

INVESTING IN ACCESSIBLE PUBLIC LANDS

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WHY IT MATTERS

A majority of Virginians agree that access to outdoor recreation is very important, and they turn to the outdoors as a place for exercise, experiencing nature, stress reduction, and socializing with family and friends.¹ Virginians and visitors alike are fortunate to have access to a wide range of public lands across the state, from small local parks to large national forests.

Public lands play many vital roles in Virginia:

- Safeguarding clean water and air by protecting the headwaters for many of our major rivers and key carbon sinks like forests, wetlands, and marshes
- Protecting habitat for game species, rare plants, and animals
- Providing access to the outdoors for people to relax, recreate, and connect with each other and nature
- Forming the backbone of a growing \$13.4 billion outdoor recreation economic sector²

The purpose of public lands is to maximize public benefit and protect and steward best-in-class landscapes for future generations. Over 75% of land in Virginia is privately owned, which makes public lands key to ensuring that everyone can access and enjoy the outdoors.^{3,4,5} Lack of equitable access to quality parks and green spaces poses a threat to mental and physical health outcomes in low-wealth urban communities and rural counties.^{5,6} Enhancing access may include establishing public lands where there are few or none, expanding public lands in high-demand areas, and establishing infrastructure and programming to address physical or language access barriers.

Public lands also enable conservation of critical landscapes, ecosystems, and animal migration. They support economies of scale for environmental monitoring, research, and restoration activities. Natural resources agencies, which manage our public lands, are a trusted repository of best practices for land management and conservation based on decades of science and experience.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

State parks are among the most recognized and popular types of public land in Virginia. State park operations are funded through agency operating budgets and partially offset by revenues from visitor spending. In 2024, Virginia State Parks generated an estimated \$382.3 million in total economic impact and \$12.29, on average, for every \$1 of general tax revenue spent.⁷ Maintenance and management investments are essential for determining whether parks and other public lands live up to their full environmental,

experiential, and economic potential.

Compared to other states, Virginia historically ranks near the bottom of state park system spending per capita.⁸ Our state park system faces a \$388 million maintenance backlog stemming from inconsistent and insufficient funding over the past two decades, understaffing within the Parks Resources Division, and a lengthy state-mandated process to complete capital projects that leads to higher costs and public frustration.⁹

Foregoing routine maintenance to deal with critical repair issues has compounded a “budgeting by emergency” situation. Leaving repairs unattended until an emergency is highly cost-ineffective due to increases in the scale of needed repairs and increases in material and construction costs over time due to inflation. The large maintenance backlog also constrains the Department of Conservation & Recreation (DCR)’s ability to invest in improving and expanding existing parks to meet visitor demand and fully developing new parks in the system, like Clinch River and Culpeper Battlefields. Other public lands in Virginia face similar challenges in securing funding to maintain and update parking lots, signage, and other basic amenities that make public lands more accessible and visitor-friendly.

Much uncertainty exists in 2025 around the ownership and management of many federal public lands. Current efforts to slash federal budgets and staff and divest federal lands threaten Virginia’s outdoor recreation economy and our long-standing collaborative relationship with federal agencies. Virginia does not have the capacity to assume ownership or management of these lands.

OPPORTUNITIES

Virginia’s natural resources agencies and programs need increased and dedicated funding to address public lands’ maintenance backlogs and unlock their full potential to support local communities through outdoor recreation opportunities and related tourism. Funding is needed for both repairs and staff to successfully address this problem and prevent it from recurring in the future. DCR has taken steps to update its infrastructure management system to support better project prioritization and is prepared to move quickly to address its maintenance backlog.

Dedicated funding will also enable agencies to respond to unique opportunities when they arise to acquire unique and strategic lands that enhance the existing public lands system. This could include increasing access to public lands in underserved or

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high-demand parts of the state, enhancing connectivity between protected lands, or creating larger buffers from development around important natural resources. The recent opportunity for Virginia to acquire Oak Hill, the home of former president James Monroe, for the state park system and provide increased public lands access for residents in Northern and Central Virginia is a prime example of how conservation is currently hampered by the lack of consistent funding.

Dedicated funding will help agencies make public lands more accessible and appealing to visitors by ensuring they meet user needs. All Virginians should feel welcome in parks, regardless of language, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, or physical and mental abilities. DCR has piloted initiatives like all-terrain wheelchairs, telescopes for colorblind users, and multilingual signage and programming that can be used at other parks.

ENDNOTES

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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.

The growing state parks maintenance backlog has led to an inefficient and costly “budgeting by emergency” system that limits the system’s potential to meet visitor demand and generate revenue.

Dedicated funding will enable Virginia’s public lands and natural resource agencies to invest in staff, maintenance, operations, and land acquisitions to make them accessible, inclusive, and desirable destinations.