



Photo: Lisa Chase, University of Vermont

NATIONAL EXTENSION TOURISM NETWORK

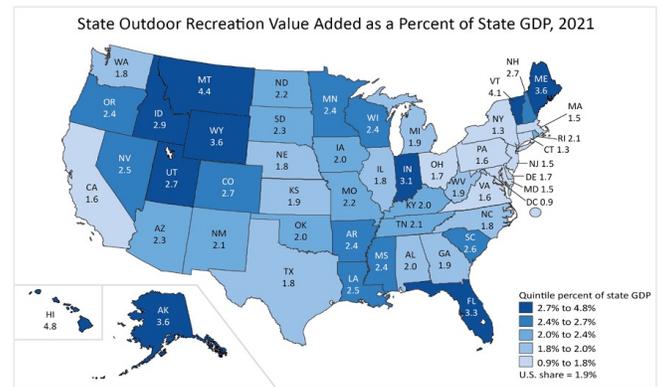
Engaging The Outdoor Recreation Sector's Growth

Background

Outdoor Recreation is a growing sector of the United States economy. The outdoor recreation economy accounted for 1.9% of the GDP for the United States in 2021. Inflation adjusted GDP for the outdoor recreation economy increased 18.9% in 2021, compared with a 5.9% increase for the overall U.S. economy. The number of new outdoor participants has increased 26% since the start of the pandemic.



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Sources:

Bureau of Economic Analysis Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2021

<https://www.bea.gov/news/2022/outdoor-recreation-satellite-account-us-and-states-2021>

Outdoor Foundation 2022 Outdoor Participation Trends Report

<https://outdoorindustry.org/resource/2022-outdoor-participation-trends-report/>

Outdoor Recreation and Extension

According to a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) recently signed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development, Forest Service, and National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) on supporting the nation's outdoor recreation economy, building the recreation economy in the United States is one of USDA's top priorities. The MOU explains these agencies' desire to build on existing collaborations and coordination to support the sustainable development of the nation's recreation economy and the associated economies of gateway communities. As a partner of USDA, NIFA, the Cooperative Extension System has a role to play in supporting the implementation of this MOU.

How is Extension Responding?

The Cooperative Extension and Sea Grant systems have been engaged in research, education, and outreach to support communities' tourism efforts for more than 50 years. The National Extension Tourism (NET) Design Team has been providing leadership to this collective work, and Extension and Sea Grant programs are beginning to dedicate more faculty and staff time toward building recreation and tourism programs. However, a unified, coordinated, national scale effort has not yet been realized. In an effort to gauge the national status of Extension's current involvement and engagement in the outdoor recreation economy NET hosted an interactive webinar in November 2022 focused on this subject. Participants expressed an interest in forming a workgroup to explore and propose a strategy for Extension to engage the growing outdoor recreation economy. Subsequently, the [Extension Outdoor Recreation Working Group](#) was formed with 65 participants attending the first meeting in February 2023 to take the pulse of Extension and its role in outdoor recreation. The sentiment from the participants in the workgroup is that Extension's current role remains limited.

In your state, to what degree is Extension currently responding to these trends in any of the following ways?





Response (continued)

However, they identified projects, resources, and research that Extension should work on, assuming the availability of additional resources to carry out this work.

The [Extension Outdoor Recreation Working Group](#) is committed to clarifying Extension’s role in the USDA MOU, collaborating with the USDA agencies involved, establishing an inventory of Extension outdoor recreation programs, developing an online hub for collaboration and information and internally organizing through NET.

With additional resources, what are the most important projects, resources, or research Extension should work on?



Examples of how NET members are supporting outdoor recreation



**Utah State University
Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism**
<https://extension.usu.edu/iort/>

Gateway & Natural Amenity Region (GNAR) Initiative
<https://www.usu.edu/gnar/>



**University of New Hampshire Extension Tourism,
Outdoor Recreation & Nature Economy.**
<https://extension.unh.edu/resource-category/tourism-outdoor-recreation-nature-economy>



**Oregon State University Extension
Guide and Outfitter Recognized Professional (GORP)**
<http://gorpguide.org>



West Virginia University Extension Service – Mon Forest Towns.
<https://publicinterestdesign.wvu.edu/mon-forest-towns>

What can be done with additional resources and partnerships?

With its legacy as a trusted source of knowledge, and its reputation for leading collaborative approaches to community problem solving, Extension remains uniquely positioned to assist communities in finding the mutual gains that lie at the dynamic confluence of recreation, economic development, tourism, and community development.

However, Working Group participants highlighted that current Extension work related to the outdoor recreation economy is carried out on a limited, ad-hoc, and primarily individual basis. Although some Extension professionals have appointments that focus on this growing sector, many more are engaging the outdoor recreation economy tangentially as a part of their other Extension responsibilities. The group expressed the need for Extension units nationwide to establish and empower positions within the Extension system that focus on outdoor recreation and community development. These positions in turn need to train and collaborate with Extension and academic professionals in allied disciplines to advance the development of resources, information, and research at the intersection of recreation and their discipline.

Working Group participants identified the following top three priorities for future Extension efforts related to the outdoor recreation economy:

1. Developing resources to support sustainable growth of the recreation economy.
2. Providing technical assistance for the development and implementation of community improvement projects.
3. Hosting and facilitating meetings with communities and public land managers to determine common goals and strategies as part of a strategic planning process.

These areas coincide with the established mission of Extension and reflect how partnerships, positions, and expertise already existing in Extension can be quickly adapted to provide meaningful impacts to the recreation economy at large, and in the communities Extension already serves.

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