant community?**” When we ask ourselves, ‘will we die here?’ we sacrifice our own worldview and what we think is right and what we think is best and consider not only one another, but the relationship that we have to this land and the responsibility that we have to many future generations.”*

Janice Ikeda, Executive Director, Vibrant Hawai'i



Prepare outdoor recreation communities for the next natural disaster.

Incorporate topics related to outdoor recreation business and infrastructure recovery and rebuilding in local, regional, state, and federal disaster relief programs, long-term planning, and risk evaluations to account for the rise in extreme weather events or other triggering events like future pandemics and their impacts on the recreation economy.



Build big, durable regional outdoor recreation visions through partnerships.

Strong regional partnerships that identify common metrics of success and bind together multiple layers of government, nonprofits, community organizations, arts and culture institutions, tourism entities, and other prominent organizations will help ensure the longevity of outdoor recreation economic development initiatives and bring more funders to the table.



Prioritize housing today, tomorrow, and for years to come.

Stable housing and permanent affordability should be named as primary objectives in outdoor recreation development plans, rather than an afterthought, to ensure that as quality of life improves, long-time locals and the recreation workforce are not displaced. Additionally, new housing pilot programs and business investments in tailored housing solutions can help address stubborn housing issues in recreation communities across the country.



Keynote Speaker Baratunde Thurston (America Outdoors with Baratunde Thurston)

Photo: Runway Productions, LLC



Invest in Indigenous Leadership.

Indigenous people are long-time stewards of vast areas of land and water, and many are looking to invest in outdoor recreation as a tool for economic diversification and resilience to buffer from boom-and-bust cycles of other industries that extract from their land. New technical assistance, grants, and loans, including those facilitated by Tribal CDFIs, can help improve community and economic resilience through outdoor recreation and ensure that outdoor recreation is not just another extractive industry.

Going Further Down the Trail:

- [Four southern Vermont towns address the housing crisis — collaboratively.](#) VT Digger
- [With \\$4M for seven reservation projects, grantees hope to boost Wind River's outdoor profile.](#) WyoFile



Colorado Director of Outdoor Recreation Conor Hall tours a manufacturing facility.

Opportunity:

Leading organizations should build new strategies, seek partnerships with colleges, universities, trade schools, and outdoor businesses and associations, and develop new models of impact measurement to **foster the same innovation and entrepreneurship in rural recreation communities** that have powered the United States economy as a whole.



Photo: Runway Productions, LLC

*It's not just about what we are doing at the campground level, to improve the experience—we're **looking at how we're working with every business within the community**, from an accessibility and tech standpoint.*

*So it's become this collective project around, what are people going to do when they're spending those \$161 in the community, and how are we working together to create that quality-of-life experience when they are traveling? **What turned into the enhancement of one campground has turned into the development and enhancement of an entire community.***

Kim Wootteon, Vice President, Commercial Strategy, KOA

We joke that the real core to rural economic development are the three B's, which are "broadband", "blues", and "beer." And if you have those, the rest of it kind of falls together. You could probably add "boats" and "backpacks" and all of the types of outdoor things that allow for quality of life to be strong.

We have seen in the research that it's not just those places that have those extraordinary, unusual assets, but it's all rural places that leverage and find ways to engage people in outdoor recreation. And that becomes part of their overall value proposition in the economy, something that we saw during pandemic when people decide, oh, maybe packed into a city altogether, isn't where I want to be in the future, and chose to move to places who were embracing that kind of outdoor recreation quality of life, and then had pathways to be able to build companies, be part of a co-work community and be part of a future-forward community."

**Matt Dunne, President and CEO,
Center on Rural Innovation**



Silas Chamberlin (Firefly Outdoor + Economics) and Matt Dunne (Center on Rural Innovation)

Photo: Runway Productions, LLC

"We need to measure success in rural communities differently and accurately. It's the process of shifting from outputs and job creation to the notion of wellbeing. How do we view our economic development and community development, not from a growth model, but from a development model that's centering wellbeing? So it can be both about jobs and improvement in health disparities or education disparities or wealth creation, and that that is a way to get a much more inclusive what you measure is what you're going to drive towards, and it's going to be much more equity centered, and it's going to be much more sustainable."

Chris Estes, Co-Director, Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group



Create a new national measurement framework for healthy recreation economies.

Outdoor recreation has a unique opportunity to define economic development success differently—including traditional metrics of jobs created and businesses recruited, and also expanding into measures of local wellbeing, conservation and stewardship, improvements in health disparities, community resilience, access for all, and maintenance of local wealth and ownership of assets. And much of the data may already be available: existing data sets and tools like trail counters can help be part of the measurement solution.



Scale new K-12 curricula and technical degree programs to connect rural youth to outdoor recreation workforce opportunities.

To build a recreation workforce rooted in local values and identity, academic institutions can support STEM inquiry curriculum that engages youth in outdoor recreation and rural development planning process. Post-secondary technical training (e.g., trades, hospitality, guiding, recreation infrastructure management) is critically important—especially in communities without four-year institutions.



Expand access to rural outdoor recreation entrepreneurship support services.

The outdoor recreation economy has a long history of product and service innovation—not only to improve the experience for recreators of all types but also to enhance the user's connection to place. Existing outdoor recreation technical assistance programs can be adapted with new modules to serve recreation businesses and entrepreneurs directly and help create more place-based business success stories. Additionally, many higher education institutions serve as entrepreneurial support systems for small and rural businesses and this support and training can be expanded across the nation.



Photo: Angelique Herring

Going Further Down the Trail:

- [Growing Equitable Outdoor Recreation Economies](#), Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group
- [Resource Guide for Outdoor Entrepreneurs](#), Founded Outdoors
- [Outdoor Recreation: Connecting Rural Youth with STEM Careers](#), University of New Hampshire

Putting the Trail Map Into Action

Rural communities across America are primed and ready to translate their outdoor recreation visions into action. According to the 2024 Census, rural counties grew by 134,000 residents between 2023 and 2024, with recreation-oriented counties seeing much of the growth as Americans have flocked to places with high-quality outdoor access. This represents an opportunity for a new American story—one where rural communities put the outdoors at the center of their community fabric and identity, their value proposition to new residents, and new initiatives for improved public health.

But success is not guaranteed. Coordinated efforts are needed between leading organizations including federal, state, Tribal, and local agencies, philanthropic foundations, outdoor businesses, and nonprofits as outlined in this Trail Map to deliver on a future where rural America is not only healthier and better connected through access to the outdoors — it is more economically resilient.

Ultimately our choices are about something bigger than economic development alone. At a time when concerning trends coincide—disconnection from the natural world, loneliness, economic erosion, declining physical and mental health—investments in outdoor recreation access at the core of rural communities are an antidote to envision a bright, bold, and resilient future.

We hope that these strategies help guide the way.



*I'd assert that what brings us together is that **we believe that quality of life in rural America is essential to the health of America overall.** What is one of those elements of quality of life in rural America? It is access to a river, access to dirt under boot. It is access, regardless of your background, regardless of what you're wearing or how you get outdoors — it doesn't really matter. **You get outside in rural America and you feel like you're part of this larger community.**"*

Marc Berejka, Divisional Vice President, REI Co-op