

INVESTING IN PUBLIC LANDS FOR ALL

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WHY IT MATTERS

If you have been to a federal, state, or local park, walked on a neighborhood trail, hiked through a natural area preserve in search of songbirds, hunted in a wildlife management area, fished in a public lake, or accessed a river using a public boat launch, you have benefited from public lands! At heart, public lands are green spaces owned and managed by a government entity for lasting public use and benefit.

Most land in Virginia is privately owned, but these pockets of public land across the state and within our cities and towns ensure that everybody, no matter who they are or where they are from, can access and enjoy the outdoors. Access to the outdoors benefits our physical and mental health and provides communities with places to gather and play. Demand for outdoor spaces surged during the COVID-19 pandemic and has remained high. In 2022, Virginia state parks welcomed a record-breaking 8 million visitors and the Blue Ridge Parkway was once again the most visited national park in the country, with 15.7 million visitors - more than Grand Teton, Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, and Yosemite national parks combined for the same year.^{1,2}

Public lands are also key to protecting and managing important natural resources for current and future generations. Public lands are the most effective way to provide large enough landscapes to deliver meaningful results like restoring and protecting habitats for rare species, wild game, and fish, wildlife corridors for migratory species, and forests and wetlands that help draw down carbon and prevent pollutants from entering our rivers and streams. Natural resources agencies are a trusted repository of best practices for land management and conservation based on decades of science and experience working with different kinds of large landscapes.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Virginia has 43 state parks, 66 natural area preserves, and 47 wildlife management areas, as well as numerous regional, county, and local parks and nature preserves operated by non-profit organizations for public enjoyment. However, there is more work to be done to make public lands easily accessible for all Virginians and ensure our most important and iconic landscapes are protected for future generations.

Many residents across the Commonwealth have a lack of access to nature, especially in urban, low-income communities and poor rural counties. Low-income neighborhoods average 42% less park acreage

per resident than high-income neighborhoods. Lack of equitable access to quality parks and green spaces poses a threat to mental and physical health outcomes in these communities.^{3,4}

State agencies, non-profits, and localities often work together to make new public lands available because each partner can bring different skills and funding sources to the table to acquire lands, build amenities, and manage public access. **Virginia Land Conservation Foundation (VLCF)**, state capital appropriations and bonds, and federal **Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) grants** all help fund public land acquisitions and development. Maintenance and management investments are also essential. This spending determines whether sites live up to their environmental, experiential, and economic potential.

Unfortunately, Virginia's funding for public lands has been minimal and unpredictable. We have missed opportunities to acquire important natural areas and urban greenspaces because state agencies, localities, and nonprofits could not secure sufficient match funding to leverage federal opportunities. We also face a \$300M maintenance and repairs backlog at state parks, long waiting lists for visitors looking to enjoy overnight stays, and public lands closing early on weekends because there weren't enough staff and parking facilities to accommodate visitors.⁵

43 state parks

8 million state park visitors in 2022

\$364M economic impact

\$300M maintenance and repair backlog

OPPORTUNITIES

Virginia needs to increase investments in our great outdoors to catch up to neighboring states like North Carolina and Maryland. Public lands help connect Virginians with the outdoors, keep us healthy, and underpin a growing \$11.3B outdoor recreation economy that supports nearly 125,000 jobs in our communities.⁶ This will take significant increases in annual appropriations for natural resources agencies and programs that support public lands so that Virginia can successfully:

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MAKE PUBLIC LANDS ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

We need to prioritize creating, expanding, and investing in public lands so that all Virginians, no matter their background or place of residence, have easy physical and financial access to safe outdoor spaces. This is particularly important in under-resourced communities. We also need to plan for the future and identify where we will need more outdoor spaces to serve growing populations.

PROVIDE WORLD-CLASS FACILITIES AND EXPERIENCES

A key component of making public lands accessible and appealing to visitors is ensuring they can meet user needs. All Virginians should feel welcome in their parks, regardless of language, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, or physical and mental abilities.

We can achieve this through constructing and maintaining accessible parking, multilingual signage, bathrooms, overnight lodging facilities, and more - as well as ensuring adequate staffing and offering interpretive programming that helps visitors of all ages and backgrounds learn about and enjoy their surroundings.

MANAGE PUBLIC LANDS FOR OPTIMAL CONSERVATION OUTCOMES

Successful land management requires a long-term commitment. Whether eradicating invasive species, bringing back healthy populations of native plants and animals like elk, restoring coastal marshes, or reducing wildfire risk by introducing carefully managed intentional burning, conservation takes significant investments of time, expertise, and labor.

TOP TAKEAWAYS

Public lands help keep Virginians healthy, provide environmental benefits like clean water, support the growing outdoor recreation industry and jobs, and protect critical natural resources for future generations.

Virginia's public lands and natural resource agencies need higher and sustained levels of annual investment in staff, maintenance, operations, and acquisitions to make them accessible, inclusive, and desirable destinations.

An annual dedicated funding source that could support \$200M for public lands, trails, state parks, and grant programs that support land conservation and outdoor access would help Virginia catch up with neighboring states in our investments in our great outdoors.

ENDNOTES

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5. Wells, "DCR Agency Update".
6. "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>.