

EXPANDING ACCESS TO VIRGINIA'S OUTDOORS

Parker Agelasto // Capital Region Land Conservancy // parker@capitalregionland.org
Justin Doyle // James River Association // jdoyle@thejamesriver.org
Ken Wright // Potomac Conservancy // wright@potomac.org

WHY IT MATTERS

From the Appalachian Mountains to the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean, Virginia is abundant with opportunities for outdoor recreation. State-owned and managed parks, forests, trails, natural area preserves, wildlife management areas, and waterbodies are used for public enjoyment. But for too many Virginians, these public lands and waters are inaccessible due to distance or the lack of facilities and infrastructure. Correcting this inequity helps all communities across the Commonwealth enjoy new parks and green spaces.

Parks and green spaces offer us the ability to connect with nature, relaxing our minds and nurturing our bodies through exercise and outdoor recreation. Access to the outdoors is strongly linked to improved mental and physical health outcomes, especially for children and the elderly. Spending time outside improves cognitive and emotional well-being, reduces anxiety and depression, and fosters a deeper appreciation for nature.¹ Many communities also use outdoor spaces to build and sustain community through gatherings like family picnics, outdoor exercise classes, live music, volunteer groups, and hobby groups like bird watching or cycling clubs.²

Outdoor recreation is a powerful economic driver for the state, employing 126,000 Virginians and generating over \$14.4 billion for the state's economy.³ Population growth, development pressures, and the impacts of climate change placed on our natural resources threaten to overwhelm our outdoors. Funding for projects that protect land and expand access to the outdoors will ensure Virginians will be able to enjoy the great outdoors and associated benefits for generations to come.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Addressing current and historic inequities in access to the outdoors requires a multifaceted and multi-level partnership between governments and communities. Federal and state programs that support conservation and recreation projects are vital to ensuring all Virginians have access to the outdoors.

The **Virginia Land Conservation Foundation (VLCF)** grant program is a key vehicle for establishing and expanding new open space. VLCF helps increase the quantity and quality of open space available to Virginians.

The **Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)** Act of 1965 established a federal reimbursement program for the acquisition and/or development of public outdoor recreation areas. Since its establish-

ment, Virginia has received more than \$135 million in assistance for more than 400 projects.⁴

Administered by the Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF), the **Open-Space Lands Preservation Trust Fund (PTF)** provides grants for acquisitions, easements, and other methods of permanently protecting open space for farming, forestry, recreation, public access, wildlife, and water quality. VOF paused the **Get Outdoors (GO) Fund** program, which provides flexible, competitive grants for projects that addressed barriers to accessing the outdoors, due to lack of funding in fiscal year 2025.⁵

Financial assistance for trail projects includes the **Virginia Recreational Trails Program (RTP)**, and the **Trail Access Grants (TAG) program**, administered by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). These programs support building, rehabilitating, or acquiring land for trails and trail facilities, and improving trail access for people with disabilities.

In 2026, the **Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR)** announced the availability of boating access grants for shovel-ready projects that expand public powerboating access. The grants support localities in constructing new or renovating existing facilities.

OPPORTUNITIES

Virginians overwhelmingly support dedicated funding to protect our land, water, and wildlife.⁶ Virginia has an opportunity to protect its natural resources and enhance the quality of life for all by expanding access to the outdoors. With dedicated funding, Virginia can become a national leader in outdoor recreation and conservation, fostering healthier, more vibrant communities. Dedicated funding can be used to:

- Protect vulnerable natural lands and waters, working farms and forests, drinking water resources, and historic and cultural sites
- Improve public access to the outdoors by fixing existing and building new infrastructure and expanding public lands
- Invest in a thriving outdoor recreation sector by developing new trails, parks, and other public lands at local and state levels

EXPANDING ACCESS TO VIRGINIA'S OUTDOORS

Parker Agelasto // Capital Region Land Conservancy // parker@capitalregionland.org
Justin Doyle // James River Association // jdoyle@thejamesriver.org
Ken Wright // Potomac Conservancy // wright@potomac.org

TOP TAKEAWAYS

Access to the outdoors is strongly linked to improved human health outcomes and supports local economies.

Existing programs that support local land protection and outdoor recreation projects and programming are inconsistently funded.

Dedicated funding that supports programs and projects that expand access to outdoor recreation is needed.

ENDNOTES

1. Weir, K. (2020, April 1). *Nurtured by nature*. American Psychological Association, 51(3). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2020/04/nurtured-nature>
2. *Parks, Recreation, and Green Spaces*. (2025, January 31). CDC. <https://www.cdc.gov/active-people-healthy-nation/php/tools/parks-rec.html>
3. Rzezni, S., Franks, C., & O'Connell, C. (2026, March 26). Outdoor Recreation Economic Statistics, U.S. and States, 2024. Bureau of Economic Analysis. <https://www.bea.gov/sites/default/files/2026-03/ores0326.pdf>
4. *Land and Water Conservation Fund - General Information*. (n.d.). Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/recreational-planning/lwcf>
5. *Get Outdoors Fund*. (2024). Virginia Outdoors Foundation. <https://www.vof.org/protect/grants/go/>
6. Survey of Virginia Voters Shows Overwhelming, Consistent Support for Conservation Funding. (2021). New Bridge Strategy & FM3 Research. [Data set]. The Nature Conservancy. https://www.nature.org/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/VA_Conservation_Funding_Poll_Results_2021.pdf

Hike overlooking the Blue Ridge Mountains
Photo by Will Fenwick

