

# Connecting Americans to the Great Outdoors

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America's natural heritage has defined the nation and shaped American culture. Since our earliest beginnings, our relationship with the outdoors has influenced our national character. Both our strong sense of community and our rugged individualism are products of our interactions with nature. Today, even a walk in the woods, a family picnic in a city park, a jog along an urban waterfront, or a fishing trip with a grandchild can restore our connection to the outdoors and create lasting memories that contribute to who we are as a people. Each camping trip to a park or forest or visit to a historic battlefield can strengthen our sense of individual pride and shared responsibility for our lands and waters and the history they contain.

Listening session participants across the nation spoke of their desire for a deep connection with the outdoors. They described spiritual renewal, better mental and physical health, quality time spent with families and friends, and opportunities for employment and for public service as some of the tangible and intangible benefits of being outdoors. People shared inspirational stories of their grassroots efforts to improve their outdoor surroundings. One community converted an illegal dump into a community garden. Revitalizing their urban area provided community members with job training, outdoor learning experiences, green space, and locally grown food.

Participants also discussed youth stewardship programs for the next generation. They talked about programs that engage Americans with the outdoors through biking, hiking, hunting, canoeing, off-roading, skiing, and other recreational activities. They described initiatives that encourage parents to get their children outside. One listening session was devoted to the cutting-edge topic of the connections between outdoor experiences and improved mental and physical health. Other sessions focused on the special relationship that tribal communities have with nature, culture, and the outdoors.

At all of the listening sessions, people spoke about the realized and potential economic benefits provided by the outdoors, including recreation and tourism, rural and urban economic redevelopment, and lower health-care costs. Recreation and tourism and related businesses and enterprises have become powerful elements of rural and urban economic development. In 2006, recreationists spent \$122.3 billion on their activities, including equipment, licenses, user fees, and trip-related expenses. This is one percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).<sup>5</sup> Spending by recreation visitors in areas around national forests is estimated to be nearly \$13 billion annually, sustaining more than 224,000 full and part-time jobs.<sup>6</sup> Recreation-related visits to Department of the Interior (DOI) lands were estimated to support over 316,000 jobs and create nearly \$25 billion in economic value to surrounding communities.<sup>7</sup> Despite the current economic downturn, the number of recreation visits to national parks increased from 205 million in 1979 to 286 million in 2009.<sup>8</sup> Every year approximately seven million anglers, two million hunters, and many millions of birders visit national wildlife refuges.<sup>9</sup> Visitors spend some \$18 billion annually on lakes and other facilities managed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), leading to 350,000 jobs added to the nation's economy.<sup>10</sup> Tourism and recreation are also highly significant outdoor activities in the coastal zone. Public lands along U.S. coastlines offer access to seashores, bays, and estuaries for fishing and birding, boating and surfing, and other coastal activities within aesthetic landscapes. Over 180 million people visit beaches and other coastal habitats every year, and coastal recreation and tourism generate \$8 billion to \$12 billion annually.<sup>11</sup>

In his remarks at the April 2010 White House Conference that launched the America's Great Outdoors Initiative, President Obama cautioned that "[w]e are losing our connection to the parks, wild places, and open spaces we grew up with and cherish. Children, especially, are spending less time outside running and playing, fishing and hunting, and connecting to the outdoors just down the street or outside of town." For many Americans, particularly young people, the outdoors and open spaces are neither accessible nor inviting today. Many of our citizens worry about their safety while outdoors and while making their way to outdoor locations. Simply getting there is another obstacle for many of our citizens, especially our youth and our disadvantaged communities. Many cannot afford transportation to reach outdoor destinations and may not have parks or green spaces close to home. Environmental problems can further complicate the picture. Some communities cannot enjoy outdoor activities because of contamination on nearby land or unhealthy air

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<sup>5</sup> 2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation.

<sup>6</sup> USDA National Visitor Use Monitoring Results: 2005 - 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Economic Impact of the Department of the Interior's Programs and Activities.

<sup>8</sup> National Park Service visitation statistics. <http://www.nature.nps.gov/stats/park.cfm>.

<sup>9</sup> Banking on Nature 2006: The Economic Benefits to Local Communities of National Wildlife Refuge Visitation

<sup>10</sup> US Army Corps of Engineers fact sheet. <http://corpsresults.us/recreation/receconomic.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> NOAA Fact Sheet. <http://www.habitat.noaa.gov/about/habitat/keyfacts.html>.

## America's Great Outdoors Vision Statement

Americans envision a future in which:

*All children, regardless of where they live, have access to clean, safe outdoor places within a short walk of their homes or schools, where they can play, dream, discover, and recreate.*

*Americans participate in the shared responsibility to protect and care for our unique natural and cultural heritage for the use and enjoyment of future generations.*

*Rural lands—our working farms, ranches, and forests—are conserved and restored through incentives and local partnerships.*

*Our national parks, national wildlife refuges, national forests, and other public lands and waters are managed with a renewed commitment to sound stewardship and resilience.*

*Our natural areas and waterways, whether publicly or privately owned, are reconnected, healthy, and resilient and support both human needs and the wildlife that depend on them.*

*Communities work together to restore and protect healthy rivers and lakes to provide recreational opportunities and to contribute significantly to a vibrant economy.*

quality. Swimmers and sunbathers encounter thousands of beach closures and health advisories each year.<sup>12</sup> In 2008, fish advisories were issued for 43 percent of the nation's total lake acreage and 39 percent of the nation's total river miles.<sup>13</sup>

This disconnection from nature and the outdoors is a serious threat facing America's great outdoors—and it is costing us. Americans' increasing disconnection from the outdoors is one factor in the skyrocketing obesity rates across the nation, which has tripled among our children over the past 30 years.<sup>14</sup> Children today spend less than half as much time outside as their parents did, but instead are “plugged in” to electronic devices for more than seven hours a day.<sup>15</sup> Studies show that access to the outdoors can help turn the tide on the obesity health epidemic.<sup>16</sup> They show that play and relaxation in nature can reduce stress and anxiety, promote learning and personal growth, and provide overall mental and physical restoration. This disconnect also weakens the commitment to stewardship of our shared natural legacy.

When consulted during the AGO listening sessions, Americans across the nation made it clear that they want to reconnect—or connect for the first time—with the great outdoors. They expressed the desire to achieve this through jobs and service and through recreation and education, and they want their federal government to help.

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<sup>12</sup> EPA Beaches Introduction. <http://water.epa.gov/type/oceb/beaches/introduction.cfm>.

<sup>13</sup> National Listing of Fish Advisories, Technical Fact Sheet: 2008 Biennial National Listing.

<sup>14</sup> Ogden, C.L., K.M. Flegal, M.D. Carroll, C.L. Johnson. *Prevalence and trends in overweight among U.S. children and adolescents, 1999–2000*.

<sup>15</sup> Juster, Thomas F., Hiromi Ono and Frank P. Stafford. *Changing Times of American Youth: 1981–2003*.

<sup>16</sup> Kuo, Frances. 2010. Parks and Other Green Environments: Essential Components of a Healthy Human Habitat. [http://www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/Explore\\_Parks\\_and\\_Recreation/Research/Ming%20\(Kuo\)%20Reserach%20Paper-Final-150dpi.pdf](http://www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/Explore_Parks_and_Recreation/Research/Ming%20(Kuo)%20Reserach%20Paper-Final-150dpi.pdf).



U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE PHOTO / BIG BRANCH MARSH NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, LOUISIANA



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## 1. Provide Quality Jobs, Career Pathways, and Service Opportunities

*“Engage parents in the outdoors so they can pass it on to their kids and create future stewards. Volunteer based groups—citizens science, rehabilitation trail work to engage communities to experience the value of the lands first hand.”* (Listening Session Participant, Missoula, MT)

The importance of job- and service-based learning opportunities related to protecting and restoring the outdoors was a constant theme raised in the listening sessions, especially in the 21 sessions devoted to youth. Americans are committed volunteers, and service is a powerful way to build skills and make a difference. According to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), in 2009, more than 63 million Americans contributed 8.1 billion hours of service, valued at nearly \$169 billion.<sup>17</sup>

During the youth listening sessions especially, people expressed a desire to work on America’s public lands and waters. However, they expressed frustration with the application and hiring processes. In some cases, they admitted to giving up and seeking employment elsewhere. Participants recommended that federal agencies streamline their hiring systems and coordinate better with each other and with state, local, and tribal partners and the private sector.

Jobs related to natural and cultural resources help build awareness of and appreciation for the outdoors. In these economically challenging times, increasing opportunities for training and employment in America’s Great Outdoors can put people back to work and produce lasting benefits. These opportunities can strengthen local and regional economies, improve individual health and welfare, and build a lasting stewardship ethic among the American people.

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<sup>17</sup> Corporation for National and Community Service. *Volunteering in America 2010: National, State, and City Information*. [http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/10\\_0614\\_via\\_final\\_issue\\_brief.pdf](http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/10_0614_via_final_issue_brief.pdf).

**GOAL A** **Develop quality conservation jobs and service opportunities that protect and restore America’s natural and cultural resources.**

Listening session participants frequently mentioned that jobs and service opportunities provide meaningful ways both to maintain and restore our natural resources and to make conservation relevant, especially to young people. Participants noted that conservation, restoration, and recreation offer quality job opportunities and also spur economic growth for local communities, regions, and the nation as a whole. They also noted that building “green infrastructure” and restoring natural systems create win-wins for jobs, the economy, and for conservation. Increasing opportunities for jobs and training in the great outdoors can put Americans back to work now with benefits that last well into the future. Through increased opportunities for conservation-related jobs and service, Americans become citizen stewards who share the responsibility of ensuring that our natural heritage is passed on to future generations.

**Recommendation 1.1** **Catalyze the establishment of a 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Conservation Service Corps (21CSC) to engage young Americans in public lands and water restoration.**

Many public comments recommended building on existing conservation service corps programs and promoted the idea for a 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Conservation Service Corps (21CSC) to provide job training and to maintain and preserve public lands. The 21CSC would provide the umbrella structure for the many existing federal, state, tribal, local, nonprofit, and private sector conservation corps programs and proposals. Its purpose would be to build on and leverage the experience and expertise of these programs and to encourage a new generation of outdoor enthusiasts and natural and cultural resource professionals. The 21CSC program will focus on helping young people, including low-income and disadvantaged youth, to earn valuable training and work experience and to accomplish needed conservation work on public lands in the great outdoors.

**Action Item 1.1a:** Create an interagency working group within the AGO Council<sup>18</sup> to develop the 21CSC framework and harmonize agency processes. The interagency working group will also seek ways to expand the opportunities for the conservation corps to work on projects related to the conservation, restoration, construction, or rehabilitation of natural, cultural, historic, archeological, recreational, or scenic resources on public lands. [Department of Agriculture (USDA), Department of Commerce (DOC), Department of Defense (DOD), Department of the Interior (DOI), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Department of Labor (DOL), Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS),

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<sup>18</sup> *The AGO Council is explained in Recommendation 10.1.*

Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP), and United States Office of Personnel Management (OPM)]

**Action Item 1.1b:** Form an advisory committee to advise the 21CSC interagency working group and facilitate alignment with and investment in the program. The advisory committee will be composed of diverse representatives from the private sector as well as state, local, and tribal government. The committee would comply with the Federal Advisory Committee Act. It will provide its report within one year of creation. (DOI as host, but in partnership with USDA, DOC, DOD, USACE, EPA, DOL, CNCS, ACHP, and OPM)

**Recommendation 1.2 Work with OPM to improve career pathways and to review barriers to jobs in natural resource conservation and historic and cultural preservation.**

Listening session comments raised concern over the importance and the difficulty of hiring qualified candidates because of the complexity of the federal hiring processes. This is of particular focus as an aging federal workforce readies for retirement.

**Action Item 1.2a:** Review hiring authorities for participants of existing public lands corps, youth conservation corps, and similar programs, and develop interagency guidance to clarify and expand hiring authority, including number of hours and type of work required for applicants to qualify for a different status. Participants must meet job prerequisites and complete their term of service. (DOI and OPM)

**Action Item 1.2b:** Create an easy-to-use job locator web portal that connects qualified applicants to natural and cultural resource job opportunities across the federal government. (DOI and OPM)

**Recommendation 1.3 Improve federal capacity for recruiting, training, and managing volunteers and volunteer programs to create a new generation of citizen stewards and mentors.**

President Obama has called on all Americans to participate in the nation's recovery and renewal through community service. Annually, tens of thousands of volunteers help federal, tribal, and state land management agencies and local governments perform work on the ground. Service activities on public lands play an important role as these opportunities provide training for inexperienced resource managers, build a stewardship ethic in the volunteers, and help restore and enhance our public lands and waters. In 2009, the CNCS engaged more than five million Americans in service opportunities through its programs, including the Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and Learn and Serve America programs, and leads President Obama's national call-to-service initiative, United We Serve.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Corporation for National & Community Service Fact Sheet. [http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/factsheet\\_cnsc.pdf](http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/factsheet_cnsc.pdf).

*“Through partnerships between existing Corps programs and federal agencies tasked with implementation of the America’s Great Outdoors, the 21<sup>st</sup> CCC would: Engage, educate and employ more young people in service to the environment; Expand and replicate innovative Corps programs and projects; Develop career pathways from Conservation Corps to federal employment in natural resource management; Facilitate connections between corps programs and other youth partner programs to expose more young people to the outdoors.”* (Listening Session Participant, Missoula, MT)

**Action Item 1.3a:** Improve access to federal resources through an easy-to-use web portal that matches volunteers with opportunities, allows volunteers to create their own projects, and offers resources for training and technical assistance. Hundreds of thousands of volunteer opportunities are searchable on CNCS’ [www.serve.gov](http://www.serve.gov), an online resource for finding, creating, and listing volunteer projects. (DOI)

**Action Item 1.3b:** Expand capacity to build on and promote partnerships and programs on public lands that connect people to the outdoors through meaningful volunteer service opportunities relating to restoration and education. (DOI, USDA, DOD-USACE, DOL, and CNCS)



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## 2. Enhance Recreational Access and Opportunities

*“I think there is a desire to go outdoors, but there is a lack of priority for it when people are so busy... We are all so busy that we don’t have the time to get out anymore.”* (Listening Session Participant, Minneapolis, MN)

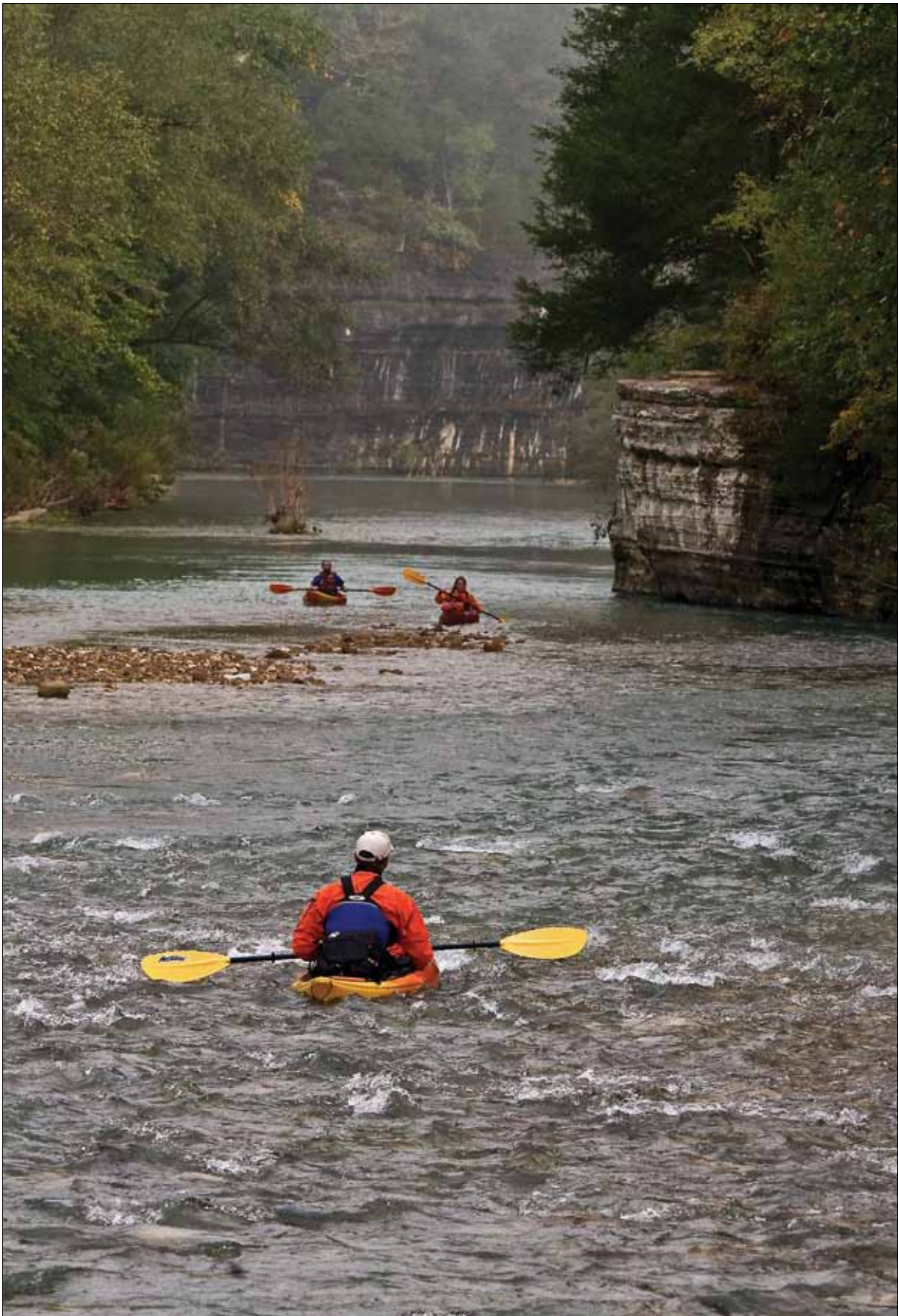
As highlighted in the AGO vision, recreation provides one of the easiest and most natural ways to connect with the outdoors. America’s lands and waters offer a multitude of outdoor recreation activities that enhance health and wellness, encourage appreciation for natural and cultural resources, and present enjoyable opportunities to connect with family and friends.

Federal agencies provide exceptional recreational opportunities and facilities on more than 635 million acres of land that receive over a billion visits each year.<sup>20</sup> The federal lands include a diversity of natural and cultural landscapes and features such as the 16 million acres of Alaska’s Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge; expansive fishing opportunities at Virginia’s John H. Kerr Dam and Reservoir (Buggs Island Lake); the majestic peaks of Utah’s Wasatch-Cache National Forest; and the cultural and historic heritage of Georgia’s Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park. Our federal lands provide innumerable trails, roads, waters, and facilities that support and promote a broad range of recreation and tourism opportunities.

Federal agencies also promote recreation along multi-jurisdictional wild and scenic rivers and national trails and fund recreation projects through such programs. In addition, state, county, and municipal entities manage thousands of parks, natural areas, and historic sites that are enjoyed on a daily basis by tens of millions of people nationwide. In addition, many private landowners provide access to their lands for recreation. The contributions of these lands to the physical, mental, and spiritual health of Americans; the quality of life of communities; and the economic benefits at the local, regional, and national levels are significant.

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<sup>20</sup> USDA report on Major Uses of Land in The United States, 2002.



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE - DOMBROWSKI PHOTO / BUFFALO NATIONAL RIVER, ARKANSAS

*“City transportation and general transportation is lacking. We need better public transportation to get around to different areas in the city, and we need shuttles that take people to outdoor spaces further away.”* (Listening Session Participant, Albuquerque, NM)

Many public comments focused on limitations to recreation on local, state, tribal, and federal lands. Many people commented on the lack of physical access related to public transportation, roads, trailheads, and trails. Others noted that the lack of information or access to information about recreational opportunities on public lands and waters is a problem. This information gap ranges from poor signage and notifications of trail or park closures to outdated, complex government websites that are hard to navigate and understand. The lack of coordinated information and regulations adds other barriers to recreation access and enjoyment.

Increasing recreational access must be balanced with the preservation and stewardship responsibilities of the federal land management agencies. Each federal land management agency has specific preservation and stewardship responsibilities based on their mission and additional designations such as Wilderness or Wild and Scenic Rivers. Increased recreational access is an important goal of the AGO and a priority for the American people, but it must be developed in ways that are consistent with and appropriate for the specific authorities of each agency.

## **GOAL A Increase and improve recreational access and opportunities.**

Federal agencies support a broad range of outdoor recreation opportunities on federal lands and waters. These range from the USACE *Handshake Partnership Program* that provides incentives for partnerships to increase recreation on USACE lands to U.S. Forest Service (USFS) *Kids in the Woods program*; National Park Service (NPS) *Junior Ranger*; Bureau of Reclamation *CAST for Kids*; Bureau of Land Management (BLM) *Take-it-Outside*; and First Lady Michelle Obama’s *Let’s Move!* initiative. All of these programs encourage children to be more active outdoors. Authorities and initiatives to support recreation across the federal government include the Department of Transportation (DOT) *Recreational Trails and National Scenic Byways Authority*, the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plans supported through the Land and Water Conservation Fund and managed by the DOI, and EPA *Urban Waters Initiative* that is helping communities access, improve, and benefit from their urban waters and adjacent lands.

Listening session participants observed that information about “what recreational activities are permitted where” is often inaccessible or unclear. They said that permitting for recreational access is not consistent, and that if federal programs and resources were aligned and better targeted, the recreation benefits would be vastly improved. Furthermore, recreational users felt that recreation should be a higher priority for land and water management agencies. Many also observed that the First Lady’s *Let’s Move!* initiative offers powerful partnership and awareness-raising opportunities about the positive relationship between outdoor recreation and public health.

**Recommendation 2.1 Support outdoor recreation access and opportunities on public lands by establishing a Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation (FICOR).**

Despite the many opportunities for quality recreation, many participants in the AGO process observed that significant obstacles remain to outdoor recreation on public lands and waters. Participants called for better integration and coordination among the federal agencies whose missions include providing outdoor recreation and/or natural resources and environmental protection.

**Action Item 2.1a:** Improve coordination, effectiveness, and efficiency among federal agencies through the FICOR.

The FICOR should also work closely with existing FACA bodies that support recreational activities. These include the Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council, Sport Fishing and Boating Partnership Council, the First Lady's *Let's Move!* initiative, and the President's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition. (USDA, DOI, DOC, and DOD-USACE)

Key tasks to accomplish in FICOR include:

- Coordinate recreation management, access, and policies across multiple agencies to improve public enjoyment and recreational use of federal lands and waters.
- Provide the public with reliable and up-to-date web-based information that is easily accessible with modern communication devices. Evolve and promote the federal interagency [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov) website to become a one-stop portal for information and resources about federal outdoor recreation opportunities, locations, access, routes, features, transportation options, and permit and reservation requirements.
- Streamline and align policies and procedures among federal, state, local, tribal, and other recreation providers.
- Improve the engagement of young people and their families in outdoor recreation through healthy, active lifestyles.
- Target underserved and disadvantaged communities for both access to and engagement in the benefits of and opportunities for outdoor recreation.
- Identify ways to improve access to our parks, refuges, and public lands for persons with disabilities.
- Identify partners outside the federal government who can promote outdoor recreation and provide additional resources and access.



## **Recommendation 2.2 Support community-based efforts to increase access to outdoor recreation.**

Across the nation, people stressed the importance of creating recreation opportunities. This included providing spaces for recreation, establishing and maintaining recreational facilities such as trails and sidewalks, and eliminating physical barriers such as fences or roads between communities and places to recreate. People also recommended technical assistance and additional federal support for regional-scale recreation planning and for creating physical recreation connectors like trails. Many (particularly young people) observed that a primary limitation for using the great outdoors is safety.

**Action Item 2.2a:** Expand technical assistance and align programs that support local, state, and tribal efforts to enhance public recreation and conservation, including, but not limited to, the *NPS Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program* (RTCA) and the National Trails System; DOT enhancement and trails and scenic byways programs; state programs such as California's Green Sticker Program; CNCS community-based efforts to increase access to outdoor recreation; and USDA *Voluntary Public Access Program (Open Fields)*. (DOI, USDA, DOT, and CNCS)

**Action Item 2.2b:** Partner with local and adjacent tribal school districts to support school kids on field trips to federal urban parks and other units. (DOI, USDA, DOD, USACE, and DOT)

**Action Item 2.2c:** Support community-based programs that improve the safety of open spaces and access routes, similar to DOT *Safe Routes to Schools* and Department of Justice (DOJ) Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation. (DOI, DOT, USACE, and DOJ)

*See also: Recommendation 5.1 (increase the number of community parks and green spaces); Section 6, Recommendation 7.5 (incentives to encourage hunting and fishing on private lands); Section 9, Recommendation 9.1 (establishment of national recreational trail blueway).*





NATIONAL PARK SERVICE / GROUNDWORK ANACOSTIA RIVER PROJECT - CHESTNUT PHOTO / WASHINGTON, D.C.

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### 3. Raise Awareness of the Value and Benefits of America's Great Outdoors

*“We need a philosophical change of what the great outdoors is. We don't need to go out west or to some faraway place. It can be a little stream, out your door, even if it's in the city. It exists where we exist.”* (Listening Session Participant, Hyde Park, NY)

The outdoor experience has lost its currency for many Americans. Increasingly busy schedules, shifting cultural norms, financial barriers, and the lure of new technology often keep many people from venturing outdoors for recreation, play, work, or service. During the listening sessions, participants spoke about the need to make the outdoors desirable and relevant to America's young people. Many people articulated a need to redefine the “great outdoors” to include iconic national parks and forests, wildlife refuges, and cultural and historic sites, as well as neighborhood and city parks, community gardens, and school yards. One of the most frequent recommendations was to launch a national public awareness initiative. It would use 21<sup>st</sup>-century communications technology and techniques to show Americans that going outdoors is fun, safe, easy, and healthy.

Many listening session participants observed that their experiences in nature and at historic places occurred early in their lives through formal and informal education. These experiences inspired a lasting connection, and for some, lifelong careers and commitment to service in the outdoors. Cultivating a stewardship ethic through education will produce the next generation of scientists, conservationists, naturalists, farmers, ranchers, forest landowners, anglers, rangers, entrepreneurs, and community leaders who value nature and outdoor experiences. Education is also an important tool to raise awareness of the many benefits of our great outdoor resources. These benefits include food and fiber; physical, mental, and spiritual health; economic values of community enhancement, outdoor jobs, industry, and tourism; and the essential services that healthy and resilient natural systems provide as they clean our air, purify our water, prevent floods, provide habitat for wildlife, and absorb pollution.

Unfortunately, many schools have had to cut back on their environmental and outdoor education programs due to tight budgets. Many nonprofit, faith-based, and private sector programs are filling the need through after-school and weekend programs, but these still leave out many children. Supported by the AGO vision, there remains a need to promote environmental literacy and awareness through a variety of strategies and partnerships.

**GOAL A** Cultivate stewardship and appreciation of America’s natural, cultural, and historic resources through innovative awareness-raising partnership initiatives and through education.

There is a growing deficit of public awareness about the value that our natural heritage and resources provide to the nation and about our shared stewardship responsibility to protect them. Particularly in the youth listening sessions, participants argued that they are removed from nature and the great outdoors, both physically (because so many now live in cities), and emotionally, socially, and culturally. These young people called for an innovative campaign to make the outdoors relevant and exciting to them. Many comments noted that particularly in fiscally challenging times like today, programs that promote environmental education are pushed aside. Therefore, our children are losing a primary point of early exposure to nature and natural systems that can spark their imaginations and drive them to become a scientist, innovator, conservationist, poet, or community leader. Nongovernmental organizations, religious institutions, and others are stepping in to provide varied environmental education opportunities, but, participants said, as wonderful and effective as some of these programs are, they cannot reach all the children who would benefit from them, as school programs would.

**Recommendation 3.1** Launch a public awareness initiative to show that experiencing America’s great outdoors is fun, easy, and healthy.

Listening session participants suggested that increasing access to, and expanding opportunities for healthy outdoor recreation is essential. The USDA and DOI are partnering with the First Lady’s *Let’s Move!* initiative through *Let’s Move Outside!*, which is focused on reducing childhood obesity through outdoor recreation. Together, AGO and *Let’s Move Outside!* initiatives would partner with public, nonprofit, and private groups to mount an innovative communications initiative aimed at young people and their parents. The joint initiative will work to expand opportunities for outdoor activity; educate the public about the health, community, and economic benefits of outdoor activity; and provide information on where and how to get moving outside.

**Action Item 3.1a:** Increase access to and expand opportunities for healthy outdoor recreation by integrating and advancing the shared goals of AGO and *Let’s Move Outside!* initiatives through a coordinated strategic plan. (AGO Council and *Let’s Move Outside!*)



*“Speaking as parent of two sons who played team sports, but were not interested in the outdoors. One went to a college that had a state-funded outdoor program that got him on a backpacking trip. It changed his life, and he majored in environmental science.”* (Listening Session Participant Concord, NH)

The joint initiative will use well-known spokespeople, leverage private sector investment, and use social and other innovative technology to increase enthusiasm and information about the great outdoors. By leveraging existing media and technology, and by developing new, user-friendly tools, this joint initiative will help make the outdoors exciting and accessible for children and families of all backgrounds.

**Action Item 3.1b:** Build partnerships that demonstrate and promote the health benefits of parks and outdoor spaces. Also build support for restoring, protecting, and creating and accessing these places. (AGO Council and *Let’s Move Outside!*)

**Action Item 3.1c:** Coordinate a national strategy with the public health and medical communities that promotes the benefits of parks, outdoor spaces, and natural places to improve the health and well-being of Americans. (AGO Council)

### **Recommendation 3.2 Work with the Department of Education and other federal agencies to align and support programs that advance awareness and understanding of the benefits of nature.**

One of the most common concerns raised at listening sessions was the need to integrate learning about nature and the environment into school curriculums. The federal government has an important but limited role to play in supporting the nation’s states, districts, and schools to ensure that all children gain a basic level of environmental literacy and understand how environmental issues cut across different subject areas. The Department of Education’s *21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers Program*, for example, provides support for activities that increase learning time, including after school, before school, and summer school programs. The administration’s *Blueprint to Reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act* proposes to reform and strengthen this program by incorporating approaches that better integrate community involvement and comprehensively redesign and expand the school day. In addition to giving more time for academic work (which could include topics like biology), programs would also provide enrichment activities, which could include opportunities for experiential learning outdoors. Furthermore, the Effective Teaching and Learning for a Well-Rounded Education program would provide competitive grants to states, high-need districts, and private sector partners to strengthen teaching and learning across academic content areas. Other opportunities for federal agencies to become more coordinated and strategically invested through existing environmental and outdoor education programs include distance learning web activities, professional teacher development workshops, and formal education programs.

**Action Item 3.2a:** Report to the AGO Council on specific ways to integrate and support the outdoors, nature, cultural sites, and the environment into place-based, experiential, expanded-time programs; after-school and summer school programs; and service learning programs. (DOI and the Department of Education)

**Action Item 3.2b:** In partnership with local school districts, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations, expand connections to public schools and youth organizations through existing web-based programs, service learning, teacher training, field trips, and residential and other programs. These could include, but are not limited to, the NPS *Teacher-Ranger-Teacher*, *Electronic Classroom*, and *Citizen Science* programs; USFS *Pollinator Live* program; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) *Bay-Watershed Education and Training Program (B-WET)* program; and USDA *Know Your Farmer Know Your Food* program. Special emphasis will be placed on engaging underserved communities. (DOI, USDA, DOC)

**Action Item 3.2c:** Work with the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) to develop curricula that incorporate traditional tribal practices, activities, and environmental literacy for both the classroom and outdoor activities. (DOI)

**Recommendation 3.3 Promote and support replicable programs that teach about and connect children and families with their natural and cultural heritage.**

*“Hunting and fishing are ways of life. They are our passions. We share it with family and friends and it truly makes us whole and makes us who we are. We MUST protect our land and waters. We MUST ensure that they will be around for generations to come. President Obama, this is not a choice, this is an obligation.”* (Listening Session Participant, Missoula, MT)

An appreciation and an understanding of America’s great outdoors cannot be gained without an understanding of the nation’s natural and cultural history. Education about America’s great outdoors should include both formal education and informal opportunities outside the education system—outdoor learning, nature walks, orienteering, recreation, hunting, fishing, and many other activities. Many programs promote stewardship and appreciation of our natural and cultural heritage beyond the school day. They are led by diverse organizations, including faith-based and scouts organizations, hunting and fishing groups, outdoor recreation and conservation organizations, and groups working with future farmers. They are as diverse as America, yet they share the common goal of instilling a stewardship ethic in their communities. These remarkable programs are helping to launch the next generation of scientists, farmers, ranchers, conservationists, entrepreneurs, artists, teachers, and community leaders who care about the outdoors. The federal government should support, celebrate, and reward these initiatives.

**Action Item 3.3a:** Support and expand existing federal programs that emphasize place-based, experiential learning, including: The NPS *Parks as Classrooms* and *Junior Ranger* programs; CNCS *Learn and Serve America*’s expanding network of environmental and cultural resources service grantees; NOAA *B-WET*; USFS *Children’s Forests*, *NatureWatch*, and *More Kids in the Woods*; and BLM *Take it Outside* and *Hands on the Land*. (DOI, USDA, DOC).



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## 4. Engage Young People in Conservation and the Great Outdoors

Youth participation in AGO had a tremendous impact on the themes of this report and influenced its recommendations. At 21 youth-specific listening sessions across the nation, government officials met with hundreds of young people, each of whom had a personal perspective on—and experiences with—the outdoors. From a uniformed conservation corps in Missoula, to a room of high school kids in Orlando, to Native American youth in two BIE schools, these voices were diverse, passionate, and thoughtful. As we look to protect America’s great outdoors for current and future generations, it is imperative that we continue to engage, empower, and learn from our young people. They are our future farmers, ranchers, hunters, anglers, conservationists, scientists, teachers, business leaders, and elected officials who will inherit and carry on the stewardship of our nation’s outdoor legacy.

**GOAL A** **Build stewardship values and engage youth in conservation and recreation.**

America’s young people are our nation’s future. We have an obligation to ensure that America’s great natural legacy is preserved for their enjoyment, welfare, and livelihoods. To honor and capture the youth voice, a separate pullout report, “Youth and America’s Great Outdoors,” was prepared by a team of young and committed federal employees.

**Recommendation 4.1** **Engage young people in the implementation of AGO.**

Thousands of young people joined in the AGO process through the listening sessions, the AGO Facebook page, and the website. Many of our youth are already participating in the protection and enhancement of our



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natural resources and want to help address the challenges of connecting with the outdoors.

**Action Item 4.1a:** Disseminate and implement the “Youth and America’s Great Outdoors” report. (DOI working with the AGO Council)

**Action Item 4.1b:** Create an America’s Great Outdoors youth outreach strategy. (AGO Council)