

# BUILDING A STRONG OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMY

Heather Barar // Friends of the Lower Appomattox River // hbarrar@foliar-va.org  
Elliott Caldwell // East Coast Greenway Alliance // elliott@greenway.org  
Justin Doyle // James River Association // jdoyle@jrava.org  
Mikaela Ruiz-Ramón // The Nature Conservancy // m.ruiz-ramon@tnc.org

## WHY IT MATTERS

Outdoor recreation is a broad and growing sector that supports community health and economic growth. Outdoor recreation includes everything from traditional activities like hiking, camping, and paddling in the far-off outdoors to walking, running, and cycling on local trails, to attending a sporting event or concert at a local park or visiting a historic battlefield. The backbone of outdoor recreation is Virginia's network of public lands, trails, and rivers. Virginia is home to 43 state parks, 47 wildlife management areas, 66 natural area preserves, statewide trail systems, and bodies of water, as well as hundreds of local, county, and regional parks and trails where Virginians and visitors can connect to the outdoors.

Virginians turn to the outdoors as a place for exercise, experiencing nature, stress reduction, and socializing with family and friends.<sup>1</sup> Outdoor recreation is also a frequent draw for local and out-of-state visitors. Localities across the state have identified outdoor recreation assets and opportunities as a way to attract new businesses, workers, and tourists and to strengthen local economies.<sup>2,3</sup>

In 2022, outdoor recreation generated \$11.3B in direct economic output and supported nearly 125,000 jobs in Virginia.<sup>4</sup> Of that, \$3.8B went to tourism expenditures in local communities like lodging, restaurants, and retail such as outdoor outfitters.<sup>5</sup> Virginia state parks alone generated \$305M in visitor spending, while Shenandoah National Park visitors spent \$104M in local communities near the park.<sup>6,7</sup>

Many neighboring states like North Carolina, West Virginia, and Maryland have recognized the importance and value of outdoor recreation for health and

local economies and have prioritized making the outdoors available and accessible to all. Virginia has a wealth of natural beauty, diverse landscapes, and interesting history that make it an ideal place to get outdoors - so why aren't we investing in outdoor recreation?

## CURRENT LANDSCAPE

An overwhelming 82% of Virginians agree that access to the outdoors for recreation is a priority and want to see the state invest more.<sup>8</sup> Military installations are also recognizing the value of multi-use spaces that support both mission readiness and the well-being of military families through outdoor recreation opportunities.

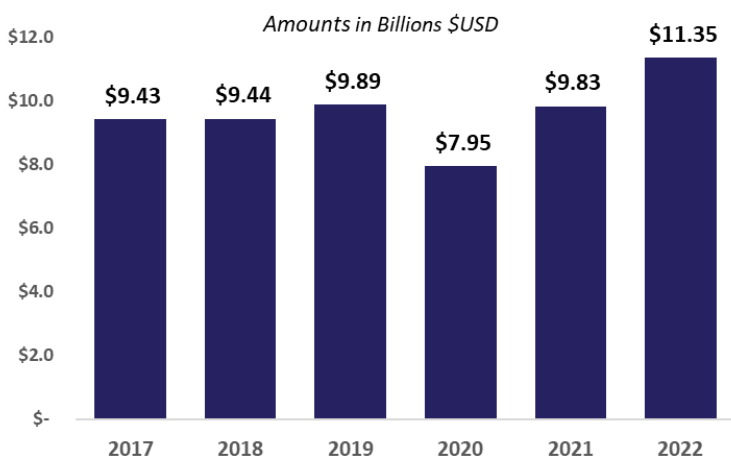
Demand for accessible outdoor spaces for recreation, particularly in densely populated areas, has begun to exceed the capacity of existing spaces due to a lack of consistent state funding in acquisitions, repairs, and upgrades to outdoor spaces. For example, rangers at Crow's Nest Natural Area Preserve near Fredericksburg are often forced to shut the gates early on weekends because the parking lot fills quickly. Virginia Outdoors Foundation's Get Outdoors (GO) Fund grant program helps localities and nonprofits address physical and financial barriers to accessing the outdoors and participating in outdoor recreation activities. Unfortunately, the GO Fund has been heavily oversubscribed and is being suspended due to insufficient funding.

Virginia opened an Office of Outdoor Recreation in 2019 based on successful models in 22 other states, but it went defunct without sustained funding from the state budget. The state has since been unable to replicate the scale of success of states like Maryland, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania to catalyze public and private sector investment in the outdoor recreation sector.<sup>9</sup> Virginia's newly updated Outdoors Plan includes many detailed recommendations on what investments are needed to make the outdoors available, accessible, and appealing to all.

## OPPORTUNITIES

Virginia is well-positioned to be a national leader in supporting outdoor recreation if it begins investing in and supporting statewide, regional, and local initiatives to make the outdoors more accessible. We should ensure residents and visitors, who bring dollars into our economy, can continue to experience and enjoy outdoor places that make our Commonwealth a special place to live and visit. Providing

Annual Economic Impact of Outdoor Recreation in Virginia



# BUILDING A STRONG OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMY

Heather Barar // Friends of the Lower Appomattox River // [hbarrar@folar-va.org](mailto:hbarrar@folar-va.org)  
Elliott Caldwell // East Coast Greenway Alliance // [elliott@greenway.org](mailto:elliott@greenway.org)  
Justin Doyle // James River Association // [jdoyle@jrava.org](mailto:jdoyle@jrava.org)  
Mikaela Ruiz-Ramón // The Nature Conservancy // [m.ruiz-ramon@tnc.org](mailto:m.ruiz-ramon@tnc.org)

dedicated funding for the outdoors, supporting the Office of Outdoor Recreation, and studying the economic impact of outdoor recreation are all necessary for Virginia to become a national leader in outdoor recreation.

Virginia's Great Outdoors Act would provide the dedicated funding needed to create and expand access to safe, comfortable, and enjoyable places for people to recreate in their communities and across the Commonwealth. It would provide funding for state natural resources agencies, the State Office of Trails, and the Virginia Land Conservation Fund (VLCF) and enable state and local partners to protect more of Virginia's iconic lands and waters for public enjoyment and invest in the infrastructure needed to make them accessible for different forms of outdoor recreation. This will lead to more and better state and local parks, trails, green spaces, and other opportunities for Virginians to get outdoors.

Supporting the Office of Outdoor Recreation and studying the economic impact of outdoor recreation will help ensure funding is spent strategically and delivers the greatest benefit to communities. With full staffing, the Office of Outdoor Recreation would be able to actively coordinate with outdoor recreation partners and stakeholders and provide support to outdoor recreation businesses starting in or moving to Virginia. A statewide economic impact study of outdoor recreation will help quantify economic, environmental, and health benefits and inform priority policies and investments to grow our outdoor recreation sector.

## TOP TAKEAWAYS

Every city, county, and town from the coast to the mountains is looking to grow outdoor recreation opportunities. Virginia can support them by:

- Providing at least \$200 million in dedicated annual funding for investments in the outdoors, including public lands, trails, state parks, and grant programs that support land conservation and outdoor access.
- Re-establishing and fully staffing the Office of Outdoor Recreation to engage and coordinate among outdoor recreation stakeholders and draw outdoor recreation businesses to Virginia.
- Funding a study on the economic impact of outdoor recreation and related tourism administered by the Virginia Tourism Corporation.

## ENDNOTES

1. "Chapter 2 - Virginia's Outdoors Demand Survey," *Virginia Outdoor Plan*, Department of Conservation and Recreation, (2018). <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/recreational-planning/document/vopchapt02.pdf>.
2. "DRIVE 2.0: 2020-2025 Strategic Tourism Plan," Virginia Tourism Corporation, (2019), <https://www.vatc.org/drive-2-0-strategic-tourism-plan/>.
3. O'Brian, Patrick, and Cora Gnegy. "Community Action Plan: Recreation Economy for Rural Communities." Giles County, (May 2021). [https://virginiasmtnplayground.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/RERC-Community-Action-Plan\\_GilesCoVa-Final.pdf](https://virginiasmtnplayground.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/RERC-Community-Action-Plan_GilesCoVa-Final.pdf).
4. "Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account - 2022 Virginia," US Bureau of Economic Analysis, (November 17, 2023), <https://apps.bea.gov/data/special-topics/orsa/summary-sheets/ORSA%20-%20Virginia.pdf>.
5. Roberts, Dan. "The Economic Impact of Outdoor Recreation in Virginia," Fredericksburg, VA, (May 15, 2024), <https://vaunitedlandtrusts.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/B-Economic-Impact-of-Outdoor-Recreation-in-Virginia.pdf>.
6. Wells, Matt, "DCR Agency Update to Senate Finance & Appropriations Committee – Economic Development and Natural Resources Subcommittee," Richmond, VA, (January 29, 2024). [https://sfac.virginia.gov/pdf/economic\\_development/2024/01292024\\_No1\\_DCR%20Budget%20Presentation%20SFAC%20EDNR%201-26-2024.pdf](https://sfac.virginia.gov/pdf/economic_development/2024/01292024_No1_DCR%20Budget%20Presentation%20SFAC%20EDNR%201-26-2024.pdf).
7. U.S. National Park Service, "Tourism to Shenandoah National Park Contributes \$145 Million to Local Economy - Shenandoah National Park," (August 31, 2023), <https://www.nps.gov/shen/learn/news/tourism-to-shenandoah-national-park.htm>.
8. Wells, "DCR Agency Update".
9. "Confluence of States 2023 Outdoor Report," Confluence of States, (2023), <https://recreationroundtable.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/FY2023-COS-Outdoor-Report.pdf>.