

Public Lands & Outdoor Recreation 101

Access to public land is important to the health of people and our planet while also contributing significantly to the United States economy. Although the outdoor recreation industry is threatened by climate change, it will also play an important role in our effort to mitigate and adapt to its effects.



Overview

- Outdoor recreation includes any physical leisure activity that takes place outdoors such as hiking, rafting, hunting, fishing, rock climbing, and more.
- Outdoor recreation can sustainably increase access to the outdoors, protect nature, and bolster the economy if done responsibly. This means practicing leave-no-trace principles and ensuring the infrastructure needed to manage a growing number of participants.
- Sportsmen and women are the “backbone” of conservation in the United States. They not only fund conservation initiatives but they also play a crucial role in managing species overpopulation.

Current Standing In The U.S.

- Outdoor recreation and public land use are popular in the United States, with 55% of Americans participating in some form of outdoor recreation activity in 2023.
- As of 2022, the outdoor recreation industry contributed \$1 trillion, 5 million jobs, and 2.2% of the total GDP to the United States economy.
- Around 40% of the land in the United States is public land, with 13% under federal protection. This land is funded by taxpayer dollars and managed by several government agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management and the National Park Service.

Economics

- The COVID-19 pandemic sparked a rapid increase in the outdoor recreation industry and has been growing since. Between 2021 and 2022, the industry grew by nearly 5%, and in 2021, the industry’s contribution to the GDP grew by a staggering 18.9%.
- Through the purchase of hunting licenses, sportsmen and women generated \$1 billion in 2020 to support state conservation programs.
- The outdoor industry generates a total of \$125 billion each year in tax revenue, with approximately \$60 billion benefiting gateway communities that sit just outside tourist attractions, such as national parks.

Challenges

- The outdoor industry is itself threatened by climate change. As natural disasters strike our nation, summer months become hotter and winter storms become more erratic, the industry’s growth and success may be impacted.
- Despite the overall economic gain associated with outdoor recreation and public lands, gateway communities face housing shortages, low wages relative to the cost of living, and increased traffic and parking-related issues.
- A recent decline in hunting has resulted in a decrease in conservation funding available for staffing wildlife agencies and implementing management programs.
- Overcrowding in public parks can lead to the trampling of trails, natural habitat loss, disruption of wildlife behavior, and litter.

What’s Next?

- Modernizing visitor centers, restoring campgrounds, and expanding and updating trail systems will improve accessibility while benefiting the environment and economy.
- Streamlining permitting processes and reducing regulatory fees will benefit small, local businesses that rely on public land access to operate.
- Continue to protect public lands through national parks, wilderness designations, state parks, and more, so we can conserve critical ecosystems that can be enjoyed for generations to come and will increase our resilience to climate change.
- Additionally, ensuring that sportsmen and women continue to have access to public lands for hunting and fishing will benefit nationwide conservation efforts and secure continued funding for wildlife agencies.