



NATIONAL EXTENSION  
TOURISM NETWORK

# National Extension Tourism Network (NET) Outdoor Recreation Case Study Series

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## Mon Forest Towns – Developing a Regional Recreation Economies Partnership

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### Overview:

The Mon Forest Towns Partnership (MFTP) is a collaboration between the Monongahela National Forest (MNF), West Virginia University (WVU) Extension, and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development aimed at engaging local stakeholders in creating a shared recreation vision for each county and the greater region surrounding the MNF. Since its formation in 2017, the partnership has generated more than \$3M in external funding in support of recreation development in the region. This case study briefly describes the project’s methods, outcomes and impacts, and the role played by WVU Extension. For a more in-depth description, visit: <http://bit.ly/46LAICL>.

### Why This Matters:

The MNF region spans ten counties and multiple rural communities in West Virginia, which have long had their economies tied to the coal, timber, and wood products industries. Over the last few decades, these industries have waned, leading to lower household incomes and increased poverty. Recognizing both the opportunities presented by the outdoor recreation industry’s growth and the unique challenges faced by rural communities, this partnership has propelled communities toward improving the environmental, social, and economic assets of the region. It can serve as a model for other forest gateway regions with similar goals.

### Outcomes, Impacts, and Practical Implications

The MFTP has generated \$376K to support the backbone organization, \$204K to support collective marketing activities, \$4M for business development activities, \$1.6M for trail and recreation development, and \$1.5M for downtown redevelopment. USDA recognizes the MFT Partnership as model program for USDA partnerships and Extension engagement to support recreation economies.



### Ten WV Gateway Communities:

- Thomas
- Davis
- Parsons
- Petersburg
- White Sulphur Springs
- Elkins
- Franklin
- Richwood
- Cowen
- Marlinton

### Transdisciplinary Extension + Research Programs Implemented

- Community Assessments
- Asset Mapping
- Participatory Research
- Community Design
- Economic and Quality of Life Indicators
- Regional Branding and Marketing

Learn more at: <https://bit.ly/4q0dhsP>  
or scan the code!



## Key Components and Methodology

The MFTP process was guided by a collective-impact framework, helping local partners visualize how to adapt previous efforts that had been applied on the municipal and county scales to a larger regional/landscape scale. The USFS and WVU Extension served cooperatively as the project's backbone. Agency partners agreed on key guiding principles including a bottom-up approach, local control, shared governance, and participatory processes that engaged community members and partners.

The first step was to establish trust and respect among the many disparate stakeholders and organizations. Organizers held 60 meetings over two years throughout the ten communities, engaging 100+ local stakeholders and gauging interest in establishing a shared partnership to support recreation economies centered around nature-based recreation for locals and visitors. Trust and respect were established across the partnership and a shared recreation vision to guide the project began to form.

Building on this momentum, the partners planned a larger gathering to foster relationship development and to further define the shared vision and anticipated outcomes of a collaborative regional initiative. The MFT Summit, held in June 2019, engaged 85 stakeholders who ultimately identified five common themes associated with the development of regional recreation economies that would form the basis of a strategic plan: Community Health & Wellness, Business & Entrepreneurial Development, Regional Branding & Marketing, Sustainable Trail & Recreation Development, and Rural Workforce Development.

An MFT Partnership Agreement drafted by the charter partners also was introduced at the Summit, outlining the operational guidelines and the purpose of the partnership as a catalyst and forum for the development and delivery of an integrated regional recreation economy. A strategic planning committee established in 2021 initiated a year-long strategic planning process. The resulting five-year strategic plan was approved by the full board in 2022, and identifies seven goals for developing a recreation economy in the MNF region.

## Extension's Role

With funding from the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation, a transdisciplinary team of WVU faculty and students formed to address regional needs and make early tangible progress. A neutral facilitator is crucial for collective impact, a role WVU Extension filled due to their expertise in participatory planning and local stakeholder engagement. They led early strategic planning and convened decision makers, which was vital for forming the Partnership. Later, after an Executive Director was hired, WVU Extension shifted to the Executive Committee and focused on partnering with WVU faculty and students to create a platform for monitoring outcomes and measuring success. WVU partners include:

**Doug Arbogast**, Extension Rural Tourism Specialist • **Daniel Eades**, Extension Rural Development Specialist  
**Jackie Strager**, Extension GIS Specialist • **Peter Strager**, Extension Landscape Architecture Specialist  
**Eve Faulkes**, Graphic Design

## Next Steps

The MFT initiative is now a staffed and incorporated nonprofit and has the leadership and experience to achieve success. The Partnership's initial goals speak to the vast opportunities and challenges facing rural gateway communities. Yet six years later, through an intentional, deliberate process, the MFTP is moving communities to collectively improve the environmental, social, and economic assets of the region. Achieving collective impact is a messy and fragile process yet the hope and optimism for a brighter future and new perspectives on local resources and shared stewardship of the Forest and its communities has proven to light a spark in rural Appalachia.



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National Extension Tourism (NET) integrates research, education and outreach within Cooperative Extension and Sea Grant to support sustainable tourism, thus contributing to the long-term economic development, environmental stewardship, and socio-cultural well-being of communities and regions. The National Extension Outdoor Recreation Working Group, a NET effort, seeks to develop a shared strategy and collaborative network for Extension programming related to the outdoor recreation economy. NET and NEORWG receive administrative support from the Regional Rural Development Centers. Visit [extensiontourism.net](https://extensiontourism.net) and [extensiontourism.net/outdoor-recreation-working-group](https://extensiontourism.net/outdoor-recreation-working-group).