




# NORTH CAROLINA
# 2025-2030 STATEWIDE COMPREHENSIVE OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN











# TABLE OF CONTENTS


**01**

01 Executive Summary

**02**

16 Introduction

**03**

34 State of the State

**04**

62 Demographics

**05**

82 Recreation Trends

**06**

106 State Engagement

**07**

140 Needs Assessment

- Previous Plans & Studies
- Supply & Demand Barriers
- Recreation Providers Funding
- Land Acquisition
- Recreation for All
- Health Assessment
- Resiliency Assessment
- Trails

**08**

336 Recommendations & 5-Year Strategic Plan

**09**

380 Appendix

- Wetlands Summary
- Public Survey Results
- Recreation Provider Survey
- Open Project Selection Process


Shaping Outdoor Recreation from Mountains to Sea

2025-2030 NC Outdoor Recreation Plan

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# United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

1.1.B(2225)
(*via email*)

November 5, 2025

The Honorable Josh Stein
Governor of North Carolina
20301 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, North Carolina 27699

Dear Governor Stein:

We are pleased to report that we have reviewed and approved the 2025-2030 North Carolina Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). We commend the staff of the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources for their exceptional efforts throughout the planning process and their producing this high-quality, forward-looking document.

The North Carolina SCORP demonstrates a strong commitment to public engagement and aligns fully with the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) Act's requirements for outdoor recreation planning and engagement. With this approval, North Carolina's eligibility for the LWCF State Assistance Program is extended through 2030, paving the way for new opportunities to strengthen parks and outdoor recreation across the state.

We look forward to continuing our partnership with the State of North Carolina in implementing the SCORP and in advancing shared goals through the administration of the LWCF financial assistance program.

Sincerely,

STEPHAN NOFIELD

Digitally signed by STEPHAN NOFIELD
Date: 2025.11.05 13:08:02 -05'00'

Stephan Nofield
Associate Director, Partnerships and Civic Engagement (A)
National Park Service

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA**
**OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR**

**JOSH STEIN**
**GOVERNOR**

September 9, 2025

Mr. Stephan J. Nofield
National Park Service
Associate Director
for Partnerships and Civic Engagement
1849 C Street NW, Room 3325
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Mr. Nofield,

I am pleased to submit to you the North Carolina 2025-2030 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan. The plan has been prepared to meet the requirements for continuing Land and Water Conservation Fund eligibility, to improve outdoor recreation, and to meet the need for meaningful evaluation of state and local government public outdoor recreation projects. I certify that an ample amount of public involvement went into development of the plan including statewide surveys of outdoor recreation preferences, in-person events and meetings, and public review of the draft document.

We look forward to working with your office to improve outdoor recreation in North Carolina.

Sincerely,

Josh Stein
Governor

NC DEPARTMENT OF
NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

Josh Stein, **Governor**
Pamela B. Cashwell, **Secretary**

September 29. 2025

Mr. Stephan J. Nofield
National Park Service
Associate Director for Partnerships and Civic Engagement
1849 C Street NW, Room 3325
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Mr. Nofield,

As Secretary of the NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (NC DNCR), which oversees the NC Division of Parks and Recreation, I'm pleased to join my colleagues in submitting the North Carolina 2025-2030 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP).

Outdoor recreation is an important part of North Carolina's economy, with recent data showing that it contributes nearly $16.2 billion to the state's economy, including over 145,000 jobs. As stewards of many of the natural and cultural resources that support our state's outdoor recreation industry, and as administrators of several significant funding programs for local parks and conservation, NC DNCR is committed to understanding the priorities of North Carolina's citizens when it comes to providing recreational amenities. The 5-year SCORP, developed by our NC Division of Parks and Recreation with considerable public input, is an important resource in identifying those priorities, and is used extensively by state and local officials in allocating resources (including the state's apportionment of federal Land & Water Conservation Fund dollars) to meet the recreational needs of all North Carolinians.

We are grateful for North Carolina's partnership with the National Park Service on so many levels – from your management of national parks and seashores within our state's boundaries, to your funding of local outdoor recreation amenities – and we look forward to working closely with you over the next five years as we strive to realize the vision set forth by our citizens in this iteration of the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan.

Sincerely,

Pamela B. Cashwell

Pamela B. Cashwell
Secretary

Division of Parks and Recreation
NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources

Governor Josh Stein

Secretary Pamela B. Cashwell

October 10, 2025

Dear North Carolinians:

The state has an abundance of natural treasures and people who love the outdoors. From the Mountains to the Sea, North Carolina offers a rich and diverse landscape that invites exploration, connection, and stewardship. Our parks, trails, rivers, and forests are not only places of beauty — they are essential to our health, our economy, and our way of life.

I'm proud to present the NC 2025-2030: Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). The plan is a critical document which lays the groundwork for future outdoor recreation, ensures our eligibility for federal Land and Water Conservation Funding and provided an opportunity for the public to have a say in the future of recreation and conservation across the state. This document is the product of extensive public input across our state to ensure that those most engaged in outdoor recreation have an opportunity to give input into our future.

This plan helps direct investments where they are needed most, ensuring that North Carolina's natural resources remain a source of pride, health, and prosperity for generations to come. Building this legacy by ensuring that these natural assets are protected serve us all well. It reflects the voices of thousands of North Carolinians who cherish the outdoors and want to see it thrive.

I look forward to the implementation of this plan and the exciting path of outdoor recreation in our amazing state. Thank you for your continued support in shaping a healthier, more connected, and more resilient North Carolina.

Sincerely,

Brian L. Strong

Brian L. Strong, Director
NC Division of Parks and Recreation
1615 MSC - Raleigh, NC 27699-1615
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NORTH CAROLINA STATE PARKS
*Naturally Wonderful*



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





Visit NC



# 2025-2030 STATEWIDE COMPREHENSIVE OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN

## THEMES

### HEALTH & WELLBEING

**"Transform parks into dynamic spaces for physical activity, mental rejuvenation, and social connection."**

- Opportunity for physical activity
- Promote programs and amenities that provide health benefits
- Use data informed decisions to remove or minimize barriers to access

### RECREATION FOR ALL

**"Reimagine all parks as welcoming, safe, and valued places for all users through universal access."**

- Provide recreation activities near growth centers
- Promote multi-use amenities to allow flexibility
- Adopt standards for adaptive trails
- Undertake outreach efforts to connect unaware non-users

### RESILIENCY

**"Achieve lasting resiliency and build sustainable, adaptive park systems that prepare our communities for future challenges."**

- Protect the state's sensitive natural resources
- Focus on investments that consider protection against natural disasters
- Invest in new technologies and tools to plan for recovery efforts

### ECONOMIC IMPACT

**"Harness the transformative power of parks to stimulate business development, tourism and community investment."**

- Identify economically challenged areas to find opportunities to expand economic impact through recreation
- Explore partnerships to maximize return on investments
- Provide recurring funding for new amenities and maintenance to smaller communities
- Continue to support advocacy efforts for funding



# TRAILS

**81%**
of survey respondents support trails development

**92%**
of participants express interest in engaging in recreation in the outdoors

**2023**
The Year of the Trail

**2024-2025**
non-recurring funding support

Trail network as economic driver

## SUPPLY & DEMAND

Barriers to access include a perception of overcrowding and lack of personal time

Strong support to protect natural resources

**93%** already participate in hiking, walking, and other trails related activities

## STATE ENGAGEMENT

**100**
Counties Participated

Recreation providers priorities acknowledged thru prosperity zones

Engagement with Tribal communities

**1,200+**
People Touchpoints

## RECREATION TRENDS

**57%** of outdoor recreation participants nationwide are women, people of color, and older adults

Individualized focus on health and well being

Preference for diverse activities

## DEMOGRAPHICS

4th Highest Growing State

66.7% live in urban areas

20% of population will be 65+ by 2030

# INTRODUCTION

The 2025-2030 North Carolina Statewide Outdoor Recreation Plan is both a review of the state of outdoor recreation as it is today and a visionary plan for how the state can continue to improve and provide great outdoor experiences for all residents. The planning effort for this SCORP included extensive engagement efforts statewide, collaboration with State Parks staff, and numerous technical analyses. A summary of the result of these efforts is below, laying a foundation for success for North Carolina's outdoor recreation into the coming years.

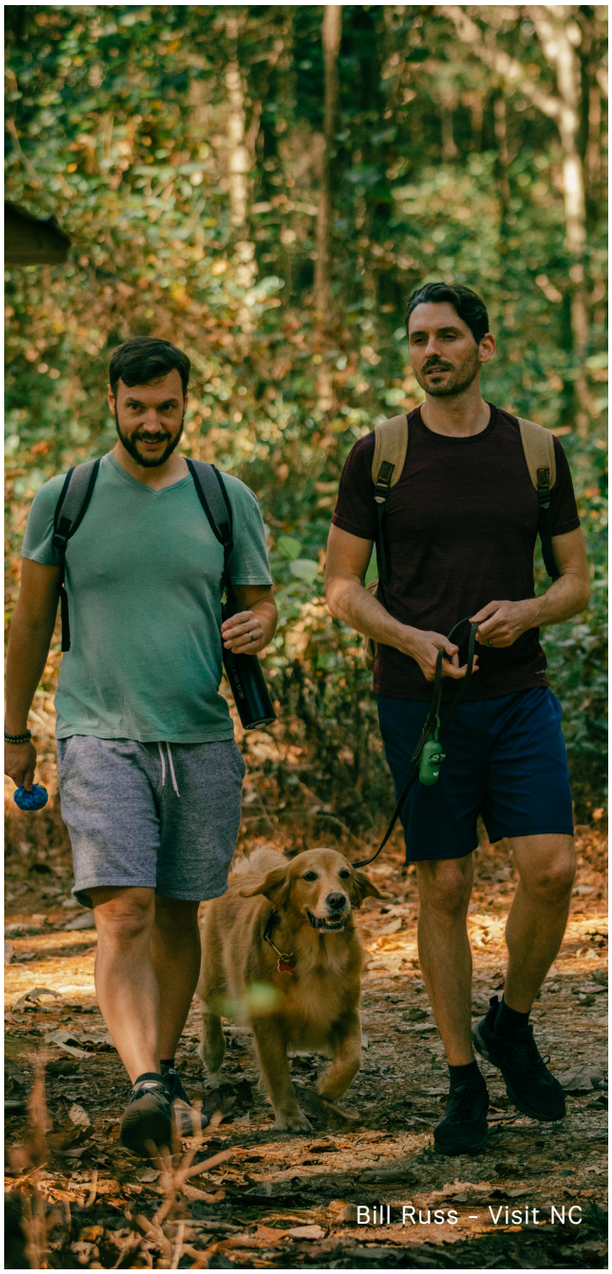
## Demographics Summary

North Carolina is a rapidly growing state — it is the 9th largest state in the United States and had the 4th highest numerical increase in population in 2023. Growth brings opportunities and challenges for all aspects of living in the state, including for our statewide parks and recreation system.

Positive net migration has driven the State's growth, as people continue to move here from other states and countries. This creates a more diverse state population which also means a more diverse set of needs and expectations, for the state park system.

The fastest growing counties in the state, in order, are Brunswick, Pender, Franklin, Johnston, and Union. These are all counties adjacent to some of our most populous and urban counties. This is in line with a quickly urbanizing population — 66.7 percent of residents live in urban areas. At the Prosperity Zone level, the Southwest Zone (Char-Meck Region) and North Central Zone (Triangle Region) have a higher average annual growth rate than the state, meaning a large amount of the state's growth is centered in these areas.

Demographically, the state is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. The population aged 65 or older is also increasing rapidly. Additionally, the early childhood population will reverse a longer term negative growth trend meaning the state will have more children aged zero through four than it has in recent years.



Bill Russ - Visit NC

# Recreation Trends

The Trends chapter narrates the evolving outdoor recreation trends in the United States, focusing on participation, demographic shifts, and the implications for parks and recreation agencies in meeting diverse visitor needs as the demographics across the state continue to grow and change over the next five to ten years.

There is increasing awareness in communities to provide recreational opportunities for diverse populations, including women, people of color, older adults, and people with neurodiverse needs. Additionally, there is growing awareness of the need to provide amenities that are culturally and traditionally significant based on the local demographics of the area.

Overall participation rates for hiking, fishing, running, and camping are high; however, there is a shift toward more casual engagement in these activities. Additionally, paddleboarding, adventure racing, rock climbing, trail running, gravel biking, cardio tennis, pickleball, women's flag football, and small-sided soccer are emerging as popular activities. Parks and recreation agencies need to acknowledge these trends and offer opportunities for residents to learn about and enjoy these new programs.

The NC Division of Parks and Recreation (the Division) is already providing various environmental education programs to connect children and families to nature and promote environmental stewardship. There is a need to identify partnership opportunities with key organizations to ensure fair access for all residents. Aligned with the Division's mission, there are significant efforts in land conservation, habitat connectivity, wildfire management, and coastal resiliency, recognizing parks as critical infrastructure for community and environmental health.

Parks increasingly serve as significant economic drivers, contributing billions to the state economy, supporting jobs, and boosting tourism. Technology and social media influence outdoor recreation, while organizations use digital tools, apps, and virtual experiences to enhance visitor engagement and education.

As outdoor recreation continues to evolve, the Division and the local agencies need to remain adaptive and proactive in acknowledging the diverse needs of communities, recognizing the latest recreation trends, and supporting the long-term sustainability of parks and recreation resources.




**Big Canoe - Falls Lake State Park**

# State Engagement

Engagement played a vital role in shaping the 2025–2030 SCORP, ensuring that all voices contributed to the planning process and that the plan's recommendations reflect public input. Throughout the two-year project cycle, the Division made a conscious effort to engage North Carolina's residents from the mountains to the sea. This plan used a combination of input from residents across the state via in-person events, digital surveys, a scientific survey, as well as focus groups and stakeholder involvement. This chapter provides insight into the findings of these efforts, with the full scientific survey also available in the **Appendix** of the plan.

Engaging across 100 counties and millions of residents and visitors was no easy feat, but the Division was intentional in trying to ensure that all North Carolinians felt included in this process. There were over 7,200 survey respondents from the public opinion, scientific, and tribal community surveys. Hundreds of in-person connections and opportunities for feedback across 10 regional events, with at least one occurring in each Prosperity Zone. The Division also collaborated with 60 different organizations, agencies, and nonprofits during the stakeholder and focus group meetings. Each and every person who took the time to learn about this plan and provide their input played a vital in its creation, and their perspectives and feedback influenced the very themes of the plan: Health and Wellness, Recreation for All, Environmental Resiliency, and Economic Impact.

The engagement process was comprehensive, inclusive, and data-driven, ensuring this SCORP aligns with the diverse needs of North Carolina residents while addressing the Division's conservation, recreation, and education priorities.




**Moore Square Engagement at World Refugee Day**

# Supply & Demand

The supply and demand assessment acknowledges the projected growth happening around North Carolina and aims to uncover whether the existing outdoor recreation facilities are meeting the demands of today's population as well as the future demands.

Ease of access is a defining strength of many outdoor activities. With minimal preparation required, opportunities like walking or local park visits offer simple yet powerful ways to increase daily engagement with the great outdoors. This accessibility is key to fostering widespread participation across age groups, physical and mental abilities, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Access to fresh air, scenic spaces, and quiet settings enhances both physical and mental wellbeing. Investments in parks and recreation must balance recreational use with environmental conservation. Survey findings showcase that residents strongly favor the maintenance and improvement of existing infrastructure over rapid expansion, ensuring the sustainability and quality of resources for future generations. Strategic investments should also prioritize high-demand activities such as hiking, biking, and paddling, which reflect clear user preferences. At the same time, expanding the range of amenities, such as camping sites, public gardens, and water-based recreation, can accommodate broader interests and attract more diverse users.

Improving existing park facilities and developing new, conveniently located parks is essential to increasing visitation and meeting community needs. Addressing persistent barriers like overcrowding and unmet facility needs is critical to making parks more welcoming and accessible to all.

To achieve the goals and recommendations noted within the assessment, the Division must continue to collaborate with partners such as Recreation Resources Service (RRS) and other recreation providers. Shared tools like the annual Municipal and County Parks and Recreation Service Study (MCPRSS) report and this SCORP will guide future planning, resource allocation, and performance tracking. As North Carolina's population grows, leaders must adopt a unified, data-informed approach to build a balanced, resilient, and inclusive outdoor recreation system that meets the needs of all residents.




**Accessible Trail in Jackson County, NC**

# Funding & Third Party Providers

The 2025-2030 SCORP Funding and Third-Party Recreation Providers Assessment identifies key funding opportunities that aim to foster collaborative partnerships and prioritize access for all residents and visitors.

This chapter outlines a wide range of federal, state, local, nonprofit, and private funding sources for outdoor recreation, conservation, and park development. Major funding programs include the Land and Water Conservation Fund, Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Program, and Recreational Trails Program. The State also benefits from nonprofit grants as well as private sector partners.

To ensure fair and just access to outdoor recreation for all, the recommendations focus on targeted funding for rural and urban disparities, community-centered decision-making, flexible grant structures, data-informed distribution, and support capacity building in underserved areas.

The strategies for local agencies also include proactively monitoring grant opportunities, building partnerships, and aligning projects with funding priorities. To maximize the investment impact, it is also important to maintain strong connections with grant administrators and community stakeholders.

By leveraging diverse funding sources and engaging with a broad network of stakeholders, the State can ensure that all communities benefit from high-quality recreational opportunities, improved health outcomes, and strengthened local economies.



North Carolina Aquariums

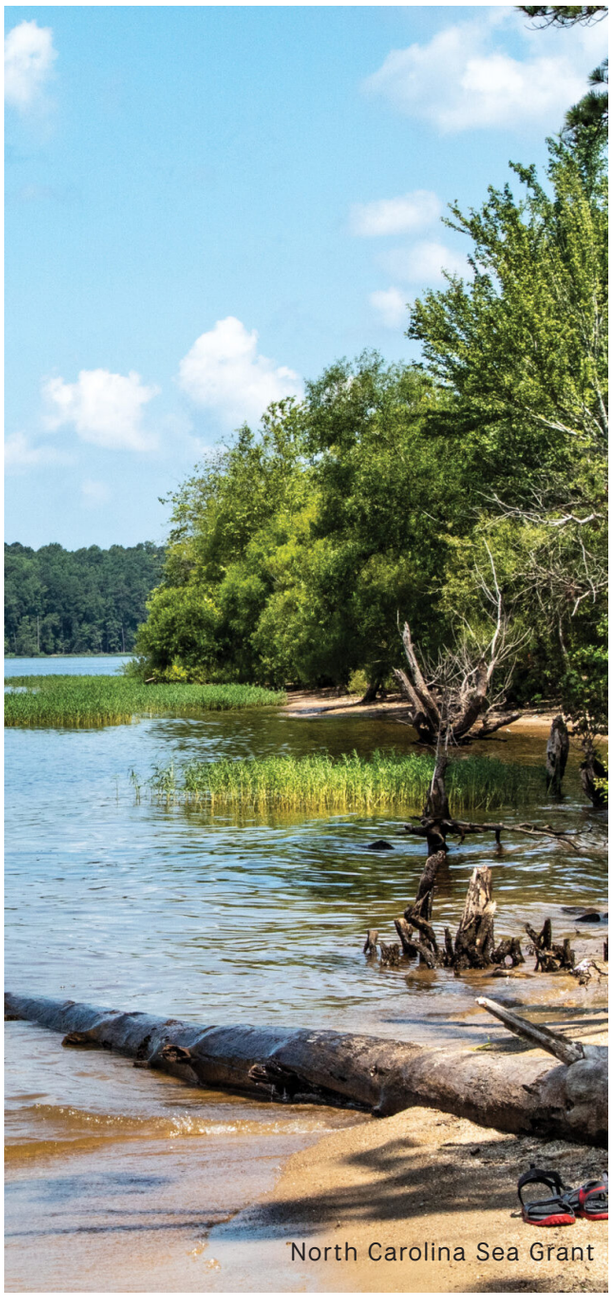
**Roanoke Island**

# Land Acquisition

The land acquisition chapter for the SCORP 2025-2030 update integrates the results of community and stakeholder engagement, funding challenges, and evolving priorities. Collectively, the findings guide how the Division and the local agencies approach land acquisition efforts in expanding access to outdoor recreation, protecting sensitive natural resources, and creating an economic impact for smaller, rural North Carolina communities.

The community engagement for SCORP revealed strong support for land acquisition, particularly for protecting natural resources and sensitive habitats, considering the concerns related to growth pressures across the State. The recreation providers expressed challenges with limited funding, competing land use demands, and rising costs of land as barriers to successful acquisitions.

The plan focuses on land acquisitions in areas that face significant access barriers, as identified in the plan. The plan also underscores the need for diversified funding sources and innovative funding mechanisms including donations, easements, and developer incentives, to support acquisition and development. Finally, the plan carries over the recommendations from previous SCORP (2020-2025) to continue to leverage the landholding mechanisms to secure critical properties proactively and eventually transfer those to local agencies for development and operations. Partnerships with federal, state, and local governments, as well as nonprofits, are essential for coordinated conservation and recreation goals.




**Safeguarding Water at Falls Lake**

# Recreation for All

At the core of 2025-2030 SCORP is the aim to make parks and recreation more accessible, inclusive, and equitable for all residents and visitors. The chapter looked at three main equity themes as opposed to focusing on highly localized indicators. Those themes are access and connectivity, inclusive and welcoming spaces, and programming and partnerships.

Improving access to parks and recreation in North Carolina requires addressing key barriers such as limited public transportation, lack of nonmotorized access, and economic challenges. Enhancing transit options and connectivity is essential for expanding park access across all communities, especially in socially vulnerable areas. Many older facilities and remote parks lack inclusive design, highlighting the need for accessible infrastructure, multilingual communication, and culturally relevant programming to create truly welcoming spaces.

This assessment identified existing partnerships with schools and community organizations that drive inclusive programming and outreach. The assessment recommended forming new partnerships to advance this effort, with increased funding and training for local providers supporting those collaborations. The Division actively promotes workforce equity, aligning with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards and the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) Equity Action Plan to build a diverse, community-responsive staff.

Lastly, this chapter includes a funding analysis of administered Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) and Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) funding, highlighting trends and gaps in funding allocation that note a need for additional resources in certain areas. Inclusive and equitable outdoor spaces are not just a goal, they are essential for building healthier, more connected communities across North Carolina.




**Catalyst Sports**

# Health Assessment

Having access to parks and the ability to spend time recreating outdoors has been proven to have positive impacts on physical and mental health. Ensuring that benefit is available to as many residents as possible is critical to achieving the Division's mission.

The Division, as a recognized statewide resource, should continue to share information, reports, and studies with the general public and partnership organizations as it relates to federal and state opportunities, the latest recreation research studies, and other resources that support outdoor recreation and open spaces in North Carolina. Additionally, the Division should increase programming in state parks and encourage local agencies to build amenities that support educational programming to promote mental and social well-being.

The Division should continue to support cities, counties, towns, and recognized tribes to identify and improve access to outdoor recreation. Interagency communication is vital to make sure that all agencies are working together to achieve the same goal. Supporting municipalities in their work to identify the disparities in how people access their park system and championing efforts to combat inequities using Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) and Environmental Justice Index (EJI) data to identify health vulnerable areas within their communities can also improve outcomes for residents.




**Kayaker paddling on the millpond at Merchants Millpond State Park**

# Resiliency

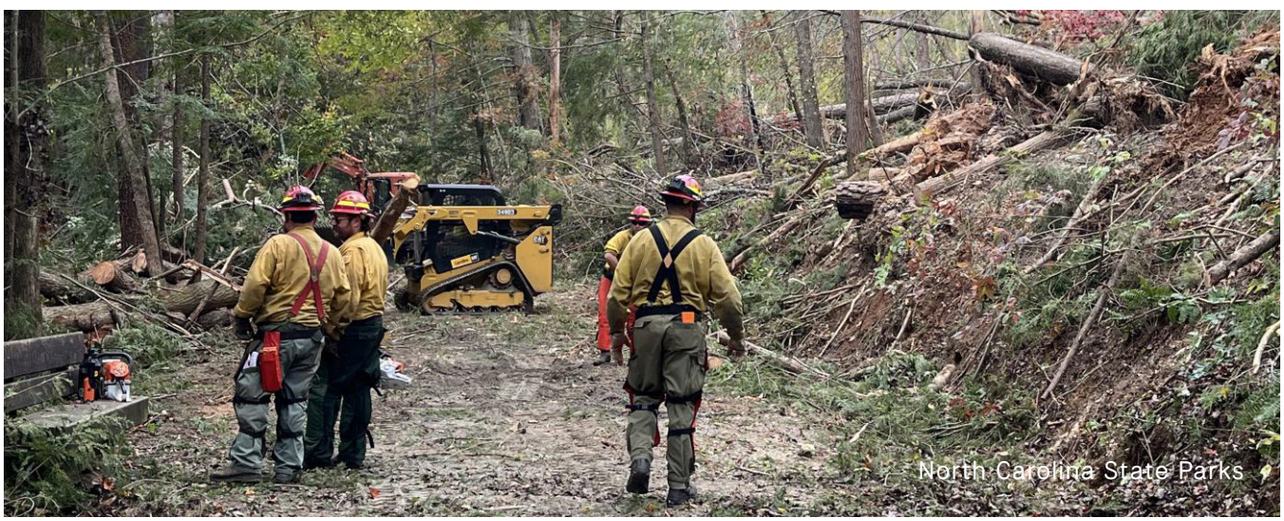
Parks are a critical tool in protecting and enhancing our natural environment. Parks not only provide places to enjoy the great outdoors; they allow for people to learn more and engage with the state's ecology while also protecting it. Four key areas where parks can provide positive environmental impact are: habitat and biodiversity, natural disasters, water quality, and air quality.

Parks protect critical habitats from development and disruption, safeguarding critical ecosystems that provide refuge for countless plant and animal species. Biodiversity is essential for ecosystem health and conservation of large areas. The development and preservation of state parks maintains this diversity. Expanding parks in critical conservation areas, such as those identified by North Carolina's Natural Heritage Program, can maximize their conservation impact.

Parks can also serve as natural buffers against disasters like hurricanes, floods, and wildfires through conservation of forests, wetlands, and coastal ecosystems. Coastal ecosystems, including dunes, coastal wetlands, and living shorelines protect inland areas from intense storm surge and flooding, which can reduce the need for costly and sometimes less effective man-made infrastructure. Wildfire mitigation through fire management practices like controlled burns and vegetation thinning helps prevent large, uncontrolled fires, while park ecosystems serve as firebreaks and protect nearby communities.

Parks filter and regulate water quality through natural ecosystems such as wetlands, forests, and riparian buffers, preventing pollutants like sediment, nutrients, and toxins from reaching water systems. Watershed management in parks helps mitigate flooding and drought, maintains groundwater recharge areas, and supports both ecological and human water needs.

Parks serve as natural air filters, absorbing pollutants such as $CO_2$, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen oxides, which improves air quality and contributes to climate change mitigation. Parks also create a "green lung" effect, lowering temperatures and reducing ground-level ozone, which improves air quality and reduces the risks associated with smog, such as respiratory problems. State parks provide scientific data for studying the effects of air pollution, supporting environmental policies that enhance air quality at local, regional, and national levels.




**Hurricane Helene Relief Efforts**



# Trails

The Trails chapter outlines North Carolina's comprehensive efforts for trail development, highlighting key partners, trail types, supporting organizations, and funding initiatives aimed at enhancing the state's trail network.

North Carolina is recognized as the "Great Trails State" due to extensive collaborative efforts by various federal, state, and local organizations, with a key role played by the Division overseeing trails planning, construction, and maintenance through programs like the Recreational Trails Program and Complete the Trails Program.

North Carolinians increasingly recognize the health, environmental, and economic benefits of trails, an outcome of the community awareness efforts like the "Year of the Trail." Trails improve health outcomes by supporting an active lifestyle, protecting significant natural resources while allowing low-impact recreational opportunities, and supporting jobs and local businesses through tourism impact.

While North Carolina has made significant progress towards state-wide trails connectivity, significant obstacles to implementation, such as a lack of recurring funding, still exist. Additionally, deferred maintenance and management of aging trails need capital investment to provide a high-quality user experience. Community awareness campaigns and programs continue to play a critical role in ensuring sustained public support for expanding and enhancing the trail network across the state.

The Great Trails State Plan (2022) aims to connect all 100 counties through a 6,547-mile trail network. To ensure the successful implementation of this plan, the State Legislature has allocated significant funding in recent years, including the $25 million non-recurring funds in 2023, and a recent $11 million grant announcement from Governor Josh Stein for communities and nonprofits in western North Carolina in 2025.



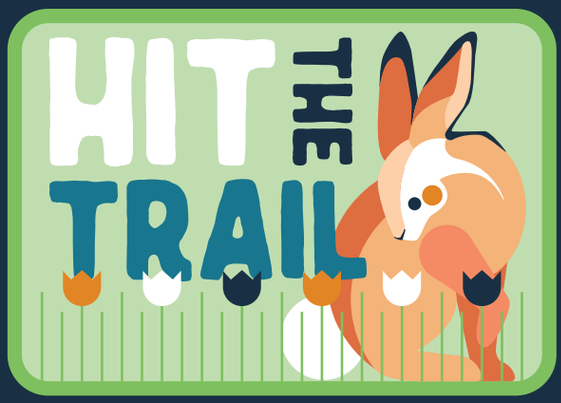

**Rough Ridge Trail, Linville, North Carolina**



# INTRODUCTION

# INTRODUCTION

A statewide outdoor recreation plan provides a strategic framework for guiding investment in parks and recreation while ensuring eligibility for federal funding. By identifying current and future needs, the plan helps state and local agencies secure grants to enhance, expand, and preserve outdoor spaces, promote equity, and support sustainable growth.




## Overview

By identifying current and future needs, the plan helps state and local agencies secure grants to enhance, expand, and preserve outdoor spaces, promote equity, and support sustainable growth. The SCORP update establishes a strategic vision and framework for a sustainable, welcoming, and well-connected outdoor recreation system throughout North Carolina. The SCORP is driven by the Division's mission to **"administering a diverse system of state parks, natural areas, trails, lakes, natural and scenic rivers, and recreation areas."** The plan aims to engage and connect with the public by providing a clear and practical foundation for the future of North Carolina's outdoor recreation. This update will address opportunities and needs for public outdoor recreation to establish a future-forward vision.

Having a current SCORP is crucial to the Division's work in numerous ways, the three most significant are:

1. Maintaining a current SCORP keeps North Carolina eligible for funding from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), which supports and enhances outdoor recreation initiatives across the state.
2. Projects submitted for LWCF funding are evaluated for how well they align with the adopted SCORP's identified objectives and initiatives.
3. Completing a SCORP provides an opportunity for reflection and adjustment. As the state rapidly grows, there are changes in preferences for recreational services. Completing a SCORP provides an opportunity for reflection and adjustment every five years. This plan is designed to assess, reflect, and respond to evolving needs in the state and provide strategies to help guide the Division over the next five years.

### Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) in North Carolina

Since 1965, the United States Department of the Interior (DOI) has funded the Land and Water Conservation Fund for outdoor recreation development and land acquisition by local governments and state agencies. In 2019, Congress permanently reauthorized the fund and then permanently funded the program the following year with the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act.

The Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (DNCR) administers the program. The Governor appoints a State Liaison Officer (SLO), who reviews the LWCF allocation in consultation with the Grants and Outreach Program staff within the Division. The SLO determines the minimum and maximum amount of grant awards for state agency and local government projects; the current grant maximum is $750,000.

During each funding cycle, the Grants and Outreach Program staff will review and evaluate each application submitted, consider the project rankings, and recommend a list of projects to the SLO for funding. The SLO recommends the list of projects to the National Park Service (NPS) for final review and funding.

Since 1965, the LWCF program has built a permanent park legacy for present and future generations. In our state alone, the LWCF has provided more than $85 million in matching grants to protect land and support more than 900 state and local park projects. More than 40,000 acres have been acquired with LWCF assistance.

## Planning Process

While drafting and adopting SCORP was the Division's main task, the plan's development was the result of a collaborative effort to gain input from visiting and local recreation users, as well as local and state recreation providers. The planning process included public workshops, several opinion surveys, focus group meetings, and stakeholder meetings along with regular consultations with recreational professionals from around the state. This continued engagement is key to the plan's success and implementation.

Additionally, the Division enlisted several consultants to conduct a statistically valid survey, analyze wetlands, trails, economic impact, and several others plans and assessments.

## Plan Content

This plan is grounded in the robust community and stakeholder engagement as well as data-driven findings and recommendations. From the initial inventory and analysis through the recommendations and strategic plan creation, the team engaged the community, recreation providers, stakeholders, and special interest focus groups. The team also ensured that local, regional, and national recreation needs and trends, as well as demographic shifts and agency performance, were taken into account and analyzed throughout the planning process. During the drafting of the plan, current facilities and programs were evaluated as well as the overall operational successes and challenges of the Division and its mission. Lastly, the project team developed a set of guiding principles that prioritizes recommendations to improve recreational offerings and meet expectations as North Carolina continues to be one of the fastest-growing states in the country. This 2025-2030 SCORP includes the following components:

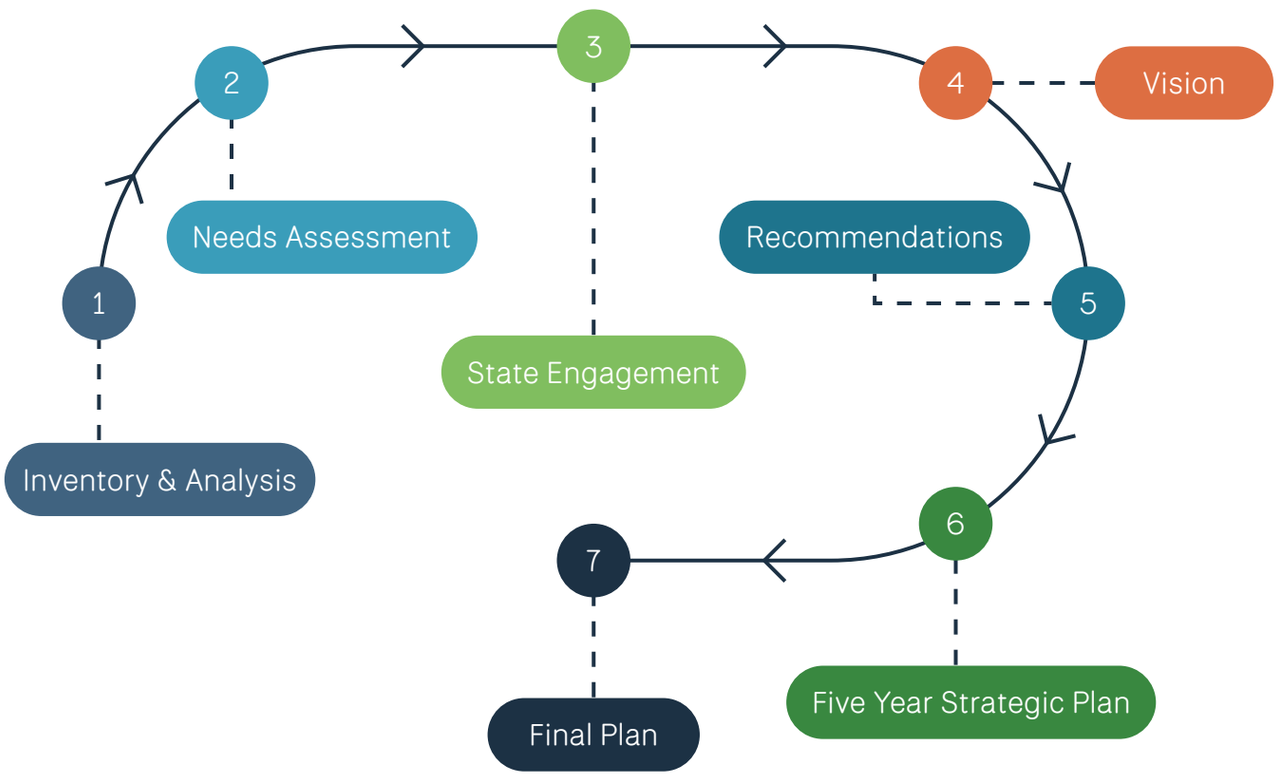



**Figure 2.1: Plan Contents**

## Introduction

The introduction provides a high level overview of the SCORP process, the goals of the planning effort, and an overview of funding sources that are relevant to the plan. The past planning efforts provide a comprehensive understanding of the recommendations that have guided the allocation of LWCF funding, and the review of other agencies statewide and regional planning efforts to identify shared goals and potential partnerships.

## State of the System

State of the System provides an overview of the unique geography, topography, and growth patterns of North Carolina. It accesses climate, history, and natural resources, while also providing a status update on outdoor recreation at the local and state level.

## Demographics

A demographic analysis was conducted to conclude current and future demographic trends across the state as they relate to creating parks, recreation, and open spaces for all people who live, visit, and play in North Carolina.

## Recreation Trends

A recreational trends analysis was conducted to provide insight into the current and future recreation trends and participation levels as they relate to the state's unique community composition.

## Needs Assessment

Several assessments were conducted during the project including a supply and demand analysis of outdoor recreation opportunities and recreation participation barriers, economic impact analysis, funding, land acquisition, and assessments for access, health equity, resiliency, and trails. The various assessments ensure a holistic approach is taken for funding allocations of outdoor recreation projects across the state.

## State Engagement

Through the state engagement process, input was sought from staff, focus groups, stakeholders, and recreational professionals on the local level. The process aimed to be transparent and equitable, engaging the widest possible range of residents.

## Vision & Recommendations

Visioning allows the Division to develop a future direction. Building on insights from the state engagement period and findings from various assessments, the project team developed a set of guiding principles. The visioning session validates the guiding principles that inform the creation of recommendations. Each of this plan's recommendations and five-year action items are in service to achieving this vision and providing a framework to guide North Carolina outdoor recreation initiatives.

## Five-Year Strategic Plan

Following the visioning and recommendations phase of the SCORP, the Division presents a five-year strategic plan to guide internal growth and external support. The plan prioritizes each recommendation within two timeframes: zero to two years and three to five years. Prioritization criteria vary by context, ranging from land availability to financial implications, but all are firmly grounded in principles shaped by community and stakeholder input gathered during engagement and assessment phases.

## Appendix

Within the **Appendix**, several full reports are included within this chapter including the Wetlands Summary, Methodology, Public Survey results, Recreation Provider Survey results, Scientific Survey results, Economic Impact Analysis findings, and the Open Project Selection Process.




Plan Schedule

# Outdoor Recreation in North Carolina

## Seashores, Beaches & Lighthouses

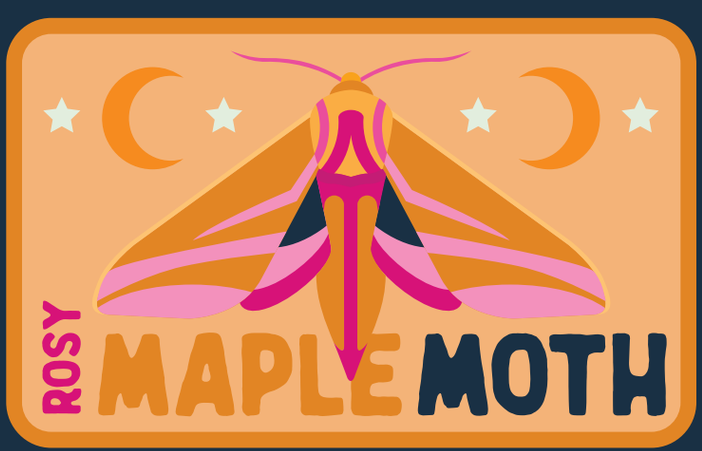
North Carolina's coast is a blend of natural beauty, recreational opportunities, and historical landmarks. The Cape Hatteras and Cape Lookout National Seashores protect miles of pristine beaches, dunes, and coastal habitats, providing a haven for wildlife and a retreat for beachgoers, anglers, and water sports enthusiasts. Iconic lighthouses, like the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse—**the tallest brick lighthouse in the country**—alongside the Bodie Island and Cape Lookout lighthouses, stand as symbols of the state's rich maritime history. These lighthouses, coupled with North Carolina's vast network of coastal waterways and estuaries, offer both natural and recreational resources that highlight the state's commitment to preserving its coastal tradition while inviting residents and visitors to explore and enjoy its shores.

## Lakes & Rivers

The state's abundant lakes and rivers make it a haven for water-based recreation. Jordan Lake, Falls Lake, and Kerr Lake are among the most popular, supporting activities like fishing, boating, and swimming. The state's rivers, including the French Broad, Yadkin, New Rivers, Cape Fear, and the Neuse, are popular for paddling and tubing, drawing both locals and visitors seeking adventure. Within the North Carolina state parks system, the Eno River,




**Cape Hatteras Lighthouse**




## DID YOU KNOW?

These beautiful little friends can be found throughout North Carolina! They are commonly found in every forested habitat in the state. In their larval state they are referred to as Green-Striped Mapleworms, but after they have grown up you can find them fluttering around forests at night. If you are hoping to find one during your own nocturnal adventure, be sure to investigate any maple trees around as these are the moth's favorite!

Mayo River, Lumber River, and New River state parks aim at providing safe access to North Carolina's rivers while also conserving the areas around them and encouraging stewardship to the greater connected water system.

## Conservation Lands

North Carolina is home to an extensive network of conservation lands, including state forests, national forests, wildlife refuges, and preserves that protect the state's rich biodiversity. The state boasts four national forests—Pisgah, Nantahala, Uwharrie, and Croatan—covering over 1.2 million acres, offering vital habitats for wildlife and recreational opportunities like hiking, fishing, and camping. State forests, such as DuPont and Clemmons, emphasize sustainable forestry and outdoor education. Additionally, wildlife refuges like Alligator River and Pee Dee support endangered species and wetland ecosystems. Together, these protected lands safeguard the natural heritage, contribute to environmental health, and provide spaces for recreation, education, and conservation.

## Trails

With an extensive network of statewide and regional trails, outdoor enthusiasts can explore the state's diverse landscapes. The Mountains-to-Sea State Trail (MST), once complete, will stretch over 1,400 miles from Kuwohi (formerly Clingmans Dome) in the Great Smoky Mountains to Jockey's Ridge State Park on the Outer Banks, inviting hikers to experience the state's varied terrain. Other major trails, including the Appalachian Trail and the Carolina Thread Trail, link communities across regions, providing ample opportunities for hiking, biking, and nature observation. Historical routes, like the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail (also an NC state trail), trace paths used during the Revolutionary War, blending outdoor recreation with a journey through North Carolina's past. Supported by partnerships across local and state agencies, these trails remain accessible, well-maintained, and enriching for both residents and visitors.

North Carolina, known as the "Great Trails State," has seen a surge in trail popularity in recent years. The inaugural Great Trails State Day on October 21, 2023, attracted thousands of participants statewide, celebrating the state's diverse trail networks.[1] Building on this momentum, the state hosted its first Great Trails State Conference in 2024, bringing together trail planners, designers, and community leaders to advance trail development. Highlights from the NC General Assembly's 2023 budget as it relates to State Parks and Trails include:

- A new non-recurring $25 million trail and greenway funding program called the Great Trails State Program
- The addition of $5 million for the Complete the Trails Fund supporting authorized State Trails such as the East Coast Greenway
- Nearly $25 million to specific trail and greenway projects across the state

These initiatives have significantly boosted public engagement with North Carolina's trails, reinforcing the state's commitment to outdoor recreation, health, and conservation.

## Historic Sites & National Landmarks

North Carolina is rich in historic and cultural sites that offer insights into the nation's past. In 2026, America will celebrate 250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, marked through the nationwide initiative of America250.[2] America250 is a nonpartisan initiative working to engage every American in the 250th anniversary of the United States. In North Carolina the initiative is divided into three commemorative themes: **Visions of Freedom, Gathering of Voices, and Common Ground.** Common Ground reflects the idea that places carry our stories of struggle, creation, and connection. This is especially true in the history of the outdoors, where generations have practiced both stewardship and recreation. Through the America250 initiative, the state aims at continuing the development of state parks and embracing history with programming such as a lecture series on North Carolina history located at a park or open space area or signage to educate visitors regarding history of the land.

The state is home to 27 designated historic sites managed by the North Carolina Division of State Historic Sites, each highlighting unique aspects of the state's history. Examples include the Fort Fisher State Historic Site, a major Civil War focal point, and Historic Edenton, which preserves colonial-era structures and stories. In addition to state sites, federal landmarks add to North Carolina's historical landscape. The Outer Banks is home to three national parks–Cape Hatteras National Seashore, Fort Raleigh National Historic Site, and Wright Brothers National Memorial. The Wright Brothers National Memorial

1 "Great Trails State Day," NC Trails - Great Trails State Coalition, July 19, 2024, https://greattrailsnc.com/great-trails-state-day/.

2 "Planning Guide for the 250th Anniversary of the United States and North Carolina." America250n.d. https://www.america250.nc.gov/america-250-nc-field-guide-2024/open.




**Historic Edenton - State Historic Site**




**Wright Brothers National Memorial**

in Kill Devil Hills commemorates the first successful powered flight, celebrating the state's role in aviation history. The Blue Ridge Parkway, a scenic route managed by the NPS (National Park Service), passes through western North Carolina, providing access to historic structures and remarkable mountain views. These sites, managed at both the state and national levels, also contribute to North Carolina's heritage tourism, allowing visitors to explore the valuable cultural and historical tapestry of the region.

## Outdoor Recreation Providers

Multiple stakeholders support North Carolina's outdoor recreation landscape. In addition to the State Park System, local cities, counties, and towns provide outdoor access through parks, trails, and recreational programming. Nonprofit organizations also play a vital role. Groups such as the Friends of State Parks help acquire and protect natural spaces, while partnerships with organizations like the Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail and Great Trails State Coalition[3] promote trail development across public and private lands. Private businesses, including outfitters and rental companies, further enhance recreational opportunities by offering gear and guided activities for residents and tourists alike. The North Carolina Outdoor Recreation Coalition, a nonprofit trade association in collaboration with Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina (EDPNC) and Office of Outdoor Recreation (OREC) provides a voice for local businesses supporting outdoor recreation. The NC Department of Commerce, through its Rural Economic Development Division[4] and the NC Outdoor Economy Office, is focusing on strategic planning that will utilize natural resource assets for outdoor recreation to bolster local economic vitality. Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies (CORE) is a technical program developed by the NC Department of Commerce to increase tourism, encourage small business development, position communities to attract outdoor gear manufacturing industries, plan for outdoor recreation asset and infrastructure development, and enhance quality of life improvements for residents[5], thereby creating local economic impact in rural areas of the State.

3 "The Great Trails State Coalition," Great Trails State Coalition, February 6, 2025, https://greattrailsstatecoalition.org/.

4 "Rural Planning," NC Department of Commerce, February 21, 2025, https://www.commerce.nc.gov/about-us/divisions-programs/rural-economic-development-division/nc-main-street-rural-planning-center/rural-planning.

5 Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies (CORE), 2025, https://www.commerce.nc.gov/creating-outdoor-recreation-economies/download.

# Funding Context

The LWCF was established by Congress in 1964 to fulfill a bipartisan commitment to safeguard natural areas, water resources, and cultural heritage, and to provide recreation opportunities to all Americans. Using zero taxpayer dollars, the LWCF invests earnings from offshore oil and gas leasing to help strengthen communities, preserve history, and protect the national endowment of lands and waters. The LWCF program is divided into the "State Side"[6] which provides grants to the state and local governments, and the "Federal Side"[7], which is used to acquire lands, waters, and interests therein necessary to achieve the natural, cultural, wildlife, and recreation management objectives of federal land management agencies.[8]

Most of the funds from the LWCF support two general purposes and every year during the budget process, Congress determines the total appropriation from the fund to support these efforts.

1. Federal-Side: Federal acquisition of land for the benefit of the public. A portion of the funds are also used for the protection of the historic and natural resources through the following programs:

    - **American Battlefield Protection Program[9]** – This program sponsors the preservation of historic battlefields.
    - **Forest Legacy Program[10]** – This is a Forest Service program that encourages the protection of privately owned forest lands.
    - **Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund[11]** – This is a Fish and Wildlife Service program that provides funding to states and territories for species and habitat conservation on non-federal lands.

6 "State and Local Grant Funding," National Parks Service, August 8, 2024, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/lwcf/stateside.htm.

7 "Federal Land Acquisition," National Parks Service, February 6, 2023, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/lwcf/federalside.htm.

8 "Land and Water Conservation Fund (U.S. National Park Service)," National Parks Service, July 10, 2024, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/lwcf/index.htm.

9 "Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Program," National Park Service, https://www.nps.gov/orgs/2287/index.htm.

10 "Forest Legacy Program," U.S. Forest Service, https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/private-land/forest-legacy/program.

11 "Endangered Species Program," U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, https://www.fws.gov/program/endangered-species.

2. State-Side: Grants to states for recreational planning, acquiring recreational lands, or developing outdoor recreational facilities. LWCF funds are limited to 50% or less of a proposed project's total cost; the rest must come from other, non-federal funds.

A formula in the Land and Water Conservation Act determines how the funds are apportioned to states (See 54 U.S.C. §200305(b)).[12] States must use the money for its intended purpose within three years.[13]

## Federal Side[14]

The NPS is guided by the Act of August 25, 1916, (the National Park Service Organic Act) to protect and preserve resources within units of the National Park System, while providing for public use and enjoyment of those resources. Several national park units contain non-federal land.

Depending on the use of these lands, it is sometimes necessary to seek to acquire them or conduct land exchanges to protect resources and provide for visitor use and enjoyment. This work is done in cooperation with states, local governments, nonprofit organizations, and property owners to provide various forms of protection.

The federal portion of the LWCF is used by the NPS to acquire lands, waters, and interests therein necessary to achieve the natural, cultural, wildlife, and recreation management objectives of the NPS. It should be noted that the federal portion of the LWCF is not accessible to the Division even if a project is located in North Carolina, all funds in this portion are managed by NPS. The Land Resources Division[15] utilize funding from the federal portion of the LWCF to make these acquisitions.

12 U.S. Code: Title 54—National Park Service and Related Programs, Subtitle II, Chapter 2003, Section 200305, 2023, https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/USCODE-2023-title54/USCODE-2023-title54-subtitleII-chap2003-sec200305.

13 "Land and Water Conservation Fund," U.S. Department of the Interior, Natural Resources Revenue Data, https://revenuedata.doi.gov/how-revenue-works/lwcf/.

14 "Federal Land Acquisition," National Parks Service, February 6, 2023, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/lwcf/federalside.htm.

15 "Land Resources Division (U.S. National Park Service)," National Parks Service, n.d., https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1860/index.htm.

## State-Side

The LWCF State and Local Assistance Program[16] (often referred to as "LWCF Stateside") is administered by the NPS State and Local Assistance Programs Division (SLAD) and provides matching grants to state, local, and tribal governments to create and expand parks, develop outdoor recreation facilities, and further local comprehensive recreation plans. Each year, funds are distributed to every state and territory using a population-based formula.

On August 4, 2020, the Great American Outdoor Act (GAOA) was signed into law, authorizing $900 million annually in permanent LWCF funding. Before the passage of GAOA, funding for LWCF relied on annual Congressional appropriations.

LWCF Stateside grants can fund a range of projects:

- Acquisition of land or water for outdoor recreation (must include public access within three years)
- Development of new park and trail facilities
- Redevelopment or renovation of existing park infrastructure to ensure it meets current standards
- Planning grants to assist states in creating and updating SCORP
- Administration grants to support state administration of the LWCF Program

16 "State and Local Assistance Program," The Land and Water Conservation Fund, n.d., https://lwcfcoalition.org/state-and-local-assistance.

**Since the program's establishment in 1965, LWCF has provided North Carolina with over $85 million in matching grants to support more than 900 state and local park projects. Continuing the Division's mission, conservation and land protection has exceeded 40,000 acres of both local and state park acquisition with LWCF assistance.**

There are two pathways LWCF monies are appropriated:

## Traditional Formula Grants

The traditional grant program provides matching grants to states for outdoor recreation planning, acquisition of lands and waters, and outdoor recreation facility development. Acquisitions funded through LWCF stateside grants must remain in recreation use in perpetuity unless the Secretary of the Interior approves of the conversion of the land to another use and acceptable replacement lands are substituted. The states award their grant money through a competitive, open project selection process based on their SCORP priorities and comprehensive recreation plans and selection criteria. They can use the money for state park projects or for pass-through to localities and tribes. States send their ranked projects to the NPS for formal approval and obligation of grant money. A five-year SCORP is a requirement to receive this funding for the State.

North Carolina's LWCF apportionment is based on a traditional formula composed of land area and population factors. Population growth highlights the need for additional outdoor recreation resources. LWCF state-side is a 50:50 matching grant program.

### Open Project Selection Process (OPSP)[17]

The administration of North Carolina's program, including the selection criteria and rating process is the focus of **Appendix B**, the Open Project Selection Process. The rating system evaluates state and local acquisition and development projects. The rating system also ensures that the selection of competing projects for funding is fair and equitable.

The current OPSP consists of the following seven components required by the NPS. These components are identified and explained in the Appendices:

- Priority Rating Systems
- Project Selection Process
- Recurring Funding Cycle
- Public Notification
- Program Technical Assistance
- Public Participation
- Funding Distribution



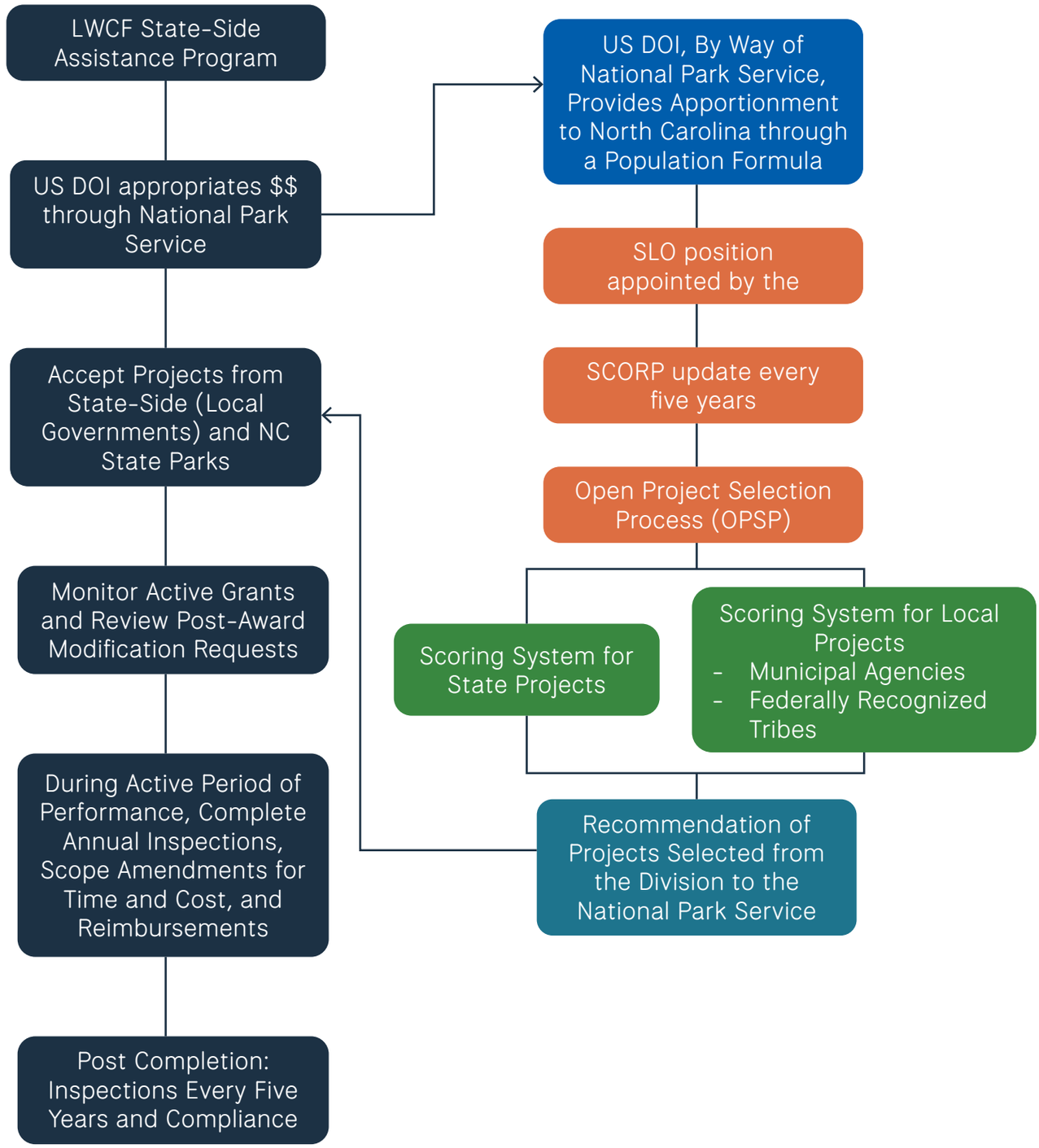







**LWCF Impact on North Carolina**

17 "How States Plan and Select Projects," National Parks Service, June 16, 2015, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/lwcf/planningprojects.htm.




**LWCF Funding – Formula Grant Workflow**

## Competitive Grant Funding Programs

Competitive grant funding[18] is administered by the Department of the Interior (DOI) through the NPS. There are two opportunities for state and local assistance for large-scale outdoor recreation endeavors through a separate national competition funded by LWCF:

1. The Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP) Program in partnership with the DOI and
2. The Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program in partnership with the Department of Defense (DOD).

Only state lead agencies, the Division's Grants and Outreach Program, and Land Management Program are eligible to submit applications for ORLP grants, although they may do so on behalf of themselves or another entity via a sub-grant. Eligible sub-recipients include other state agencies, local units of government (cities, counties, and park districts), and federally recognized Tribes.

- A state may apply to receive competitive grant funding and nominate up to four projects for NPS to consider.
- The project selection process hinges on the specific objectives in the competitive grant announcement and the requirements outlined in the state's SCORP.
- The goals set in the January 2020 grant announcement were to fund projects in historically marginalized and underserved urban areas (50,000+ people) and neighborhoods that lack sufficient outdoor recreation opportunities.

### Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP)[19]

Established by Congress in 2014, and administered through the NPS, the ORLP Program receives funding through the LWCF. ORLP is a nationally competitive grant program that delivers funding to local communities – jurisdictions of at least 25,000 people – with priority given to projects located in low-income areas and lacking in outdoor recreation opportunities. These awards help address outdoor recreation deficits by supporting projects in cities and local communities that create new outdoor recreation spaces, reinvigorate existing parks, and form connections between people and the outdoors. Historically, NC has received approximately $36 million in ORLP grants, with an additional $21.6 million selected for award in 2024 for projects in Raleigh, Garner and Buncombe County to improve NC's close-to-home access to the outdoors.

ORLP was recently codified into law through passage of the Outdoors for All Act which was included as part of the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences (EXPLORE) Act.

Nonprofit partners can collaborate with states and municipalities to identify community needs, develop a strong grant application, and secure matching funds from a variety of public and private sources.[20]

To meet ORLP objectives and goals, projects must be located in communities with a population of 25,000 or more according to the 2020 Census and must serve areas identified as underserved.

### Readiness & Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program[21]

This unique program allows military services and partners to develop off-base natural infrastructure solutions to protect critical infrastructure, military personnel, and testing or training operations from climate change impacts. This is one solution for combating encroachment and supporting our Nation's and state's long-term military readiness, while delivering mutual, multiple benefits to communities and stakeholders.

The REPI program funds cost-sharing partnerships between military services and state agencies, local governments and federally recognized tribes can satisfy the match or cost sharing requirement for any resilience or conservation program of any federal agency. The identification to address encroachment risks, which are

18 Laura A Hanson, Anne A Riddle, and Carol Hardy Vincent, "Land and Water Conservation Fund: Processes and Criteria for Allocating Funds," Congress.Gov, June 10, 2020, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/ R46563.

19 "Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Program," The Land and Water Conservation Fund, n.d., https://lwcfcoalition.org/orlp.

20 "Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership," Land and Water Conservation Fund Coalition, https://lwcfcoalition.org/orlp.

21 Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration, U.S. Department of Defense, n.d., https://www.repi.mil/.

issues external to military operations that affect or can affect military installation testing, training, and other operations and overall military readiness can provide outdoor recreation opportunities for the community and military families. REPI offers between $5 million and $15 million each year.[22]

There are 11 main encroachment risks, including: noise pollution, endangered species and critical habitat, wetlands, water quality and supply, air pollution and quality, cultural resources, maritime competition, competition for airspace, competition for radio frequency spectrum, urban growth around military installations, and unexploded ordinance and munitions constituents.

REPI partnerships acquire property, typically in the form of conservation easements, from willing landowners and, when applicable, conduct natural resource restoration work on the acquired land to potentially create outdoor recreation opportunities. As REPI projects mature, they form areas of protected or restored land in the vicinity of military installations that reduce the likelihood of land-use conflicts between military installations and surrounding communities.

## Other Grants Managed by the Division

The Division also administers the parks and trail grant programs to support the expansion and quality of outdoor recreation across the State. Some of these grant sources are mentioned below.

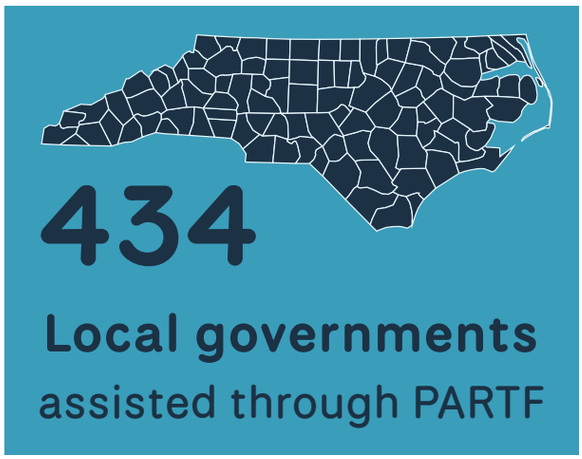
### Recurring Sources

#### North Carolina Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF)[23]

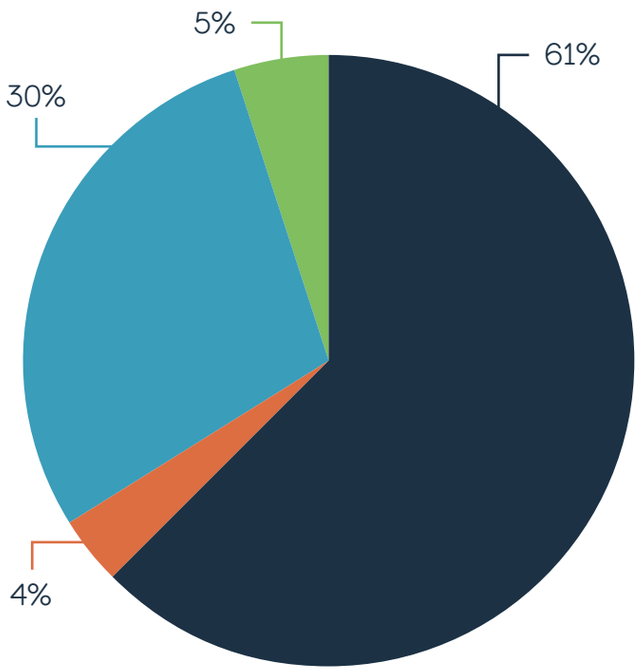
The NC General Assembly funds PARTF annually through appropriations as well as revenue from personalized State Parks license plates. Per NC General Statute §143B-135.56, PARTF is allocated as follows: Sixty-five percent for the state parks system or a state recreational forest for capital projects, repairs, and renovations of facilities and to acquire land. By resolution of the Parks and Recreation Authority, four percent of this allocation is allocated to the DuPont State Recreational Forest annually. Thirty percent to provide grants to local governments on a matching

22 "Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program"n.d. https://fundingnaturebasedsolutions.nwf.org/programs/readiness-and-environmental-protection-integration-repi-program/

23 "PARTF Grant," NC State Parks, n.d., https://www.ncparks.gov/about-us/grants.




**PARTF Grants Impact on North Carolina**




State parks system or state recreational forest for capital projects, and renovations of facilities and to acquire land

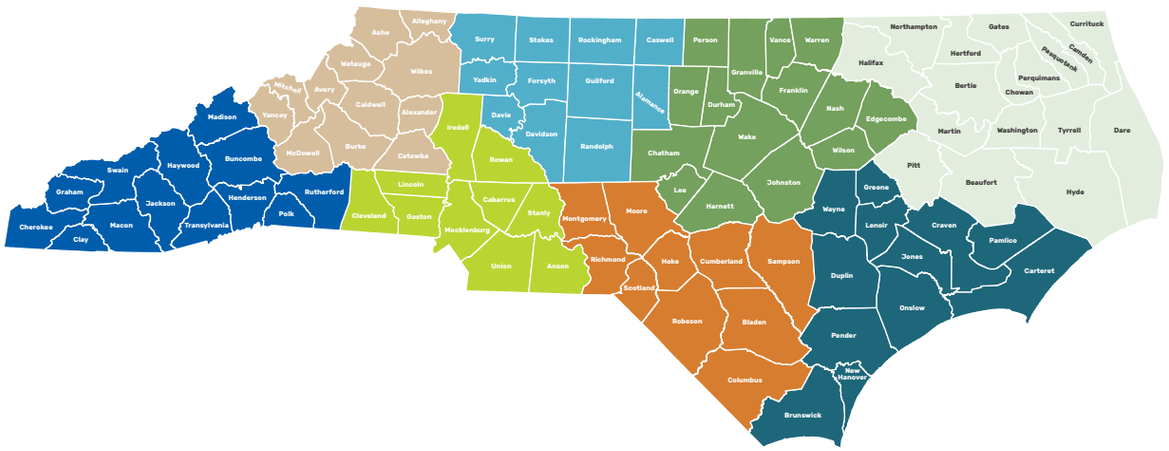
Dupont State Recreational Forest

Providing grants to local government on a matching dollar-for-dollar basis to establish or improve parks and recreational programs

North Carolina Division of Coastal Management's Public Beach and Coastal Waterfront Access Program

**Allocation of PARTF Funding**

## PROSPERITY ZONES




WR Western Region
PTR Piedmont-Triad Region
NCR North Central Region
NER Northeast Region
NWR Northwest Region
SWR Southwest Region
SCR South Central Region
SER Southeast Region

**Prosperity Zone Map**

dollar-for-dollar basis to establish or improve parks and recreational projects. Five percent for the North Carolina Division of Coastal Management's (DCM) Public Beach and Coastal Waterfront Access Program. No more than three percent of total funding can be used for administration of the funds.

The nine-member Parks and Recreation Authority allocates PARTF funding for projects in state parks and grants to local governments to actively acquire lands, renovate existing parks, and build new public recreation facilities. The grants are tracked amongst the eight Prosperity Zones, which are established by the North Carolina Department of Commerce.

## Recreational Trails Program (RTP)

The Recreational Trails Program is a $1 million plus federal grant program designed to help states provide and maintain recreational trails for both motorized and non-motorized recreational trail use. The program is funded by USDOT, passed through DOT, and is administered by the Division's Trails Program. All applications are reviewed by the North Carolina Trails Committee[24] and recommendations are made to the Secretary of the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources for approval of funds.

## Non-Recurring Sources

North Carolina had the following funding sources available recently. These could be funded again with budget availability.

### Accessible Parks Grant Program[25]

The Accessible Parks Grant Program is a non-recurring funding source, administered by PARTF, that provides matching grants for parks and recreation to benefit people living with disabilities. The Accessible Parks Grant Program provides $12.5 million in matching grants and can be used for:

- The construction of new facilities, or capital reinvestment of non-compliant facilities that do not meet the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as required by law.

24 "North Carolina Trails Committee," North Carolina Trails Committee | North Carolina Trails, n.d., https://trails.nc.gov/nc-trails-program/north-carolina-trails-committee.

25 "Accessible Parks Grant," NC State Parks, n.d., https://www.ncparks.gov/about-us/grants/accessible-parks-grant.

### Complete the Trails Program (CTP)[26]

Funds are available through this program for the planning, design, and construction of state trails—including land acquisition—through state trail partners. As of 2023, the State Legislature has provided more than $30 million through this program. Connecting Communities to State Trails Grants (CCST) is a smaller component of CTP specifically allocated for communities with less than 25,000 residents and located within six miles of an existing or planned state trail segment.

### Great Trails State Program

The Great Trails State Program[27] provides funding for new trail development and extension of existing trails. This includes paved trails or greenways, natural surface trails, biking trails, equestrian trails, and any other type of trail recognized by the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources. This funding was available for one grant cycle awarding the full $25 million dollars in FY24-25.

26 "NC Complete the Trails Program," North Carolina Trails, n.d., https://trails.nc.gov/state-trails/nc-complete-trails-program.

27 "Great Trails State Program," NC State Parks, March 26, 2024, https://www.ncparks.gov/about-us/grants/great-trails-state-program.




**Kennedy Trail - Boone, NC**

# Key Takeaways

The 2025-2030 SCORP update serves as a visionary roadmap to elevate recreational enjoyment, thoughtfully conserve North Carolina's unparalleled natural and cultural resources, and champion environmental stewardship through education and collaboration. This plan provides a strategic framework for the effective allocation of LWCF dollars, empowering partnerships with outdoor recreation providers to deliver transformative results.

The Division employs the Open Project Selection Process to rank local and state park projects for LWCF funding consideration. This rigorous process is rooted in the statewide goals and objectives shaped by extensive community engagement, ensuring that investments align with the priorities of North Carolinians.

Beyond federal assistance, North Carolina's unwavering commitment to recreation is evident through robust state-level programs like PARTF and the Complete the Trails Programs, which continue to expand and enhance recreational opportunities for residents and visitors alike. These efforts underscore the critical importance of support at all levels—from federal and state governments to local jurisdictions and the people of North Carolina.

Together, through this collective dedication, the Division can advance a thriving **recreation system for all** to enjoy, protection of cherished resources, and a legacy of outdoor enjoyment for generations to come.




**Bryson City Waterfall Hike**



Stephen Cook

**Highlands, North Carolina**



# STATE OF THE STATE

# OVERVIEW

From rugged mountains to sandy beaches, from rural, agricultural living to university-filled urban cores, North Carolina has something for everyone. Across its 236 year history, the great outdoors has always been a distinguishing factor among its peers. As the State has grown and evolved over time, the needs of North Carolinians and North Carolina's environment has as well. This chapter offers insight into the driving forces that construct the reality that the Division must operate in.



## Why North Carolina?[1]

North Carolina is a prime destination for businesses, individuals, students, professionals, families, and retirees. The state attracts new residents, and maintains generational North Carolinians, due to its combination of economic opportunities, quality of life, and natural beauty. The state boasts a strong economy with thriving industries such as technology, healthcare, agriculture, and finance, particularly in urban areas like Charlotte, Winston-Salem, Raleigh, and Durham. Its relatively low cost of living and affordable housing further enhances its appeal, leading to its ranking as the fourth fastest growing state in the country.[2] The mild climate, diverse landscapes ranging from the Grandfather Mountain to the Outer Banks, and abundant outdoor recreation opportunities make North Carolina a haven for nature enthusiasts and retirees. Families are drawn to the state for its renowned education system, with over 50 colleges and universities and over 50 community colleges. Retirees appreciate the affordability and vibrant communities throughout the state to age in place. These factors, along with its unique blend of Southern hospitality and modern urban living, make North Carolina an attractive landing site for people from all walks of life.

1 "Why North Carolina," Why North Carolina | NC Commerce, n.d., https://www.commerce.nc.gov/business/why-north-carolina.

2 "North Carolina: See What It Means To Be All in NC ." Economic Development Partnership of North Carolinan.d. https://edpnc.com/why-nc/




**Figure 3.1: Top Reasons for Choosing North Carolina**

# Outdoor Recreation – From Mountains to the Sea

North Carolina's 100 counties and over 550 municipalities form a diverse network of recreational opportunities. The state features hundreds of parks, including state parks, local parks, natural areas, national parks, and national forests, offering activities like camping, hiking, enjoying water recreation, and exploring diverse ecosystems.

Popular destinations such as the Blue Ridge Parkway, Jordan Lake, Fort Fisher, and Falls Lake State Natural Area[3], and many more local destinations attract visitors, generating trillions of dollars of economic impact.[4] The state is also a hub for sports, with numerous destination sports complexes hosting regional and national events.

3 "State Parks System Grew in Visitation, Size in 2023," NC State Parks, January 25, 2024, https://www.ncparks.gov/about/news/visitation-systemsize-2023.

4 "Outdoor Recreation Remains a Powerful Economic Driver Across North Carolina and Nationwide, According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis," MADE x MTNS WNC, n.d., https://madexmtns.com/outdoor-recreation-remains-powerful-economic-driver-across-north-carolina-and-nationwide/.

Shaping Outdoor Recreation from Mountains to Sea
2025-2030 NC Outdoor Recreation Plan

Local agencies further enhance recreation with amenities like greenways and trails, play and social gathering spaces in parks, and participation in unique activities like camping, cultural experiences, local events, and enjoying the captivating landscapes.

These offerings not only support health and leisure but also protect natural resources, educate the public, and contribute significantly to the state's economy, solidifying the state as a leader in outdoor recreation.



**Jordan Lake State Recreation Area**

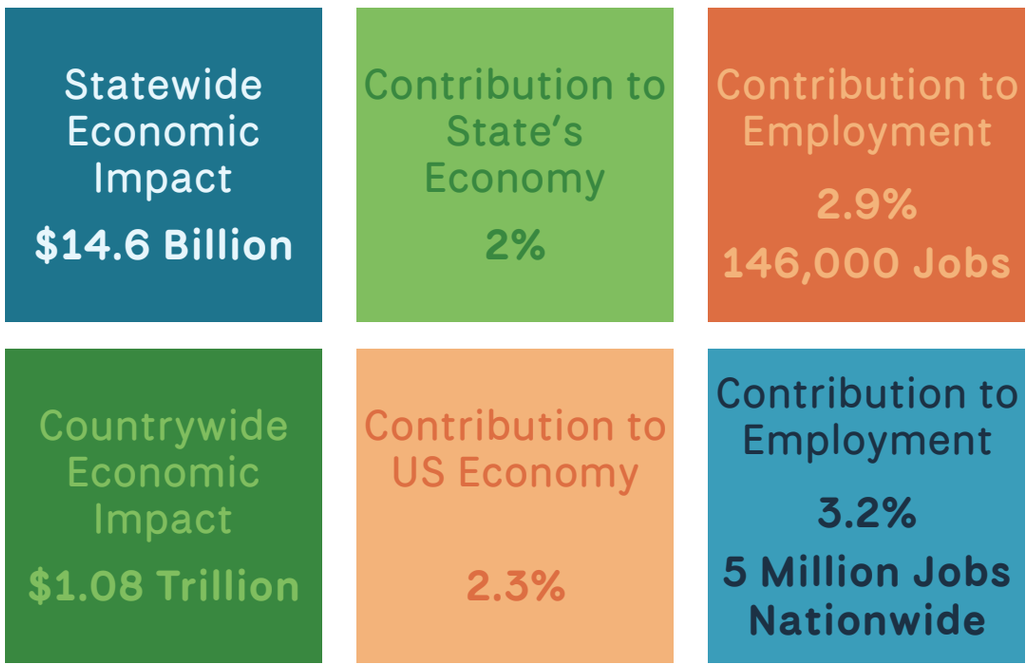



**Figure 3.2: Outdoor Recreation as Economic Driver (Source: MADE x MTNS WNC)**




**Nags Head, North Carolina**

# Outdoor Recreation – Driving Economic Growth

The Outdoor Recreation Roundtable Association (ORRA) tracks and promotes outdoor recreation's economic impact, published by the United States Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA). The 2023 BEA data (available at the time of this planning process) highlights outdoor recreation as a cornerstone of the US economy, generating jobs, supporting small businesses, and providing essential opportunities for Americans to engage with the outdoors for health, connection, and quality of life.[5] This data is updated each year and available through the partnership between Department of Commerce, VisitNC, and MADE X MTNS.

According to BEA, North Carolina ranked 11th in the nation showing the impact of strong and strategic investments in public lands and infrastructure, fostering outdoor-driven communities.[6] The strong partnerships across the State including MADE X MTNS Partnership, Outdoor Business Alliance of Western North Carolina, North Carolina Outdoor Recreation Industry Office, North Carolina Outdoor Recreation Coalition, and many others are critical in ensuring North Carolina's national standing in outdoor recreation.

5 "New Data Shows Outdoor Recreation Is a $1.2 Trillion Economic Engine, Supporting 5 Million American Jobs," Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, November 20, 2024, https://recreationroundtable.org/news/new-data-shows-outdoor-recreation-is-a-1-2-trillion-economic-engine-supporting-5-million-american-jobs/.

6 "Outdoor Recreation Remains a Powerful Economic Driver Across North Carolina and Nationwide, According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis," MADE x MTNS WNC

## Outdoor Recreation is a Solution Tool

1. It is a $1.2 trillion-dollar industry that bolsters the United States economy and creates resiliency and opportunity for local communities, including rural areas going through economic transitions.

2. Outdoor recreation and the outdoor recreation economy are bipartisan issues that we can work together on, regardless of party.

3. Outdoor recreation creates good jobs and builds local businesses.

4. Outdoor recreation improves mental and physical health.

5. Outdoor recreation prioritizes the conservation and sustainable management of healthy public lands and waters.

Source: Ahad Shahld, "5 Ways the Explore Act Improves Outdoor Access," The Wilderness Society, January 7, 2025, https://www.wilderness.org/articles/blog/5-ways-explore-act-improves-outdoor-access.

## EXPLORE Act

On January 4, 2025, the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act (EXPLORE ACT), was signed into law. This act is a package of bills designed to improve access to outdoor spaces, especially for youth, families, people with disabilities, veterans and those living in nature-deprived neighborhoods. It includes the "Outdoors for All" act which codifies the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP) program, funded through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), and provides critical federal grants to create and improve parks in urban and underserved communities. The five key takeaways from this act include:

1. Extension of free park passes to promote "Every Kid Outdoors."

2. The "Outdoors-for-All" Act codified the ORLP Program, especially for communities with historically low investment.

3. Respect for tribal sovereignty and their role in environmental stewardship through the provision of federal conservation funding.

4. Improving outdoor recreation by streamlining permitting for outfitters and organized groups.

5. Focus on accessibility for enhancing the access to outdoor recreational opportunities for veterans, wounded soldiers, and active-duty service members.

Ranked 11th in outdoor recreation's **value-added economic impact**

Ranked 9th in **employment (2.9%)**

Ranked 11th in outdoor recreation's **employee compensation**

**Figure 3.3: 2023 Bureau of Economic Analysis Findings North Carolina Rankings**

## Outdoor Recreation – State Context

North Carolina's distinctive geographic setting, enriched by its vibrant cultural and historical legacies, offers unparalleled opportunities for both residents and visitors to immerse themselves in the state's diverse landscapes—from majestic mountains to serene coastal shores. With most destinations within an easy three-to-five-hour drive, outdoor enthusiasts are perfectly positioned to explore and enjoy nature right in their backyard. Adding to the allure, the region's mild climate supports year-round recreation, from skiing, hiking, and camping to fishing, hunting, kayaking, and canoeing. It's no wonder North Carolina stands out as a premier destination for outdoor adventure and tourism.

This tourism impact not only bolsters the visitation numbers to the State, but also brings employment and income to residents, creating a larger economic impact. Outdoor recreation is a significant contributor to this larger economic driver.

The North Carolina state parks system welcomed more than 20.1 million visitors in 2023 and acquired over 2,890 acres of new land, according to the Division. Visitation at state parks increased by four percent — more than 755,000 — from 2022.[7]

7 "State Parks System Grew in Visitation, Size in 2023," NC State Parks, January 25, 2024, https://www.ncparks.gov/about/news/visitation-systemsize-2023.



**Cliffs of Neuse State Park**

# 2023 NC Tourism Facts[8]

Total spending by domestic & international visitors in North Carolina reached $35.6 billion in 2023. That sum represents a 6.9% increase over 2022 expenditures.

Direct tourism employment in North Carolina increased 4.8% to 227,200.

Direct tourism payroll increased 6.6% to nearly $9.3 billion.

State tax receipts from visitor spending rose 5.6% to $1.3 billion in 2023.

Visitors to North Carolina generated nearly $4.5 billion in federal, state, and local taxes in 2023. The total represents a 5.8% increase from 2022.

Local tax receipts grew 5.4% to $1.2 billion.

North Carolina hosted approximately 43 million visitors in 2023.

Each North Carolina household saved $518 on average in state and local taxes as a direct result of visitor spending in the state. Savings per capita averaged $239.

Visitors spend more than $97 million per day in North Carolina. That spending adds $7.1 million per day to state and local tax revenues (about $3.7 million in state taxes and $3.4 million in local taxes.)

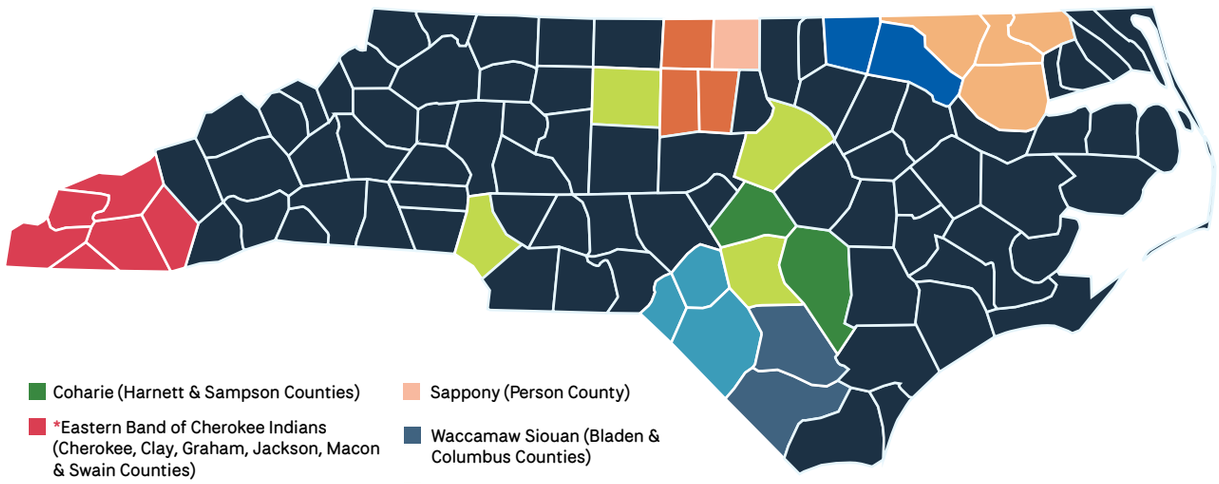
8 "North Carolina Breaks Tourism Spending Record in 2023," North Carolina Breaks Tourism Spending Record in 2023 | NC Commerce, August 13, 2024, https://www.commerce.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2024/08/13/north-carolina-breaks-tourism-spending-record-2023#:~:text=Total%20spending%20by%20domestic%20and,percent%20to%20nearly%20%249.3%20billion.

# Outdoor Recreation – Rooted in History

The state has a rich historical background that includes its early Indigenous cultures, European colonization, Revolutionary War involvement, participation in the Civil War, and impact on the Civil Rights Movement. Agriculture, particularly tobacco and cotton, and later the industrialization of textile and furniture industries, helped shape the development of the state. North Carolina is also notable for the Wright brothers' first successful powered flight in Kitty Hawk, and its diverse cultural heritage shaped by Indigenous, Black, and European influences.

## Indigenous Heritage & Early Inhabitants

Before European settlement, the State was the ancestral homeland of many Native American tribes who have lived, traveled, and cared for these lands for thousands of years. Although numerous tribes inhabited the region before European settlement, in modern day North Carolina is home to eight tribes and four Urban Indian Organizations: Coharie, Eastern Band of Cherokee, Haliwa-Saponi, Lumbee, Meherrin, Occaneechi Band of the Saponi, Sappony, Waccamaw Siouan, Cumberland County Association for Indian People, Guilford Native American Association, Triangle Native American Society, and the Metrolina Native American Association. The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians is a federally recognized tribe located in the westernmost portion of North Carolina. These tribes continue to have a significant presence across the state, contributing to North Carolina's cultural diversity, preserving unique traditions, and playing an active role in the stewardship of natural resources.



- Coharie (Harnett & Sampson Counties)
- *Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Jackson, Macon & Swain Counties)
- Haliwa-Saponi (Halifax & Warren Counties)
- Lumbee (Hoke, Robeson & Scotland Counties)
- Meherrin (Hertford, Northampton, Gates & Bertie Counties)
- Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation (Alamance, Caswell & Orange Counties)
- Sappony (Person County)
- Waccamaw Siouan (Bladen & Columbus Counties)
- Urban Indian Organizations (Holding members on the NC Commission of Indian Affairs): Cumberland County Association for Indian People, Guilford Native American Association, Metrolina Native American Association, Triangle native American Society

*Federally Recognized

**Figure 3.4: NC Commission of Indian Affairs - NC Tribal and Urban Communities**

## Early European Settlement & the Colonial Era

The first European settlement in what is now North Carolina was the Roanoke Colony, established by English explorers in 1585. Sponsored by Sir Walter Raleigh, the colony was located on Roanoke Island, near present-day Manteo. Known as the "Lost Colony," the settlement was intended to be a permanent English presence in the New World, but it famously disappeared by 1590, leaving little trace except for the cryptic word "CROATOAN" carved into a tree.[9] This mysterious disappearance remains one of the most enduring historical puzzles in American history. Subsequent successful settlement began in the late 1600s, when European settlers, largely from Virginia, moved southward into the Albemarle region, forming the foundation for the Carolina colony, which eventually split into North and South Carolina.[10]

## Revolutionary War & Independence

North Carolina played a significant role in the Revolutionary War, being one of the original Thirteen Colonies. The state is notable for events such as the 1775 Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, which asserted early calls for separation from British rule, and the 1781 Battle of Guilford Courthouse, which weakened British forces despite their tactical victory.[11] North Carolina formally joined the new United States in 1789, solidifying its commitment to the formation of the nation. This period marked the beginning of the state's political and social transformation from a British colony to a part of an independent republic. This period (also known as the Antebellum Era) also saw the growth of agriculture, particularly through plantations cultivating tobacco and cotton, as well as the increasing impact of slavery on the state's economy and society.

9 Hogeback, J. "The Lost Colony of Roanoke." Encyclopedia Britannica, August 12, 2016. https://www.britannica.com/story/the-lost-colony-of-roanoke.

10 Kelly, Martin. 2020. "The Founding of North Carolina Colony and Its Role in the Revolution." ThoughtCo. October 30, 2020. https://www.thoughtco.com/north-carolina-colony-103877.

11 Kelly, Martin. 2020. "The Founding of North Carolina Colony and Its Role in the Revolution." ThoughtCo. October 30, 2020. https://www.thoughtco.com/north-carolina-colony-103877.

## Civil War & Reconstruction

During the Civil War, North Carolina joined the Confederacy in 1861 and provided significant manpower, contributing more troops than any other Southern state.[12] The state experienced internal division, with a strong Unionist sentiment in the western mountains, and suffered considerable hardship as battles such as the fall of Fort Fisher in 1865 cut off supplies.[13] After the war, North Carolina faced the challenges of Reconstruction, marked by efforts to rebuild its economy and integrate formerly enslaved people into society.

## Industrialization & Economic Growth

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the State transitioned from an agricultural to an industrial economy. Textiles, tobacco, and furniture manufacturing became the dominant industries, leading to urban growth, especially in the Piedmont region. This period also includes the rise of railroads, which helped connect rural areas to markets and contributed to economic expansion.

## The Civil Rights Movement

During the Civil Rights Movement, North Carolina played a pivotal role in challenging racial segregation and inequality. In 1960, the Greensboro sit-ins, led by four Black college students, sparked a wave of nonviolent protests across the country and became a symbol of the fight for desegregation. [14]The State also saw significant activism through organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which was founded at Shaw University in Raleigh.[15] These efforts contributed to the eventual desegregation of public spaces and schools, making the State an important contributor to the national Civil Rights Movement.

12 Barrett, John G. The Civil War in North Carolina. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963.

13 Inscoe, John C., and Gordon B. McKinney. The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina in the Civil War. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

14 Chafe, William H. Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.

15 Tyson, Timothy B. Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.




**Jackson, NC**

## Statewide Growth & Economic Diversification

From the late 20th century to the present, North Carolina has experienced significant economic diversification. This period includes the rise of banking in Charlotte, the growth of Research Triangle Park as a technology and research hub, and the expansion of higher education institutions. The modern era also involves demographic changes, suburban growth, and shifts in industry.

# Outdoor Recreation – It Is Built into Our Geography!

The State's diverse landscape extends approximately 500 miles from east to west. It is bordered by Virginia to the north, South Carolina and Georgia to the south, and Tennessee to the west – with the Atlantic Ocean forming its eastern boundary. The state is divided into three primary geographic regions: the Coastal Plain, the Piedmont, and the Mountains. The Coastal Plain in the east is characterized by flat, low-lying terrain and includes extensive wetland areas. The Piedmont, located centrally, is rolling hills and forms a transitional zone between the coastal and mountainous regions. To the west, the Appalachian Mountain range features steep slopes and ridges, contributing to the state's varied topography.

## Coastal Plain – A Confluence of Nature, Culture & History[16]

Over the past 50 years, North Carolina's Coastal Plain has shifted from a rural, agriculture-based area to a region of urban centers and coastal development. Cities like Wilmington, Greenville, and Jacksonville have grown due to improved infrastructure and economic opportunities. Wilmington's port has spurred growth in trade, manufacturing, and logistics. Tourism, retirement living, and military installations like Camp Lejeune have further boosted the region's economy. Expanding healthcare services now cater to its growing population, including retirees drawn to the area's seaside appeal.

Particularly interesting tourist destinations along the coast are maritime museums, aquariums, and historic sites. State Parks' presence along the coast includes Carolina Beach, Fort Macon, Hammocks Beach, Jockey's Ridge, and Fort Fisher State Recreation Area. Local and state parks offer immersion into the natural environment and recreation activities like swimming, hiking, fishing, and boating.

## Piedmont – Growth, Opportunity & Innovation

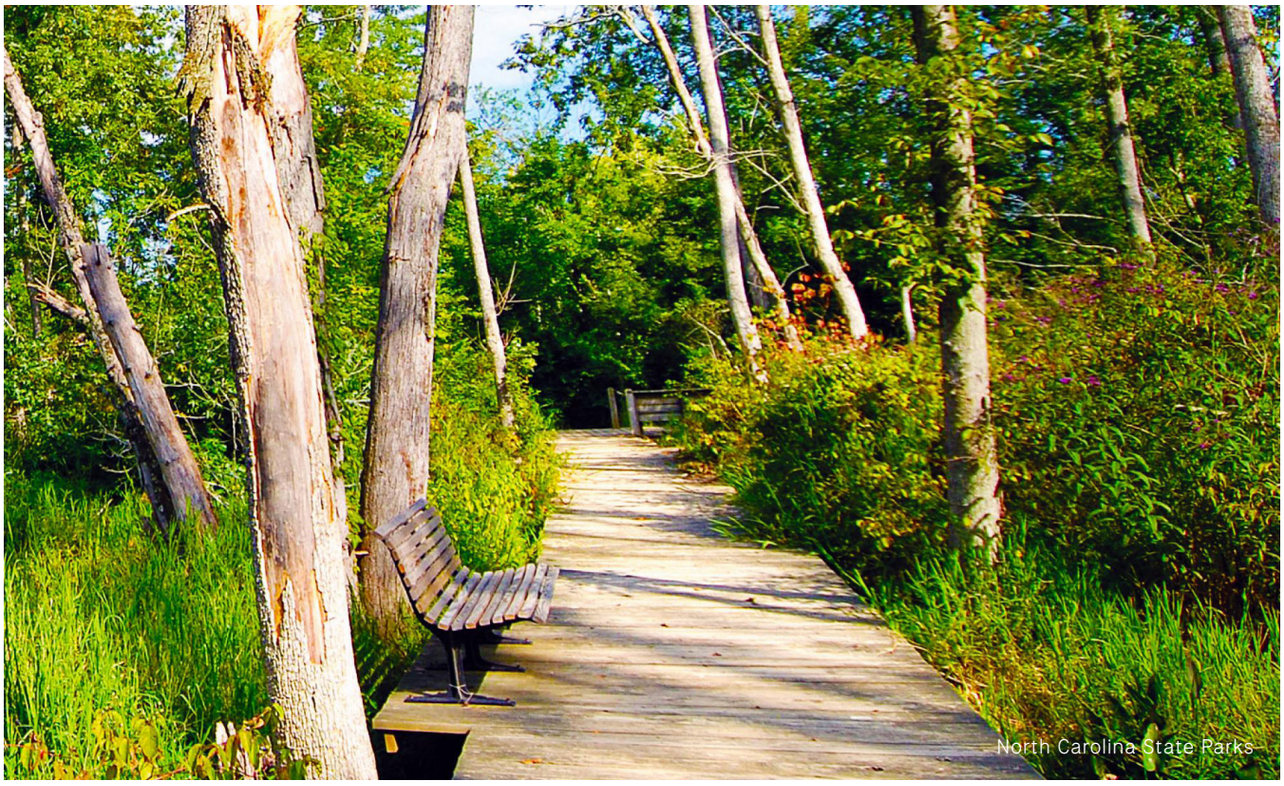
North Carolina's Piedmont region, home to the State's five largest cities (Charlotte, Raleigh, Greensboro, Durham, and Winston - Salem), has become its most populous and economically dynamic area. Once reliant on tobacco, textiles, and furniture manufacturing, the region now thrives on industries like finance, technology, pharmaceuticals, and research. Charlotte has emerged as a financial hub, while Raleigh and the Research Triangle Park drive innovation with major companies like IBM, Cisco, and soon to be a home to an Apple campus. Major universities like University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Duke University, and North Carolina State University support this growth. The region's appeal, fueled by quality of life, suburban expansion, and improved infrastructure, attracts young professionals, families, and retirees seeking urban amenities and outdoor recreation.

Visitors to state parks, nature preserves, and lakeside recreation areas can discover outdoor adventures and explore diverse activities across the Piedmont region. The Piedmont is home to numerous state parks including: Haw River, Eno River, and Mayo River, Falls Lake, Lake Norman, and Jordan Lake Recreation Areas, Occoneechee Mountain Natural Area, William B. Umstead, Carvers Creek, Weymouth Woods - Sandhills Nature Preserve, Morrow Mountain, and Crowders Mountain. Local and state parks offer some of the best and unique outdoor recreation opportunities for various interest groups. From nature lovers, hikers, bikers, swimmers, and adventure seekers to history lovers, there is an activity for everyone to enjoy at these locations as well as enjoy the breathtaking natural landscapes and Piedmont flora and fauna.

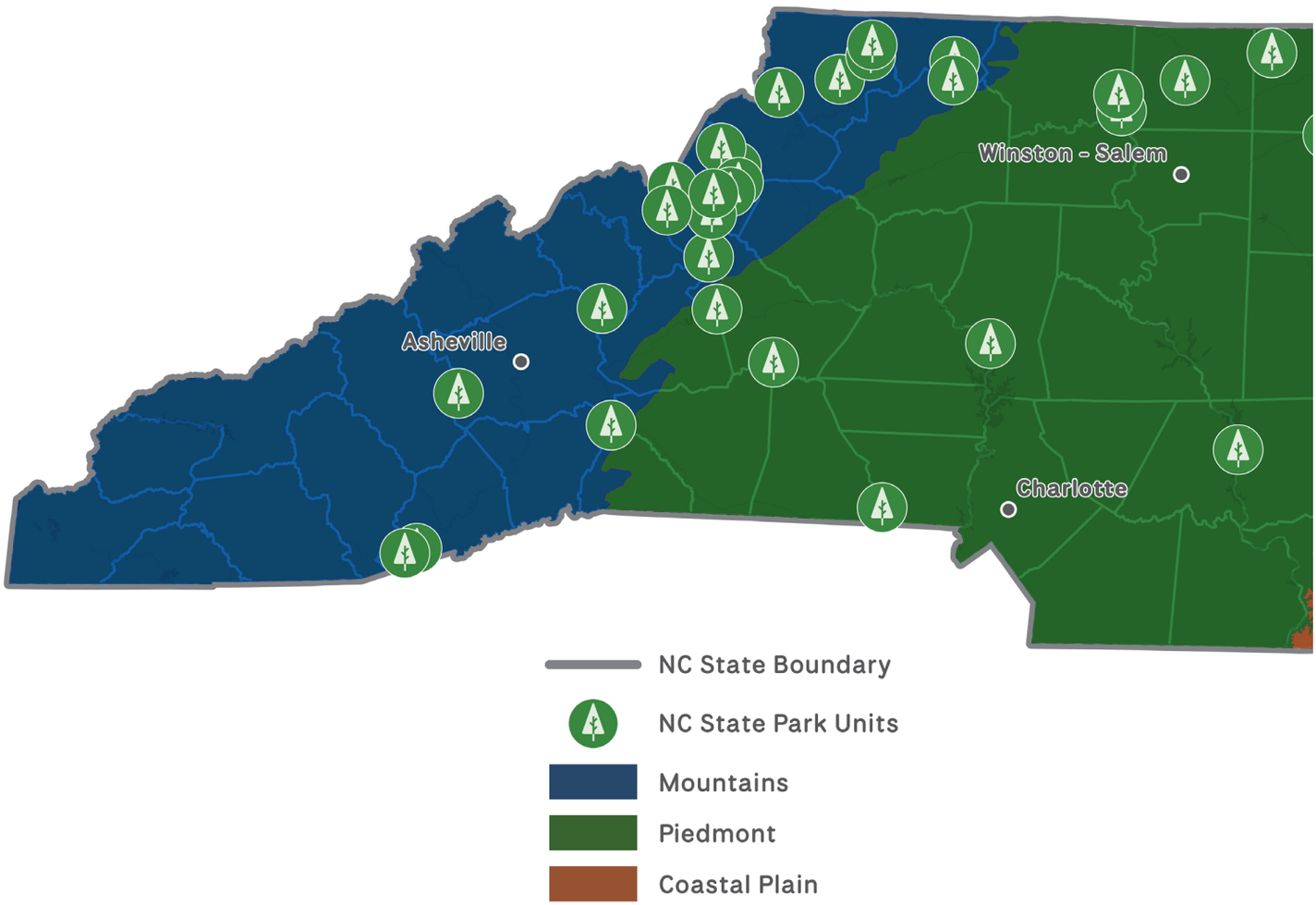
16 "North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources," Nature & Culture at the Carolina Coast | NC DNCR, n.d., https://www.dncr.nc.gov/explore/trip-ideas/discover-summer-across-north-carolina/nature-and-culture-coast#:~:text=Whether%20it's%20the%20Venus%20flytrap,natural%20environment%20and%20offer%20an.



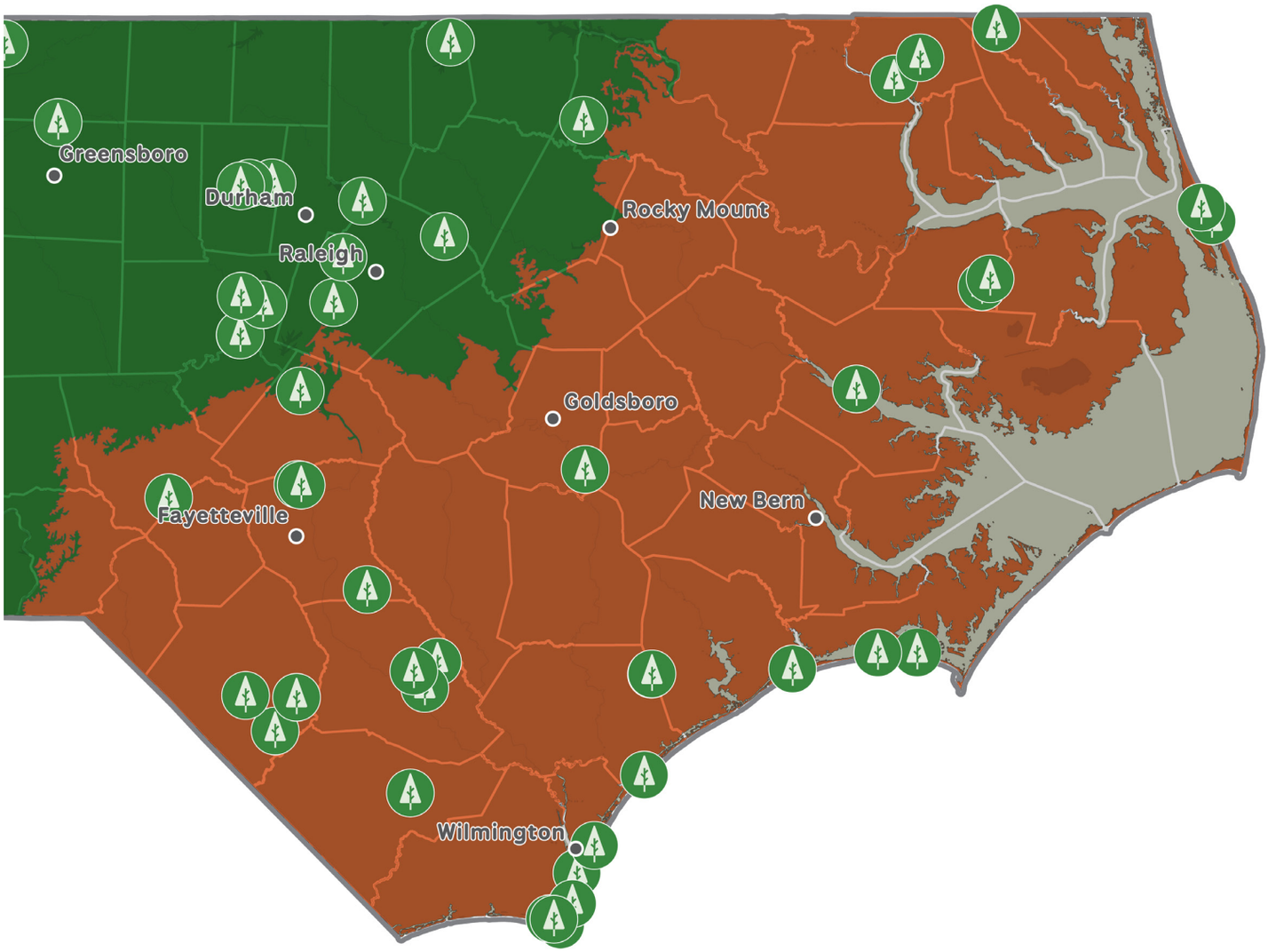

**Coastal Plain Region - Goose Creek State Park**




**Piedmont Region - Haw River State Park**




**Map 3.1: Map of 3 Regions of North Carolina**


Greensboro
Durham
Raleigh
Rocky Mount
Goldsboro
Fayetteville
New Bern
Wilmington

## Mountains – Peaks of Adventure, Beauty & Hospitality

North Carolina's Mountain region, part of the Appalachian range, has transformed from a rural area into a vibrant mix of growing communities. Once reliant on agriculture and logging, the region now thrives on tourism, fueled by its scenic beauty, outdoor recreation, and dynamic towns like Asheville and Boone. Asheville, the largest city, shines as a cultural and economic hub, drawing artists, young professionals, and retirees with its arts scene, breweries, and mild climate. Tourism has spurred real estate growth, a booming service industry, and expanded infrastructure, while sustainable practices protect the region's natural charm. Balancing growth with preservation, the Mountain region continues to attract residents and visitors seeking breathtaking landscapes, vibrant communities, and a slower pace of life.

The State's mountains are home to two State historic sites – the Thomas Wolfe Memorial in Asheville and the Zebulon B. Vance Birthplace in Weaverville. Additionally, several state parks throughout the region offer incredible views and vistas and a range of outdoor adventure activities from skiing to camping. The history of this region dates back to the prehistoric era, with Grandfather Mountain being one of the oldest mountains on Earth![17]

The only federally recognized tribe in North Carolina, the Easternband of Cherokee Indians, makes their home on the 56,000-acre Qualla Boundary, adjacent to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.[18]

# Outdoor Recreation – "Naturally Wonderful"[19]

North Carolina's natural resources span its three geographic regions. The Coastal Plain features wetlands, estuaries, and barrier islands with fertile soils for agriculture, abundant fisheries, and forests, as well as habitats for migratory birds, sea turtles, and marine species. The Piedmont region's rolling hills and rivers provide mineral deposits like granite, clay, and sand, fertile soils for crops like tobacco and soybeans, mixed hardwood and pine forests for timber, and water resources for agriculture, industry, and urban areas. The Mountain region, with the Blue Ridge and Appalachian Mountains, boasts forests, rare minerals, and wildlife. Across all regions, these resources support agriculture, forestry, tourism, outdoor recreation, and wildlife habitats, while maintaining environmental health.

## Rivers

There are 17 designated river basins. The five western basins drain to the Gulf of Mexico while the other 12 basins flow to the Atlantic Ocean as designated by the Division of Water Resources. North Carolina has approximately 37,853 miles of river, of which 144.5 miles are nationally designated as a part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.[20] The Division is tasked with administering and managing the state's five National Wild and Scenic Rivers: the Chattooga River (partially located in NC), the Horsepasture River, the Lumber River, the New River, and Wilson Creek. The National Wild and Scenic Rivers System was created by Congress in 1968 to preserve certain rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values in a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations. By presiding over the rivers, the Division is further embodying its mission of conservation, ensuring that North Carolina's rivers, ecosystems, and surrounding natural resources are protected and conserved for generations to come.

## Wetlands

Wetlands are vital ecosystems that maintain environmental balance in North Carolina. They filter water, trap pollutants, support unique wildlife, and act as natural flood buffers, protecting communities from storm surges and excess rainfall. As urban development grows, preserving wetlands is essential for biodiversity, water quality, and climate resilience, ensuring their benefits for future generations.

More than 70% of endangered species, threatened species, or species of special concerns depend on wetlands for survival.[21] Wetlands are economic drivers for seafood production, timber harvesting, and traditional activities such as fishing and hunting. Wetland refuges and public recreation areas with significant wetlands contribute to tourism offering opportunities such as birdwatching, canoeing and photography. For more information visit the **Appendix C**.

17 Marjorie Farrington, "10 Fun Facts That Make Western NC Mountains Special," WNC TIMES, January 22, 2024, https://wnctimes.com/travel/8287-10-fun-facts-that-make-western-nc-mountains-special.

18 "North Carolina Department of Administration," NC DOA, n.d., https://www.doa.nc.gov/divisions/american-indian-affairs/tribes#.

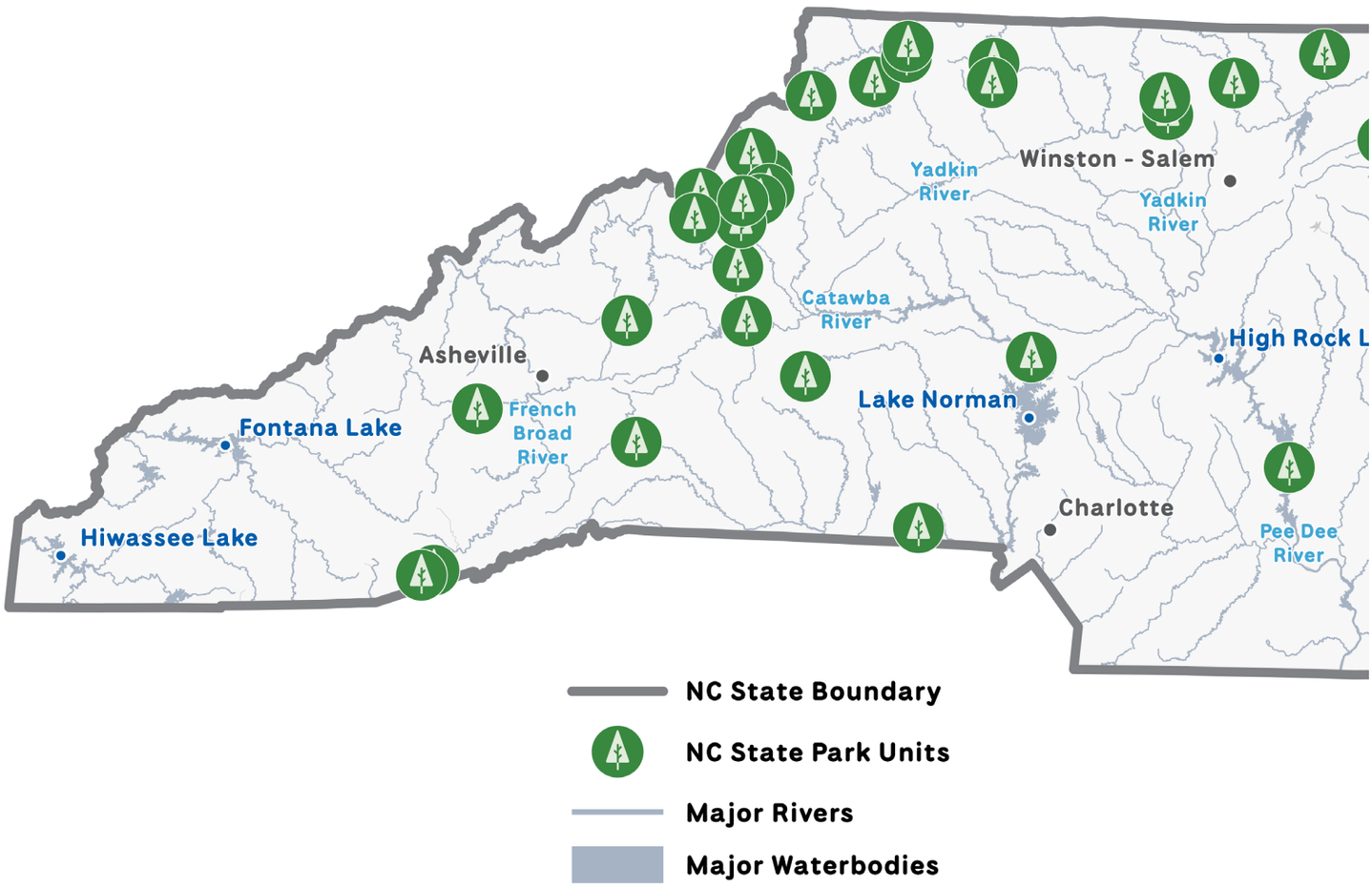
19 "Use the Park Catalog," North Carolina State Parks, n.d., https://www.ncparks.gov/.

20 "The National Wild & Scenic Rivers System," National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, n.d., https://www.rivers.gov/about.

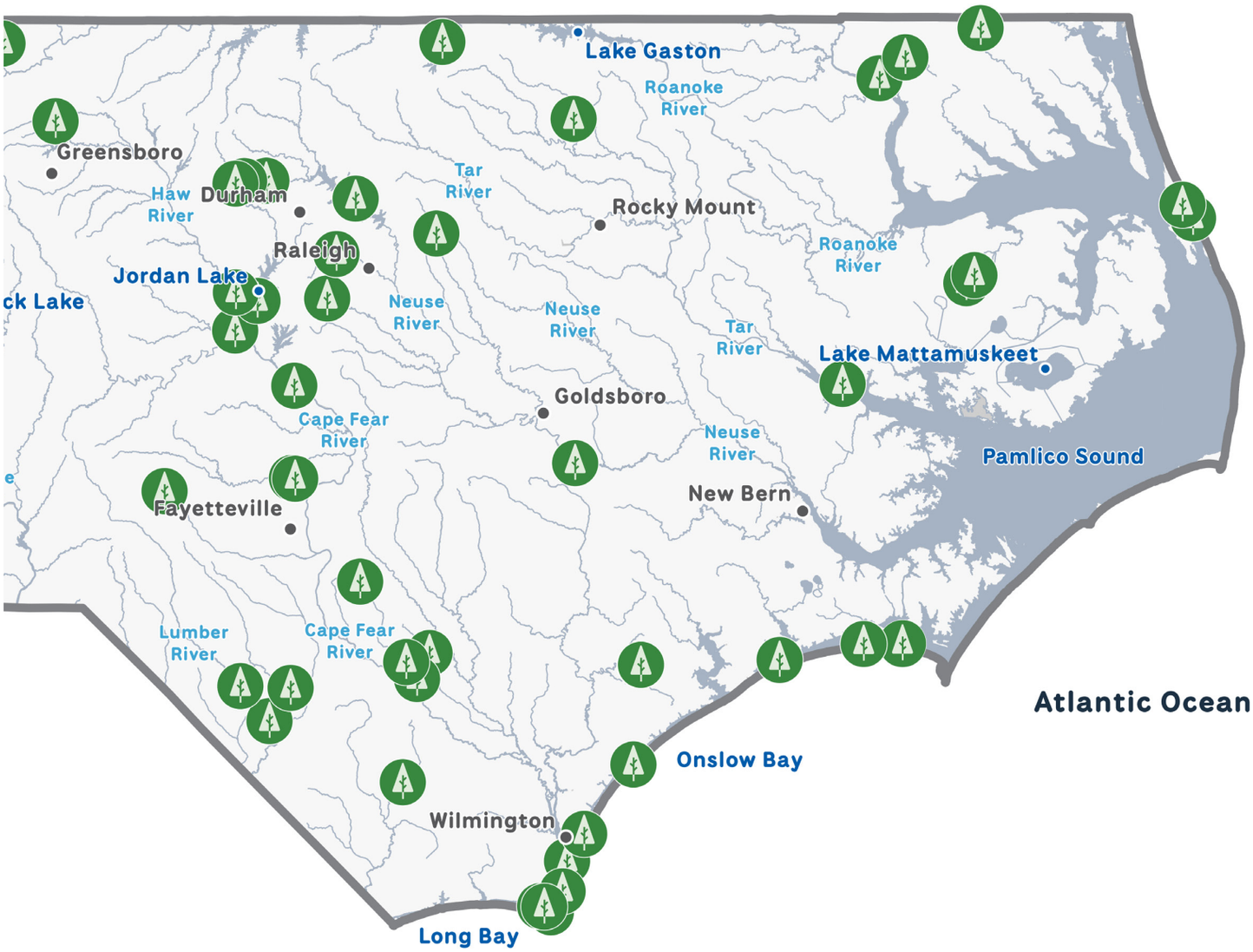
21 "World Wetlands Day: Everything You Need to Know About NC Wetlands," North Carolina Wildlife Federation, February 1, 2023, https://ncwf.org/blog/wetlands/.

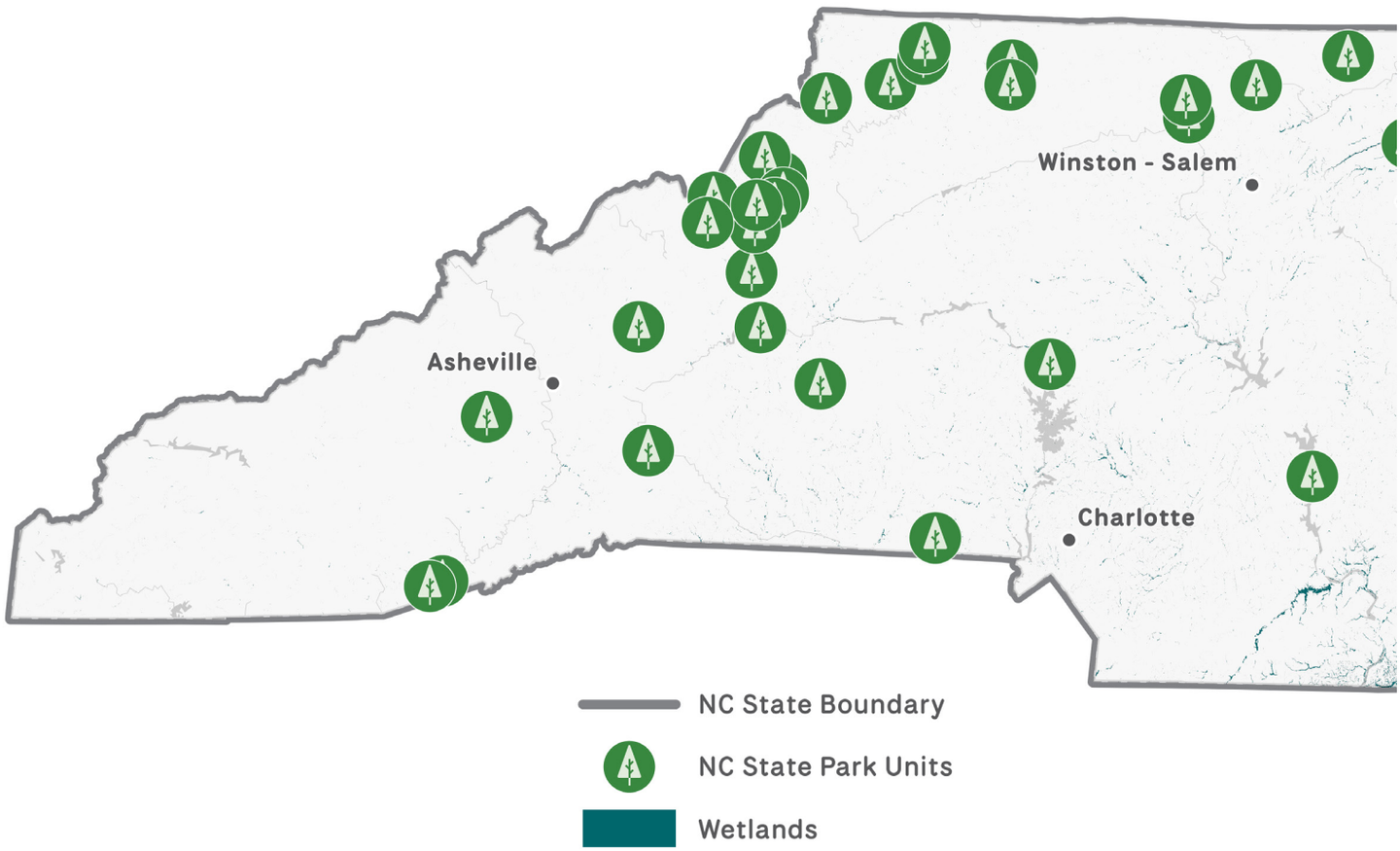



**Mountain Region - South Mountains State Park**

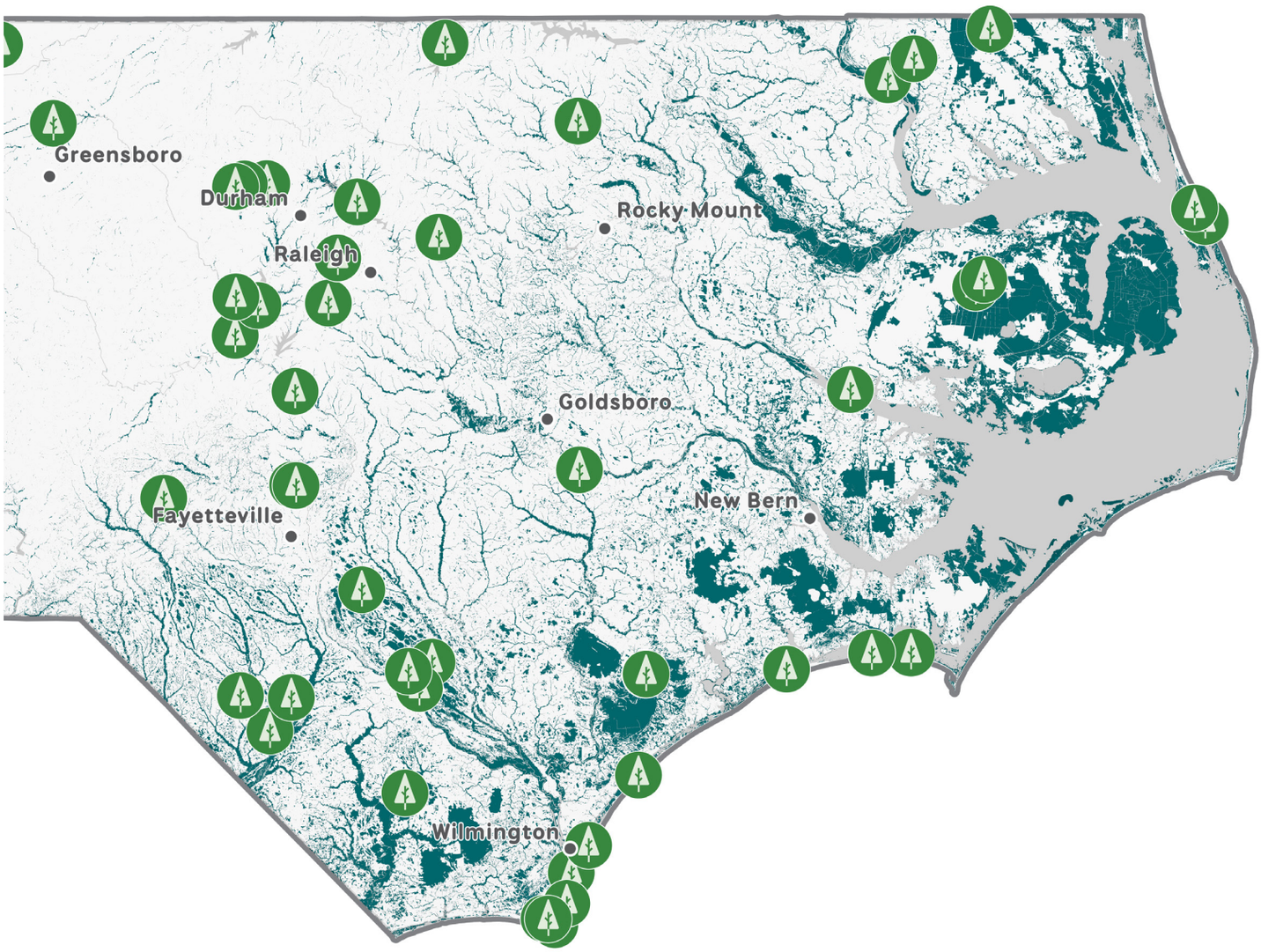



Map 3.2: Map of Rivers and State Parks


Lake Gaston
Roanoke River
Greensboro
Haw River
Durham
Tar River
Rocky Mount
Raleigh
Roanoke River
Jordan Lake
ck Lake
Neuse River
Neuse River
Tar River
Lake Mattamuskeet
Goldsboro
Cape Fear River
Neuse River
Pamlico Sound
Fayetteville
New Bern
Lumber River
Cape Fear River
Atlantic Ocean
Onslow Bay
Wilmington
Long Bay




Map 3.3: Map of Wetlands and State Parks


Greensboro
Durham
Raleigh
Rocky Mount
Goldsboro
Fayetteville
New Bern
Wilmington

## Forests

More than 60% of North Carolina is forested with many kinds of woodlands and forests, ranging from rare high-elevation spruce-fir forests to coastal maritime forests. North Carolina's forest lands currently pull 37.8 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent each year from the atmosphere, offsetting 25% of greenhouse gas emissions compared to 11% emissions offset by forest lands nationwide.[22]

North Carolina is home to four national forests and nine state forests, seven of which are designated as education state forests.[23] The national forests draw visitors for their natural beauty and unique recreational opportunities. The North Carolina Forest Service manages the state forests for education, research, habitat, recreation, and forest products.

## Agriculture

Agriculture supports a significant portion of the state's economy and land use. 46,000 farms grow over 80 different commodities. Agriculture is the second largest land use category, covering 6.9 million acres, or 20%, of the state's land and open water area.[24]

There is limited research available to showcase the impact of agriculture or agritourism on outdoor recreation across the State. While a majority of the State is still rural, agritourism is becoming a popular concept for growing urban areas focusing on education, recreation, and access to fresh produce. More research is needed to identify the economic benefits of agritourism in rural and urban areas and best practices for successful implementation.

# Outdoor Recreation – Responsible Growth & Conservation

North Carolina's rapid growth is projected to make it the 7th most populated state by the early 2030s.[25] This puts immense pressure on the natural resources, which are not only essential for environmental benefits but also access to outdoor recreation. Some of the biggest impacts of growth are highlighted below:

The 2018 Farm Bill, valued at $867 billion, significantly impacts outdoor recreation by enhancing land and water conservation efforts and promoting economic growth in rural areas. It maintains key programs like the Conservation Stewardship Program, which incentivizes farmers to rehabilitate their lands, and increases funding for the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program, encouraging landowners to allow public recreational activities such as hunting and fishing on private lands. Additionally, the bill introduces provisions for rural development projects that can now include investments in outdoor recreation infrastructure, supporting the growth of the outdoor recreation economy and benefiting gateway communities to public lands.

## Land Development & Natural Resources Loss

The expansion of urban and suburban areas has led to substantial farmland loss. Projections indicate that up to 1.8 million acres of farmland could be converted for development in coming decades, endangering the state's agricultural economy, forested lands, and already vulnerable habitats.

## Water Quality

Land development, damming of rivers and streams, alterations to wetlands, and nutrient loads from agricultural activities are degrading water quality. Poorly drained soils contribute significant pollutants to rivers, lakes, and coastal waters, threatening local habitats; drinking water sources; and impacting the complex coastal and estuarine systems.

## Natural Disasters

Rising sea levels and worsening coastal flooding, exacerbated by population growth in vulnerable areas, pose significant risks to both infrastructure and natural habitats. Degraded natural areas and disturbed hydrology in the mountains contribute to wildfires and landslides, impacting the communities.

22 "Forestry," NHP, n.d., https://www.ncnhp.org/activities/natural-and-working-lands/forestry.

23 Amy Ney, "North Carolina's Parks and Forests," Carolina Country, n.d., https://www.carolinacountry.com/carolina-stories/carolina-places/north-carolina-s-treasure-trove-of-natural-resources.

24 "Agriculture," NHP, n.d., https://www.ncnhp.org/activities/natural-and-working-lands/agriculture.

25 "NC to Become 7th Most Populated State in Early 2030s," NC to Become 7th Most Populated State in Early 2030s | NC OSBM, n.d., https://www.osbm.nc.gov/blog/2024/01/23/nc-become-7th-most-populated-state-early-2030s.

## Loss of Natural Heritage

Urban sprawl endangers wildlife habitats, trails, and historic landmarks, diminishing the unique cultural and environmental identity that defines North Carolina.

Across North Carolina, 2,429 natural heritage areas spanning 3,139,487 acres have been identified by North Carolina's Natural Heritage Program as priorities for conservation. Among counties, there is a wide range of the level of formal conservation of natural heritage areas. At the upper end of the range, Swain County has 99%, Haywood has 96%, and Clay has 95% of NHP natural area acreage protected. At the other end of the range, Lenoir and Perquimans have 0 natural areas protected with formal conservation agreements. Person and Wilson Counties have less than 1% of their NCNHP natural areas protected. Fifty counties have more than 50% of identified natural area acreage protected and 19 counties have more than 75% of natural area acreage protected.[26]

## Pressure on Rivers, Wetlands & Beaches

Iconic rivers, wetlands, and beaches are increasingly at risk, with development threatening recreational spaces and the ecological health of these vital areas.

Balancing development with proactive conservation efforts is essential to ensure natural resources remain a foundation for its communities and future growth.

# Outdoor Recreation – Climate Impact Over Time

North Carolina's climate exhibits substantial regional variation due to its diverse geographic elements.[27] In the Coastal Plain, summers are long and hot, while winters remain relatively mild with infrequent snowfall. The Piedmont region also experiences hot summers, but winters are cooler with occasional snowfall. The western Mountains, influenced by elevation, have cooler temperatures throughout the year, with winter snowfall being more common and sometimes significant at higher altitudes.

26 "Natural Heritage Program 2025 Biennial Report," North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, n.d., https://www.ncleg.gov/Files/Library/agency/dnr17691.pdf.

27 Rebekah Frankson and Kenneth E Kunkel, "NCICS," North Carolina, n.d., https://statesummaries.ncics.org/downloads/NorthCarolina-StateClimateSummary2022.pdf.

Precipitation is well-distributed across the state throughout the year, averaging 40-55 inches annually, depending on the region. The state's coastal areas are prone to hurricanes and tropical storms, which bring heavy rainfall and storm surges during the late summer and early fall. In contrast, the mountainous regions are more likely to experience snow and freezing rain during winter months.

Executive Order 80 (EO80),[28] "North Carolina's Commitment to Address Climate Change and Transition to a Clean Energy Economy," brought together many State experts and organizations to create data-driven strategies and recommendations in response to trends in climate change. The North Carolina Climate Science

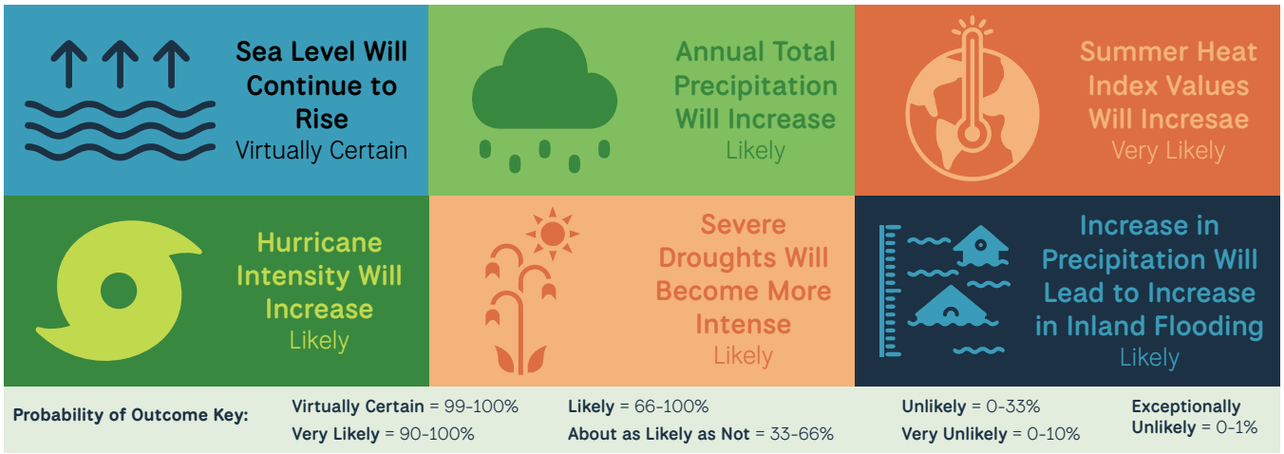
28 "North Carolina Office of the Governor," NC Governor, n.d., https://governor.nc.gov/documents/executive-order-no-80-north-carolinas-commitment-address-climate-change-and-transition.

Elevations range from sea level along the Atlantic coast to more than 6,000 feet in the western mountains (the largest elevation range of any state east of the Mississippi River).

### Impact of Climate Change on Outdoor Activities

Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) have developed a novel way to quantify the direct impact of climate change by introducing the concept of "outdoor days"—the number of days per year when the temperature is suitable for enjoying outdoor activities like walking, gardening, or dining outside. By analyzing different climatic regions nationwide, they found that some areas, such as Florida and parts of the Southeast, are likely to experience a significant decrease in outdoor days, while regions like the Northwest might see a slight increase. The study also explored how shifts in outdoor days could correlate with economic activities, such as tourism, and lead to substantial social and economic consequences, highlighting the tangible effects of global warming on everyday life.

Source:https://news.mit.edu/2024/how-climate-change-will-impact-outdoor-activities-1022




**Projected Climate Changes & Impacts (Source: North Carolina Climate Science Report)**

Report (NCCSR)[29] and 2020 Climate Risk Assessment and Resilience Plan[30] provide the framework to guide state action, engage policymakers and stakeholders, facilitate collaboration, and focus the state's attention on climate resilience actions and underlying stressors, including aging infrastructure, socioeconomic disparities, and competing development priorities.[31] The key details, trends, and policies are highlighted in **Chapter 7.7, Resiliency Assessment**.

Outdoor Industry Association acknowledges that the $887 billion outdoor recreation industry nationwide is uniquely threatened by climate change.[32] At the State level, we are seeing impacts on outdoor recreation through major natural disasters including heavy storm events, flooding, and heat waves in urban areas, all resulting in reduced timeframe to be outdoors. The impacts of climate change and localized natural hazards negatively impact public health exacerbating heat-related illness, asthma, respiratory illness, cardiovascular illness, impaired mental health, and other conditions.[33] Finally, climate change is a major contributor to habitat loss and adverse effects to biodiversity abundantly available in the State.[34]

## Executive Order 305: Protect & Restore North Carolina's Critical Natural & Working Lands

On February 13, 2024, Governor Roy Cooper signed Executive Order 305 (EO 305), "An Order to Protect and Restore North Carolina's Critical Natural and Working Lands." This landmark executive order sets 8 bold goals, policies, and directives to protect and restore Natural & Working Lands statewide, with emphasis on wetlands and forests. Executive Order 305 defines restoration as "the return of an ecosystem to a close approximation of its condition and function prior to disturbance."

> "Preserving more natural and working lands will enhance quality of life, increase recreation opportunities, and protect air and water quality. From promoting native plants to creating more parks, this landmark EO will benefit North Carolinians today and long into the future."
>
> - Reid Wilson, North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources Secretary (2021-2024)

29 "North Carolina Climate Science Report," NCICS, n.d., https://ncics.org/programs/nccsr/.

30 Climate Risk Assessment and Resilience Plan, June 2020, https://files.nc.gov/ncdeq/climate-change/resilience-plan/2020-Climate-Risk-Assessment-and-Resilience-Plan.pdf.

31 "North Carolina Climate Science Report," NCICS, n.d., https://ncics.org/programs/nccsr/.

32 "The Outdoor Business Climate Partnership Presents: Climate Advocacy in 2021," Outdoor Industry Association, n.d., https://outdoorindustry.org/advocacy/climate.

33 "Epidemiology: Occupational and Environmental," NCDHHS, n.d., https://epi.dph.ncdhhs.gov/oee/programs/climate.html.

34 North Carolina Habitat and Wildlife: Make the State Unique, n.d., https://ncwf.org/wp-content/uploads/NCWF-Conservation-Impact-Plan.pdf.

# North Carolina's Parks System – Administration & Mission

The NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (DNCR) manages, promotes, and enhances its diverse arts and culture, rich history, and spectacular natural areas. Through its programs, the department enhances education, stimulates economic development, improves public health, expands accessibility, and strengthens community resiliency . Under the umbrella of DNCR, the Division of Parks and Recreation (Division):

- Administers a diverse system of state parks, natural areas, trails, lake, natural and scenic rivers, and recreation areas.
- Supports and assists other recreation providers by administering grant programs for park and trail projects.
- Offers technical assistance for park and trail planning and development.
- Administers the North Carolina Trails System, North Carolina Natural and Scenic Rivers, and the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund.

The Division's mission focusing on recreation, conservation, and education is carried out by conserving and protecting representative examples of the State's natural beauty, ecological features, and recreational and cultural resources within the state parks system; providing and promoting safe, healthy, and enjoyable outdoor recreation opportunities throughout the state; and providing educational opportunities that promote stewardship of the state's natural and cultural heritage.

## Conservation

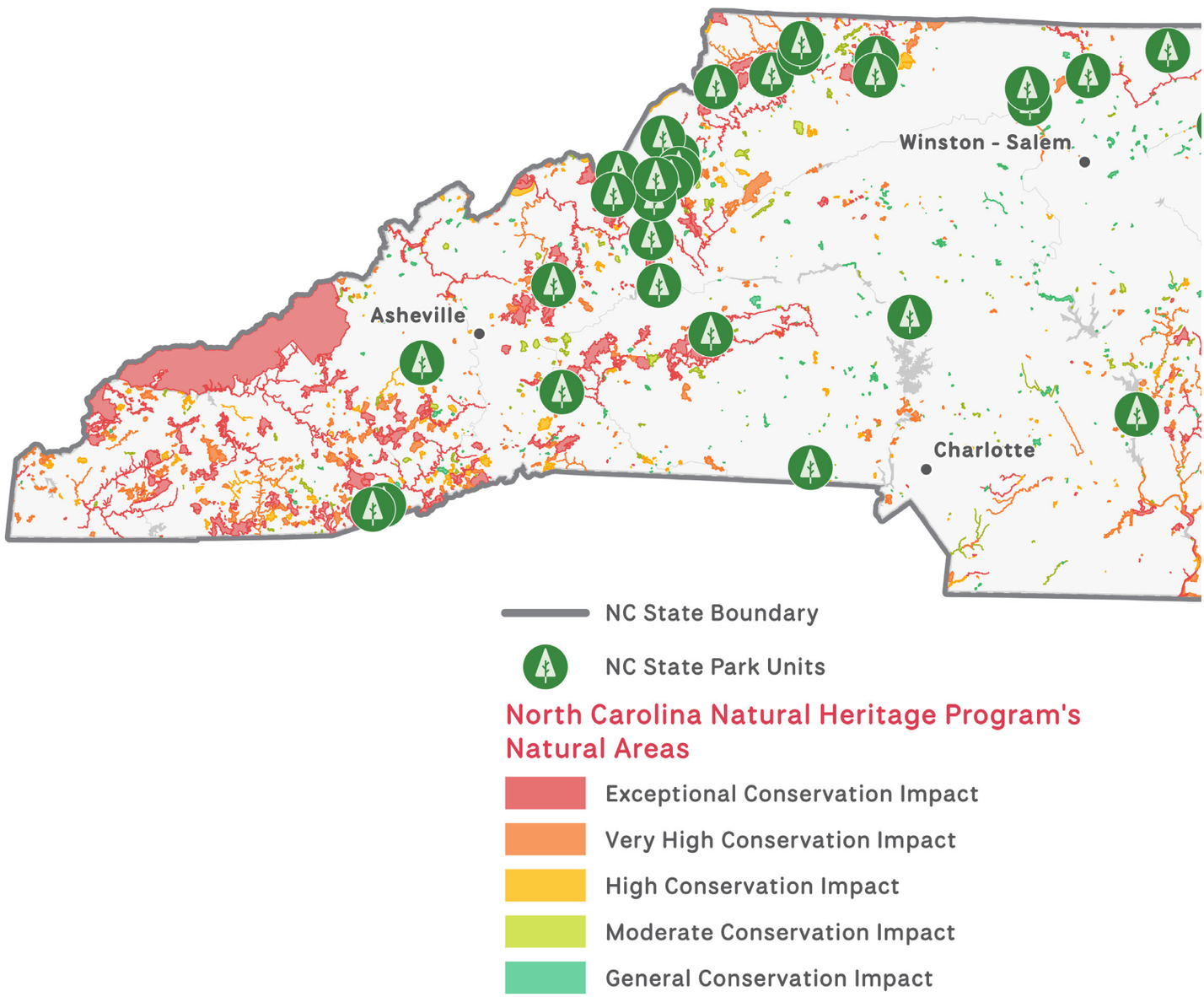
The Division emphasizes the protection of natural landscapes and cultural heritage, viewing this responsibility as essential to all aspects of park operations. The Division ensures that ecosystems remain intact and resilient while preserving historically significant features. Through policies guided by the North Carolina legislature, the parks system strives to protect the State's threatened environments and cultural sites, balancing conservation with the demands of public use.

Conservation efforts within the parks focus on maintaining ecological integrity while supporting sustainable recreation. This includes practical strategies like prescribed burns, wildlife monitoring, and restoration of natural water flows. The Division faces the ongoing challenge of integrating human activities into these protected areas without compromising environmental health. As visitor numbers increase, the planning and management of trails, facilities, and recreational programs require continuous adaptation to reduce impact while providing meaningful experiences. Furthermore, with global temperatures rising over the past several decades, the role of natural green spaces has been critical in mitigating the climate impacts. The Division recognizes that the conservation of land is not only a valuable natural resource but also a measure in which it can help address climate concerns.

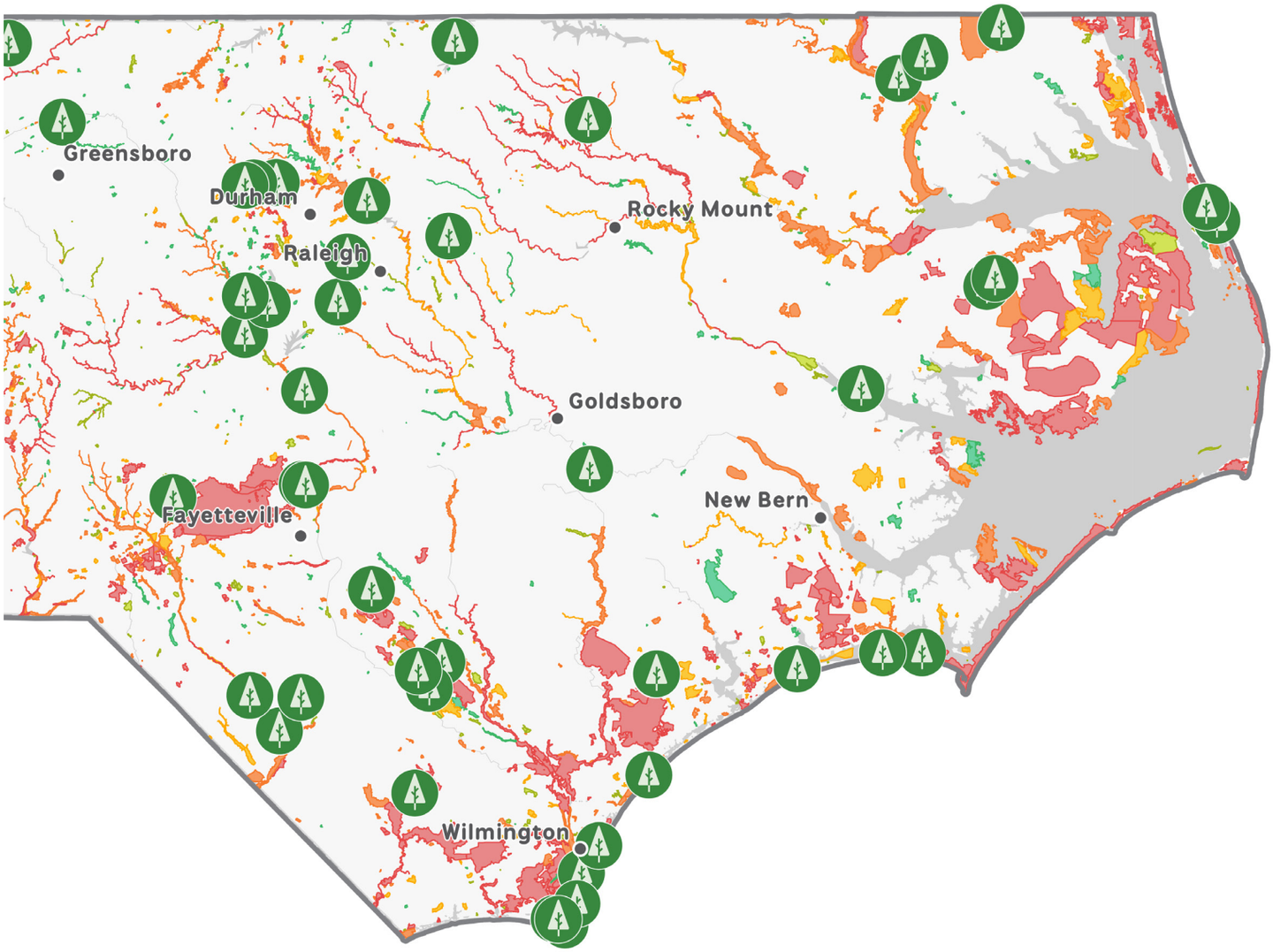
## Education

Education is a central part of the Division's mission, ensuring that visitors of all ages develop an appreciation for the state's natural and cultural resources. While the Division has long offered interpretive programs, it recently updated its mission to explicitly name education as a priority. Programs like Track Trails, the Junior Ranger initiative, and Schools in Parks foster curiosity and environmental awareness by engaging children early in outdoor activities, to spark lifelong connections to nature. These efforts ensure that every student has the opportunity to explore a state park by the end of their secondary education.

Beyond these programs, the parks offer a wealth of educational resources and events for all ages. Nature journaling, guided hikes, and special events provide participants with deeper insights into the state's ecosystems. Park staff are actively involved in delivering these experiences, combining conservation efforts with education to cultivate a lifelong appreciation for outdoor spaces and the environment. Education is seen not just as a way to impart knowledge but also as a shared learning experience, strengthening the relationship between communities and the natural environment while encouraging sustainable recreation practices.




Map 3.4: Natural Heritage Program's Identified Natural Areas


Greensboro
Durham
Raleigh
Rocky Mount
Goldsboro
Fayetteville
New Bern
Wilmington

## Recreation

Recreation is at the heart of North Carolina's state parks, offering a wide range of activities that cater to every outdoor enthusiast. Beyond recreation, the Division prioritizes low-impact practices, to promote responsible outdoor behavior as visitor numbers continue to grow.

The recreation mission extends beyond state parks, as the division collaborates with local governments to support community parks, trails, and facilities through grant programs like the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund and the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The Division also assists local agencies in enhancing recreation in local communities by providing recurring and non-recurring grant funding including grants to increase park accessibility to promote for underserved and disadvantaged communities and people living with disabilities. Accessible trails, campsites, and fishing piers at various local and state parks reflect the Division's commitment to making outdoor spaces available to all. Through partnerships and outreach, the State aims to connect urban and rural communities via trails and recreational facilities, enhancing the quality of life across the state.




**Kerr Lake State Recreation Area**

# Key Takeaways

North Carolina is ranked 7th in population growth because of its distinct advantage in providing thriving businesses, infrastructure, access to quality education, and a high quality of life. The state's diverse array of natural landscapes, historical sites, and recreational resources make it a unique destination for both residents and visitors. While the growth is welcomed, it also throws out of balance impacts to the very natural resources that make the state unique for outdoor recreation.

The State's commitment to preserving its rich cultural history and protecting its environmental assets is evident through its extensive network of state and federal sites, scenic waterways, national seashores, and miles of connected trails. The Division's strategic partnerships across local, state, and nonprofit agencies have strengthened the ability to provide accessible, well-maintained outdoor spaces while promoting economic development and advancing community health.

Looking forward, continued investment in conservation, trail expansion, and inclusive programming will help the State sustain its status as a leader in outdoor recreation and cultural conservation while also continuing to welcome growth, positive economic impact, and stronger community connections. These efforts ensure that natural beauty and historical significance remain accessible and valued, supporting recreation, education, and effective stewardship across the state's diverse landscapes.




**North Carolina State Parks Internship Program**



# DEMOGRAPHICS

# OVERVIEW

The Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan's demographic analysis highlights key metrics and demographic projections that provide a foundational understanding of North Carolina's population dynamics and regional differences. This analysis will be used to assess the recreational needs and demands as they relate to demographic changes over the next five years.

## Introduction

North Carolina is growing rapidly, that is certain. To set up the Division for success with this plan, understanding what that growth looks like and what it entails at a deeper level than just the topline population number is critical. As the composition of the population of the state changes, so do the needs and wants of the community. Being able to assess and anticipate these changes helps the Division strategically position itself to continue providing outdoor recreation.

This chapter includes the following statewide demographics metrics to show the projected population changes for 2025-2030 planning horizon:

- Population Growth
- Age and Race Segmentation
- Education
- Median Income and Poverty
- Urban and Rural Distribution
- Disability Characteristics
- Growth Centers
- Geographic Mobility

The next section includes the regional metrics based on the prosperity zones as follows:

- Population Growth
- Income Segmentation
- Race & Age Segmentation
- Education Attainment

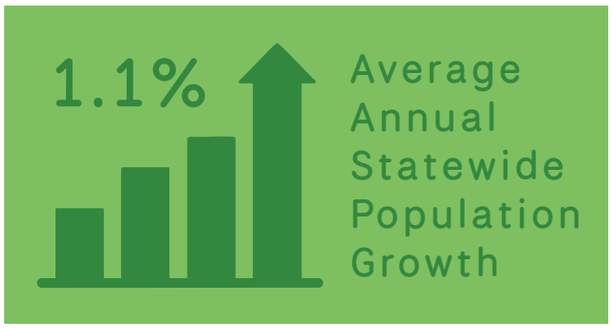


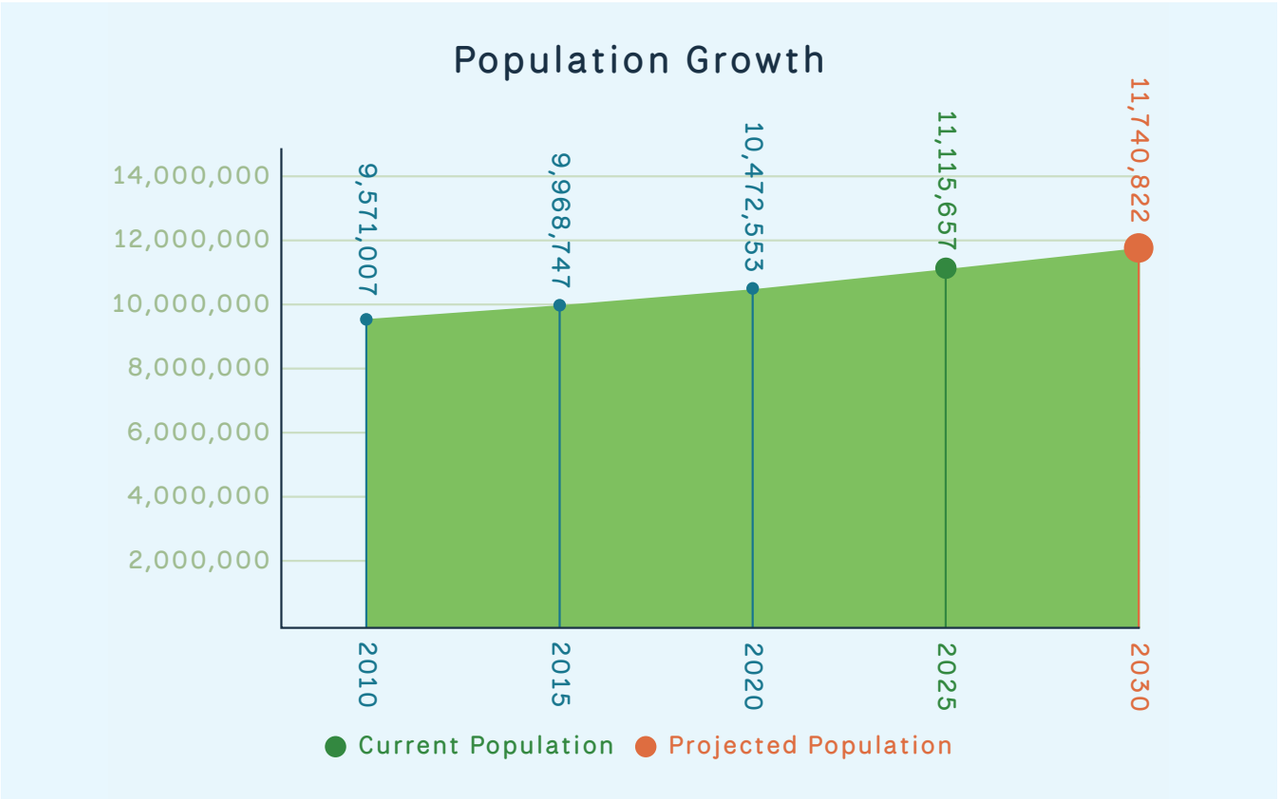

**Whitewater Rafting in Nantahala**

# Statewide Metrics

## Population Growth

As of 2025, North Carolina's population is projected to reach 11,115,657, with an average annual growth rate of 1.10 percent. By 2030, the population is expected to grow to 11,740,822. This steady increase indicates a need to accommodate expanding communities with enhanced recreational opportunities and infrastructure.







Franklin, NC

## Race & Age Segmentation

Understanding the composition of the population as it relates to age and racial segmentation ensures a future-ready, inclusive, and resilient park system. Residents of different ages, races, and ethnicities have differing needs when it comes to outdoor recreation — understanding the population composition in this way and how it will change gives decision makers insight to how facilities and programming might need to be tweaked to maintain relevance to the population.

The population aged 25-44 is growing at **twice the rate** of those aged 0-24 & 45-64

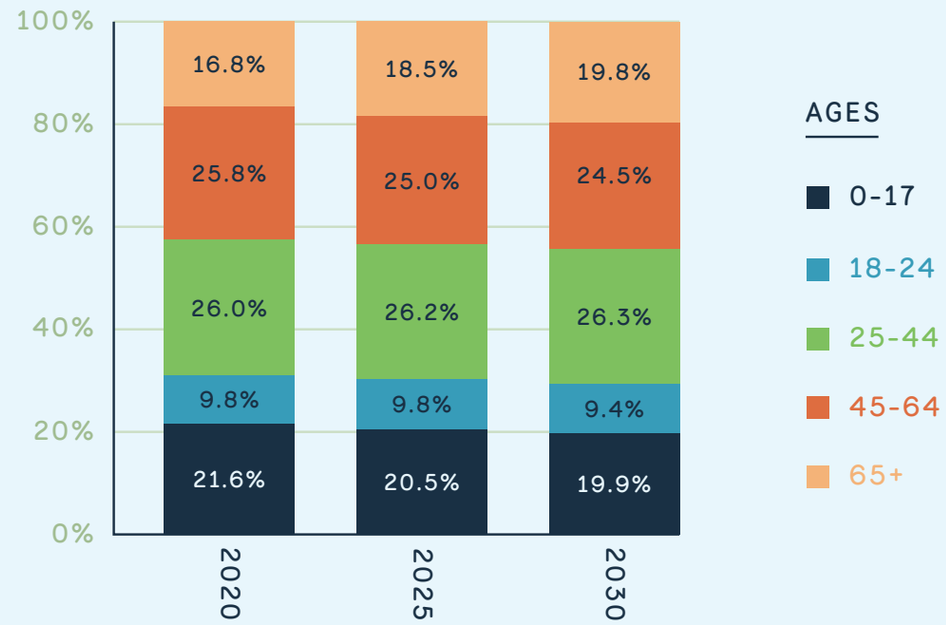
Asian Alone & 'Other' populations are growing at an average rate nearly four times higher than White Alone and Black Alone populations

The population aged 65+ is growing **four times faster** than those aged 0-24 & 45-64

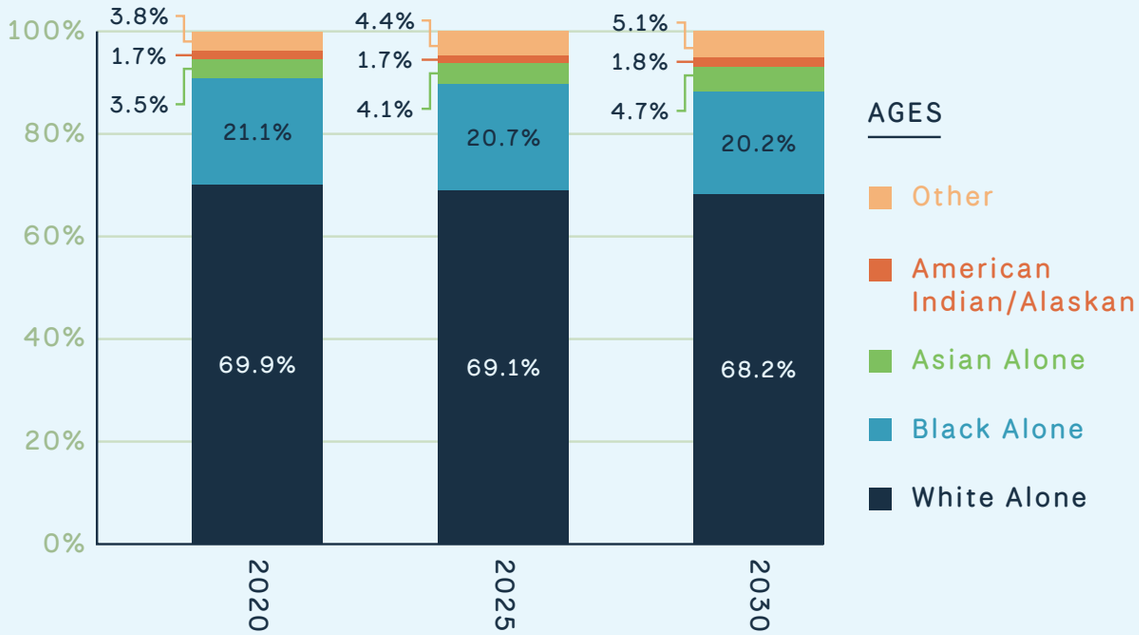



**The Gorge Zipline - Saluda, NC**

## Population Segmentation: Age

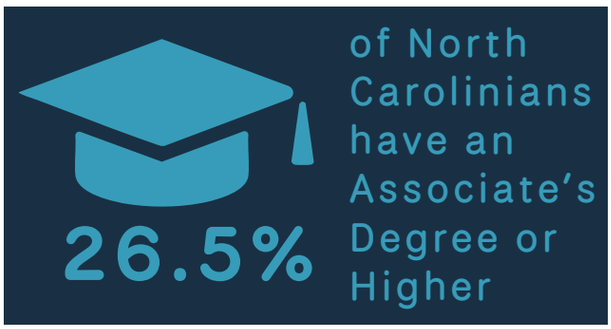



## Population Segmentation : Race



## Education

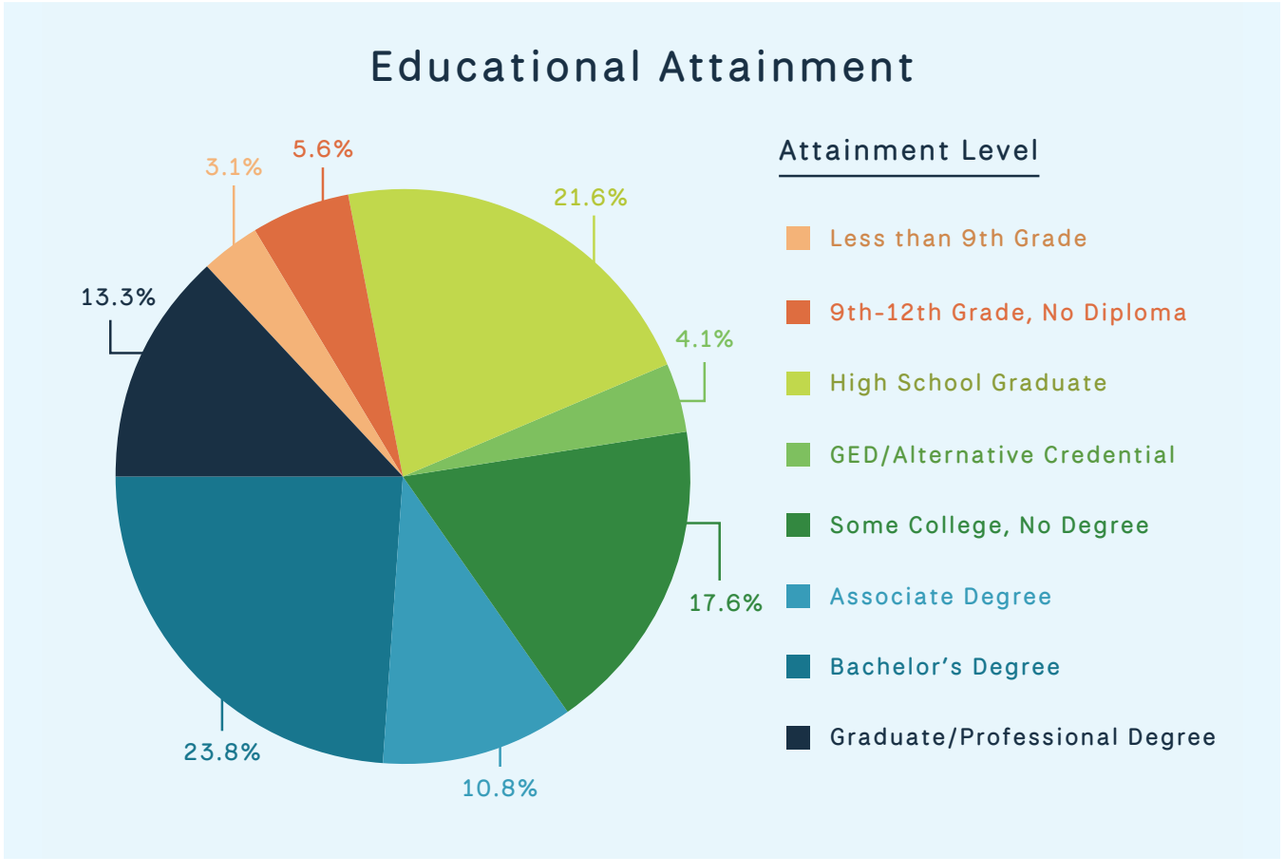
Educational attainment is steadily increasing, with 26.5 percent of residents holding an Associate's Degree or higher and 69.8 percent having at least a high school diploma.







**Reynolda House Pond - Winston Salem, NC**

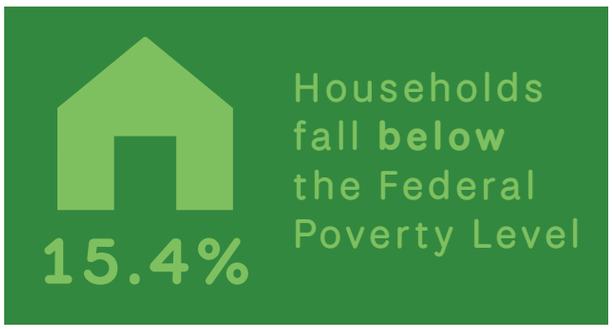


## Median Income & Poverty

Median income in 2025 is estimated at $73,963.23, growing at 3.3 percent annually. Despite this, 15.4 percent of households fall below the Federal Poverty Level, emphasizing the importance of affordable and accessible recreational opportunities.

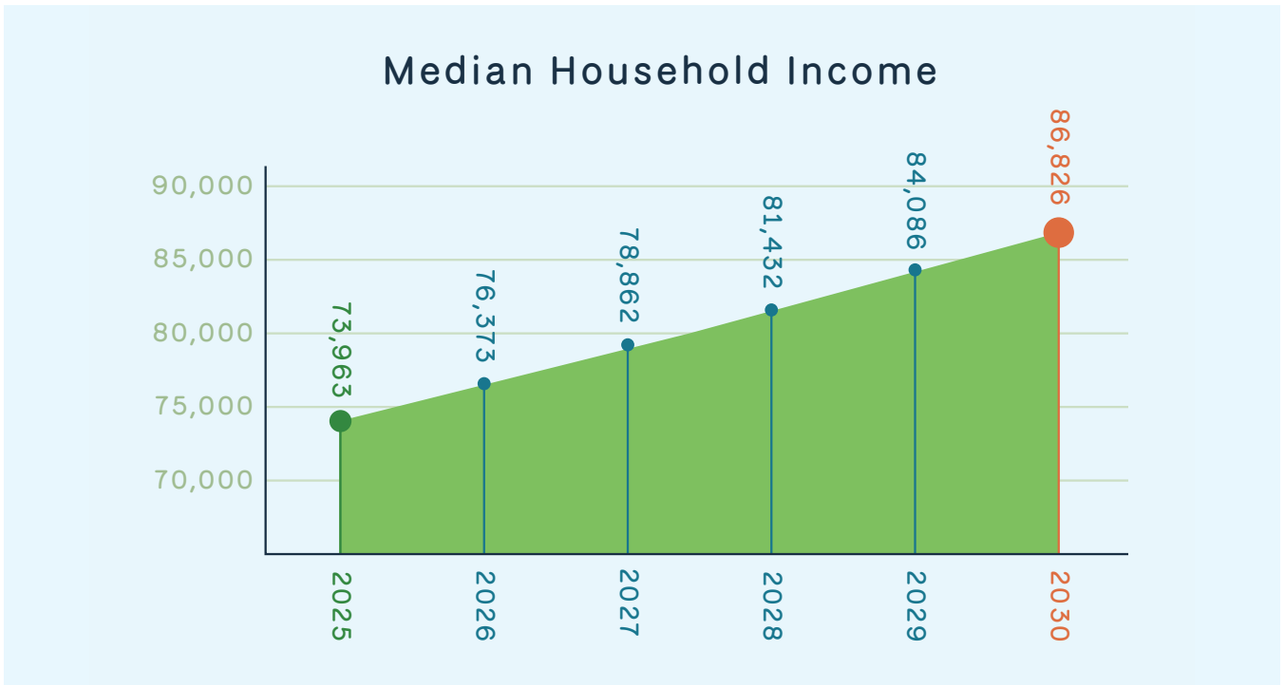



Music at American Tobacco - Durham, NC









## Urban & Rural Distribution

Approximately 66.7 percent of residents live in urban areas, below the national urban population average of 80 percent, while 33.3 percent reside in rural areas. This rural-urban balance presents diverse needs in recreational planning.







**Shackleford Horse Family - Beaufort, NC**




## DID YOU KNOW?

Venus Flytraps are local Carolinians! These unique plants thrive in the coastal plains of North and South Carolina, and they need your help.

The Venus Flytrap itself truly is a natural wonder. They belong to a small family of carnivorous plants (including pitcher plants, sundews, bladderworts and butterworts). Charles Darwin himself called the Flytrap "one of the most wonderful plants in the world," and requested that one be sent to him for his experiments.

Today, due to changes in the Flytrap's habitat, their numbers are declining. Flytraps rely on fires to clear underbrush and other plant life that shields them from sunlight on the forest floor. Therefore, things such as controlled fire suppression, agriculture, and development are threatening the Venus Flytrap's habitat.

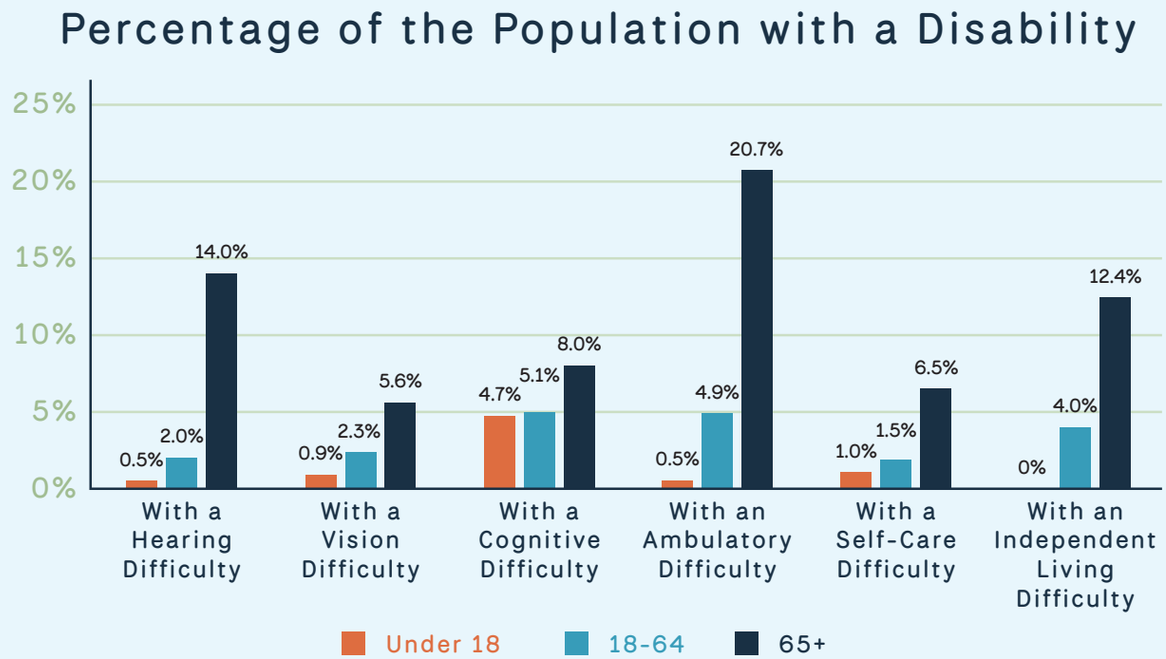
## Disability Characteristics

The state shows a slightly lower occurrence of disabilities than the national average, with ambulatory difficulties being the most common. This highlights the importance of ensuring accessibility in park facilities.

Ambulatory difficulty is the most common disability, affecting the highest percentage of the population

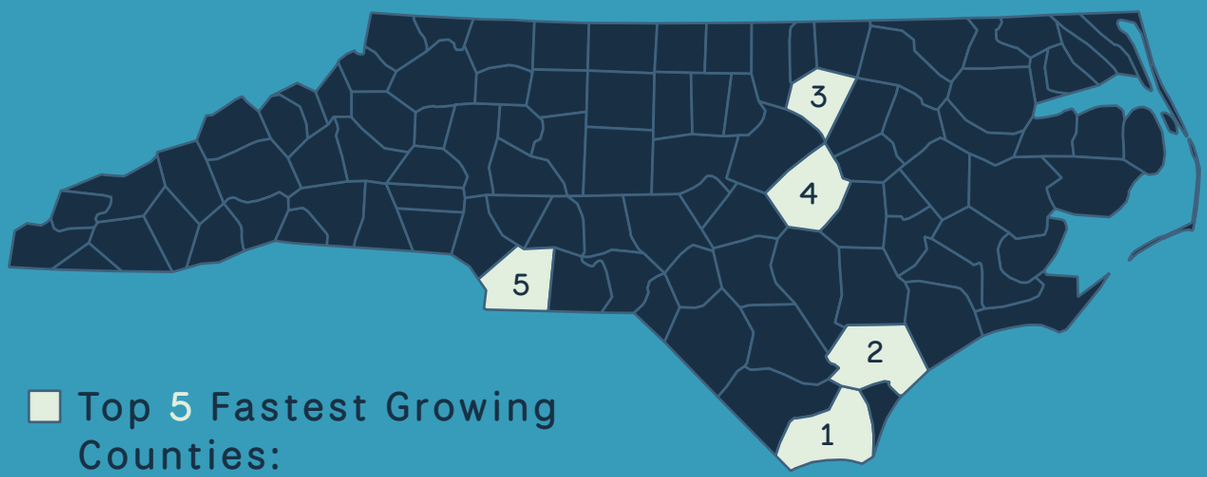



Havens Gardens - Washington, NC



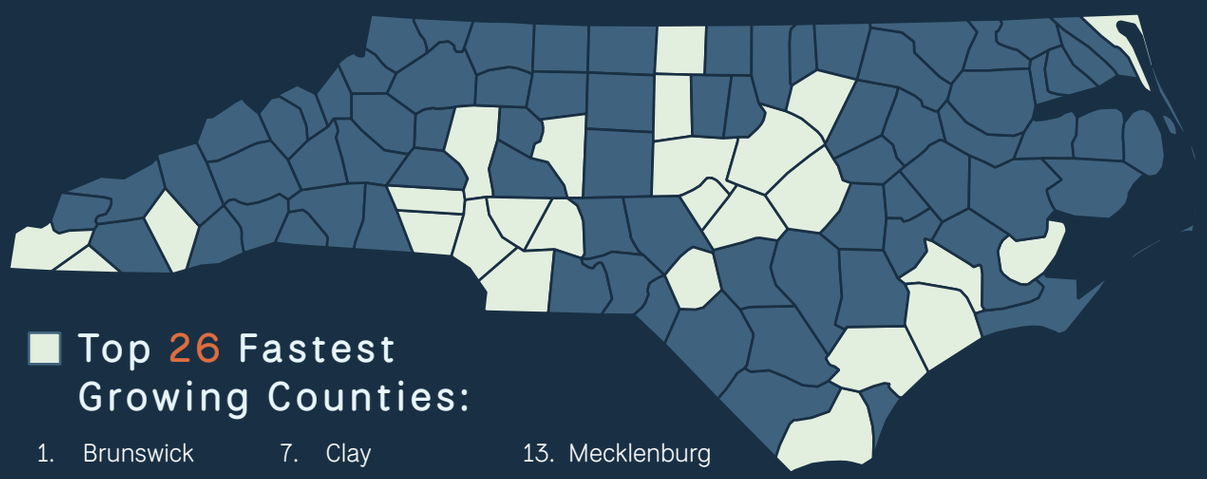

## Growth Centers

Significant growth is concentrated in 26 counties, with Brunswick, Pender, Franklin, Johnston, and Union being the fastest-growing. Growth patterns are influenced by both natural increases (births) and net migration, which predominantly drives the population changes in 72 counties.




## Top 5 Fastest Growing Counties:

1. Brunswick
2. Pender
3. Franklin
4. Johnston
5. Union



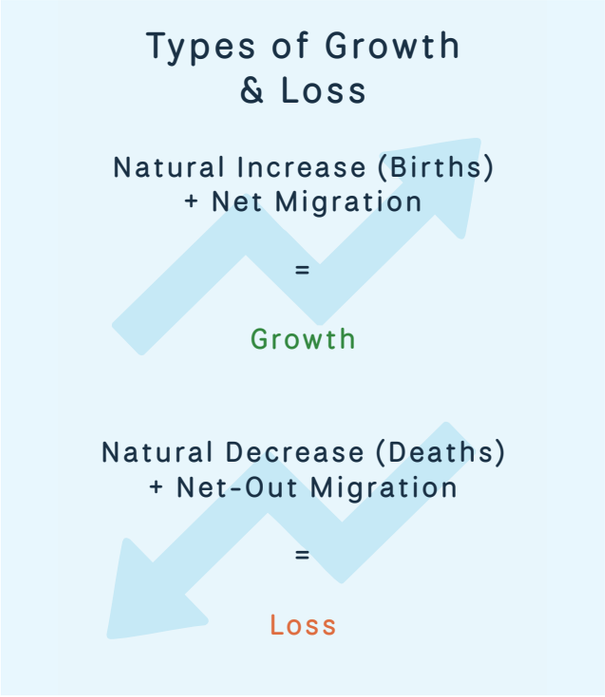
## Top 26 Fastest Growing Counties:

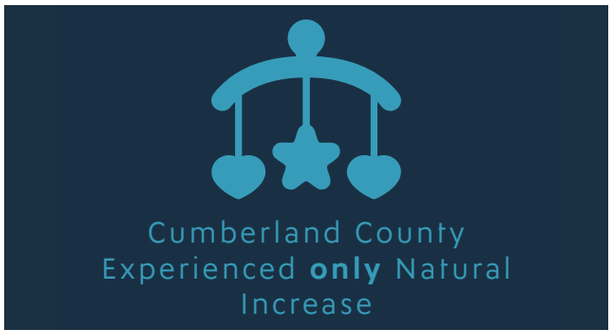
1. Brunswick
2. Pender
3. Franklin
4. Johnston
5. Union
6. Cherokee
7. Clay
8. Jackson
9. Lincoln
10. Gaston
11. Iredell
12. Cabarrus
13. Mecklenburg
14. Stanly
15. Davidson
16. Caswell
17. Alamance
18. Chatham
19. Lee
20. Harnett
21. Hoke
22. Wake
23. Onslow
24. Jones
25. Pamlico
26. Currituck

* List is in no particular order and these Counties have growth rates higher than the State's (1.3%).

## Net Migration

There are two major processes through which population change can be measured: natural population change and net migration. Natural population change is a function of the number of births and deaths that are occurring within the population over a given period. If there are more births than deaths, then natural population increase occurs. If deaths outweigh births, natural population decrease occurs. Net migration is a function of net-in migration, or the number of people moving into an area, and net-out migration, or the number of people moving away from an area.

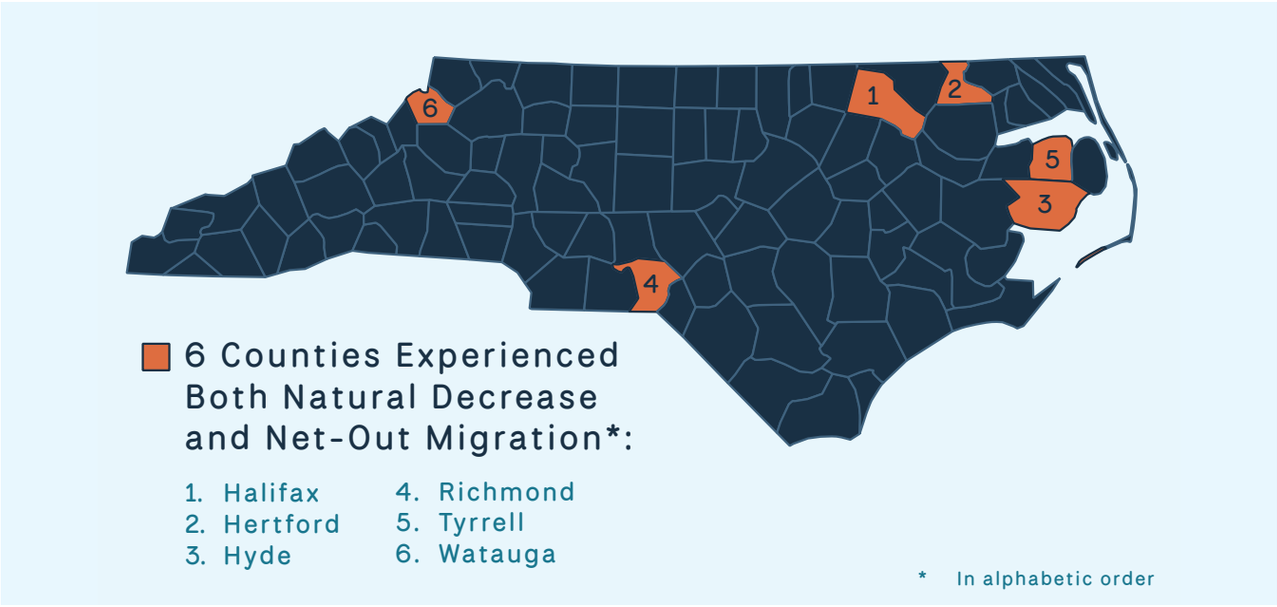


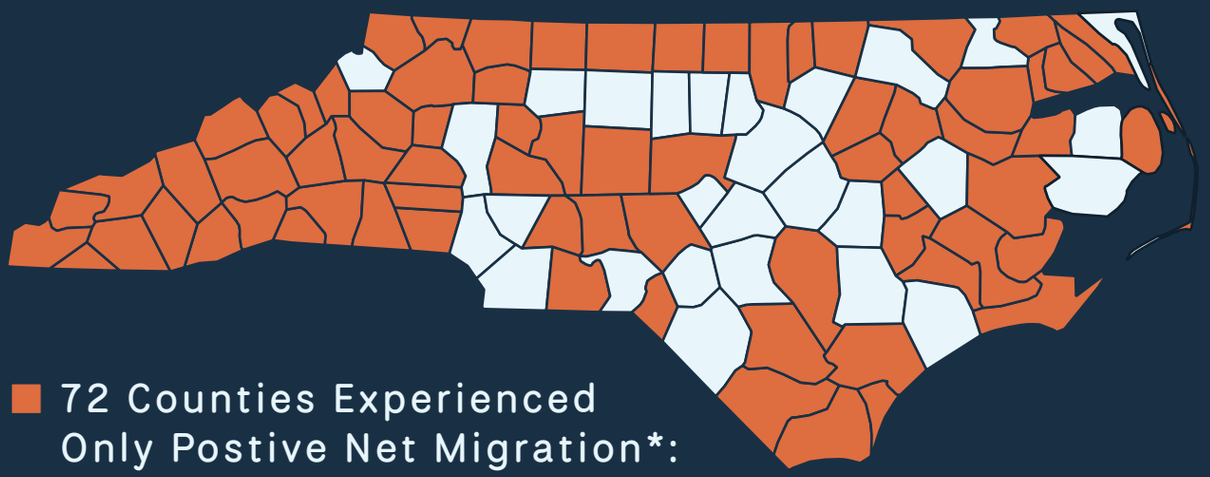







Ocracoke Beach - Ocracoke, NC

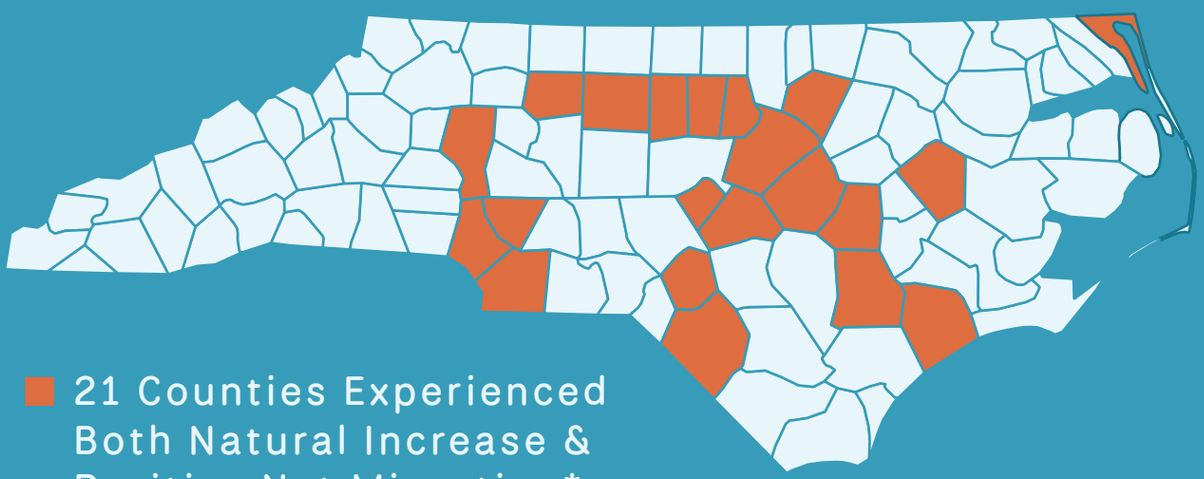




## 72 Counties Experienced Only Postive Net Migration*:

1. Cherokee
2. Graham
3. Swain
4. Clay
5. Macon
6. Jackson
7. Haywood
8. Madison
9. Buncombe
10. Transylvania
11. Henderson
12. Polk
13. Rutherford
14. McDowell
15. Yancey
16. Mitchell
17. Avery
18. Burke
19. Cleveland
20. Gaston
21. Lincoln
22. Catawba
23. Caldwell
24. Alexander
25. Wilkes
26. Ashe
27. Alghany
28. Surry
29. Yadkin
30. Stokes
31. Davie
32. Rowan
33. Davidson
34. Stanly
35. Anson
36. Montgomery
37. Randolph
38. Rockingham
39. Scotland
40. Moore
41. Chatham
42. Caswell
43. Person
44. Granville
45. Vance
46. Warren
47. Nash
48. Wilson
49. Edgecomb
50. Martin
51. Northampton
52. Bertie
53. Gates
54. Chowan
55. Perquimans
56. Pasquotank
57. Camden
58. Washington
59. Beaufort
60. Dare
61. Greene
62. Lenoir
63. Craven
64. Jones
65. Pamlico
66. Carteret
67. Sampson
68. Bladen
69. Pender
70. Columbus
71. Brunswick
72. New Hanover

* In no particular order



## 21 Counties Experienced Both Natural Increase & Positive Net Migration*:

1. Iredell
2. Mecklengburg
3. Cabarrus
4. Union
5. Robeson
6. Hoke
7. Harnett
8. Lee
9. Forsyth
10. Guilford
11. Alamance
12. Orange
13. Durham
14. Wake
15. Franklin
16. Johnston
17. Wayne
18. Duplin
19. Onslow
20. Pitt
21. Currituck

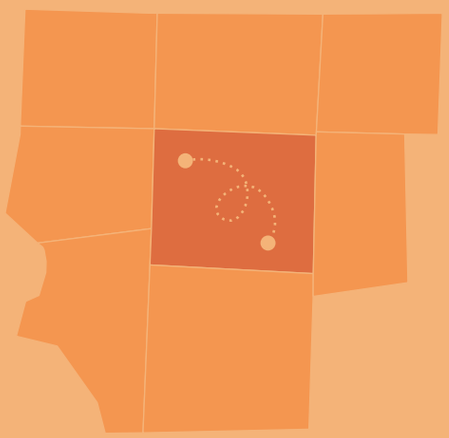
* In no particular order




**Corolla Beach**

## Geographic Mobility

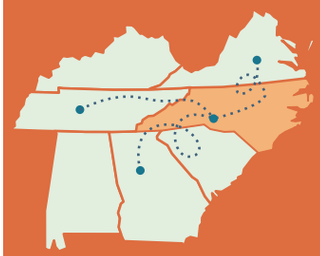
Most residents (87.3 percent) have not moved in the past year. Among movers, 5.2 percent relocated within the same county, while smaller percentages moved from other counties, states, or abroad.



**5.2%** of Residents Relocated within their Current County



**0.6%** of the Population Moved from Abroad



**3.2%** of the Population Moved from A Different State



Bill Russ - Visit NC

Cape Hatteras National Seashore

# SEVEN POPULATION TRENDS TO WATCH

North Carolina is on track to become the 7th most populated state in the country by the early 2030s.[1] A recent article, authored by the North Carolina State Demographer, shed light on seven demographic trends that will likely sustain into the next few decades, propelling the state forward in terms of population growth.




## More People Will Continue to Arrive from Other States and Nations

The first trend is related to how the population will **grow**. North Carolina, recently, has added more people to the state population than all but two other states in the country. This is due to the second component of population change: net migration. This trend will continue well into the 2030s.

## Population Will Be More Racially/Ethnically Diverse than Today

Five other trends relate to how the population will **change**. The first change will be seen in the racial and ethnic composition of the population. North Carolina has seen rapid growth in many non-white populations since the 1990s. This trend has sustained and will likely continue. In 2020, the percentage of the population that belonged to a non-white racial or ethnic group was 39%, by 2050 that number will rise to 48%.

## There Will be More Older People Living Here

Change will also be seen in the age of the population. The Baby Boom generation is aging into retirement and the number of quality retirement destinations and high-quality medical care providers have attracted migrants of the same age. This means that more North Carolinians will be 65 or older, comprising 20% of the population by the end of this decade.

1 https://www.osbm.nc.gov/blog/2024/01/23/nc-become-7th-most-populated-state-early-2030s

## Growth in the Early Childhood Population Will Surpass the Growth of the Primary/Secondary & College-Age Populations

Additionally, the number of North Carolinians in the early childhood population (ages zero through four) will reverse a negative growth trend and grow by 32% by 2050.

## The Primary/Secondary School Age Population Will Remain About the Same Size in 2030 as it is Today

The primary and secondary school-age population will likely stay the same, due to accelerated fertility rate declines brought on by the Great Recession and the COVID-19 Pandemic.

## The Rate of Growth in the College Age Population Will Slow, Population Declines Expected in the 2030s

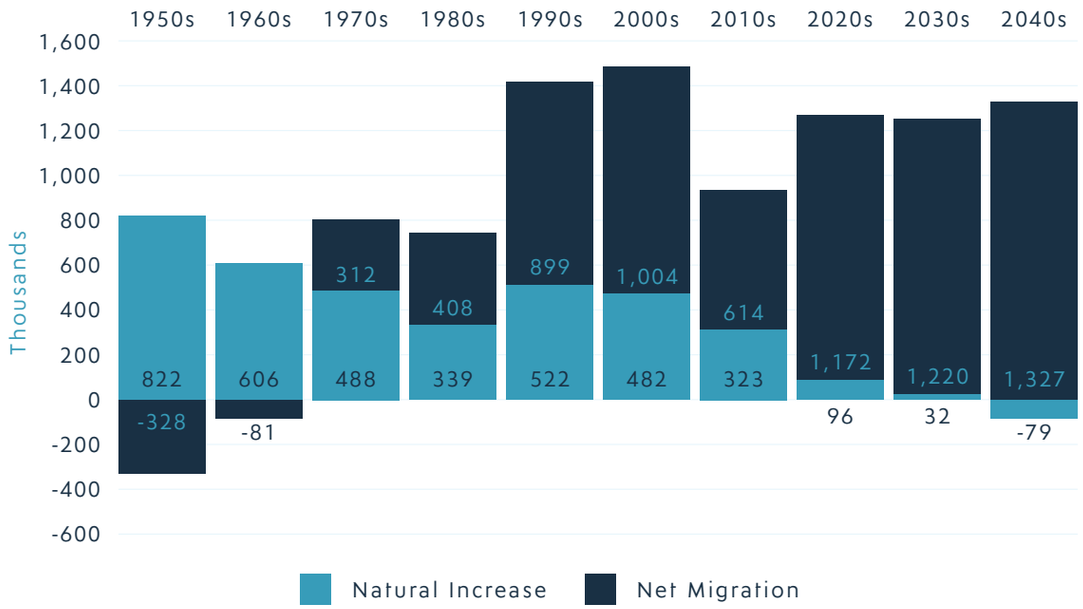
The rate of growth in the college-age population will slow and perhaps decline into the 2030s. As previously mentioned, national and international events accelerated a decline in the fertility rate meaning there are fewer children who will be advancing into the college-age population than there were in previous years.

## North Carolina Will Become a More Urban State

Finally, the last trend relates to how the state will **adapt** to all of these changes in terms of where people settle. In 2020, 65% of North Carolinians lived within the 22 urban and suburban counties within North Carolina. The other 35% lived within the 78 rural counties. By 2050 more than 75% of North Carolinians will live within the urban counties, by which time six more counties will shift from the rural classification into an urban classification. This is reflective of global trends; population growth has driven urbanization globally. More and more people are choosing to live in larger communities to take advantage of amenities, employment opportunities, and easy access to regional destinations.

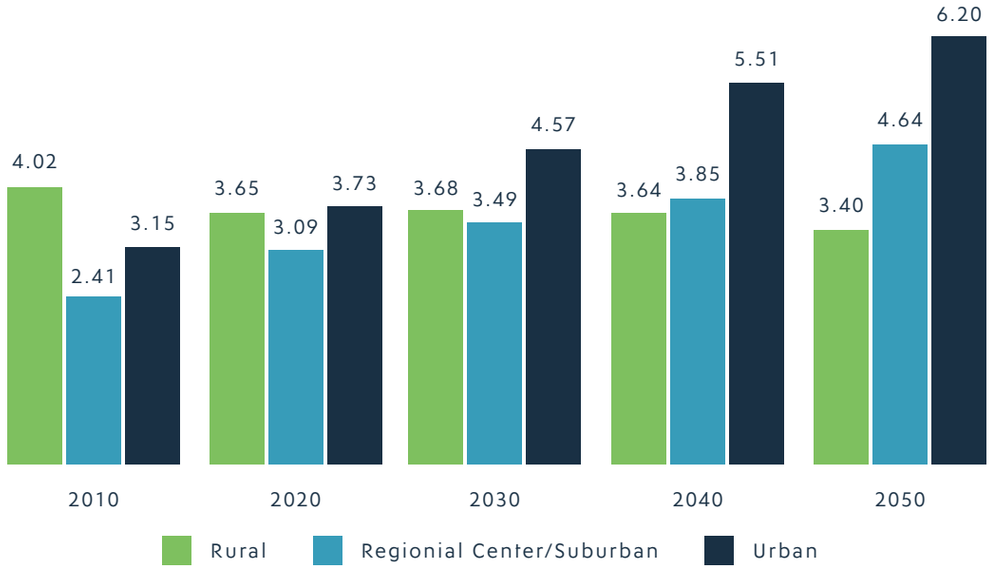
The chart below shows the way in which North Carolina's population has grown over time. Natural Increase (births) have decreased dramatically over time, meaning births are no longer a major driver in increasing the state's population. Net Migration, new residents moving into the state from elsewhere, has dramatically increased. This means that migration will continue to be the main driver of population growth in the State.

## Components of Population Change, 1950-2020 & Projected Through 2050




Source: https://www.osbm.nc.gov/blog/2024/01/23/nc-become-7th-most-populated-state-early-2030s

## Population in Rural, Regional Center/Suburban & Urban Counties by Decade in Millions, 2010-2050

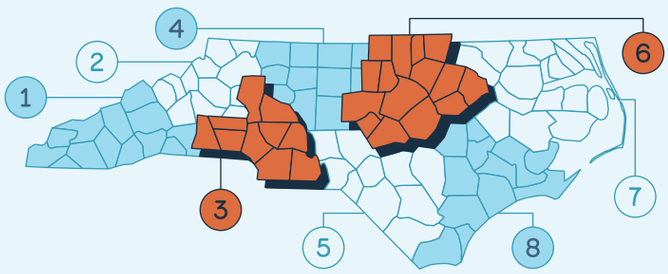



Source: https://www.osbm.nc.gov/blog/2024/01/23/nc-become-7th-most-populated-state-early-2030s

# Regional Metrics – Prosperity Zones

## Population Growth

The growth rates across North Carolina's prosperity regions vary from 0.39 percent to 1.55 percent, with the Southwest (Charlotte-Mecklenburg) and North Central (Triangle) regions outpacing the state average. These regions require more robust recreational planning to match their higher growth.




1. Western
2. Northwest
3. Southwest
4. Piedmont-Triad
5. South Central
6. North Central
7. Northeast
8. Southeast

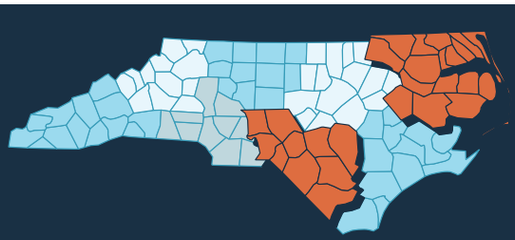
Only the Southwest Zone (Char-Meck Region) & North Central Zone (Triangle Region) have average annual growth rates higher than the state average

## Income Segmentation

Median income is lower in six of the eight Prosperity Zones compared to the statewide figure, and a higher percentage of households in these zones fall below the Federal Poverty Level. This economic disparity underscores the need for equitable and affordable distribution of recreational resources.



Median income is lower in 6 of 8 Prosperity Zones compared to the statewide median income



The Sandhills (South-Central) Zone and Northeast Zone have the highest population that is below Federal Poverty Level

## Race & Age Segmentation

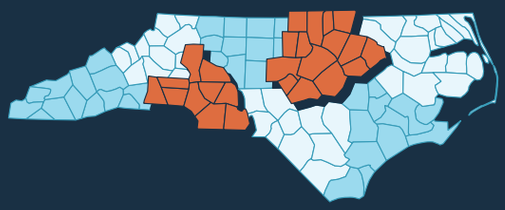
Across all Prosperity Zones, the Asian population exhibits the highest growth rate. Additionally, the 65+ age group is expanding much faster than the population under 18, a trend consistent statewide. This demographic shift may necessitate programming for older adults while still accommodating youth.



The growth rate of the 65+ population is significantly higher than the under-18 population across all Prosperity Zones

## Education Attainment

Education levels are notably high in the Southwest and North Central regions, where over 50 percent of the population holds an Associate's Degree or higher. Other regions lag behind but maintain at least 36.6 percent educational attainment, influencing workforce readiness and recreational preferences.



The Southwest Zone (Char-Meck) and North Central Zone (Triangle) are the only regions where more than 50% of the population holds an Associate's Degree or higher

## Family Configuration

The prevalence of single-parent households is highest in the Sandhills, Northeast, Piedmont Triad, and North Central zones. This demographic detail may shape recreational programming, particularly for families with limited resources.

## Implications

The demographic trends outlined above emphasize the importance of tailoring outdoor recreation planning to meet the needs of a diverse and evolving population. Population growth, aging demographics, urbanization, economic disparities, and regional variances will shape demand for accessible, inclusive, and well-distributed recreational opportunities across the 5-year planning horizon.



# Key Takeaways

- The state's population will continue to grow rapidly for the foreseeable future — this is due primarily to increasing rates of migration into the state wThe state's population composition will grow amongst residents aged 65+ and 25-44, meaning that the population in those age ranges is growing at a faster rate than other age ranges, thus they will make up a larger portion of the population.
- The state's population will continue to diversify racially/ethnically — significant growth can be seen in populations identifying as Asian Alone or Multiracial.
- North Carolina is an urbanizing state – more people are living in and moving into the state's urban areas. This will continue to strain demand for resources between our population centers and our smaller communities.




**Corolla Beach**



# RECREATION TRENDS

# OVERVIEW

Outdoor recreation trends across the United States are continuously evolving as visitor preferences, demographics, and societal values change. Tracking these trends is vital for recreation agencies to stay relevant, meet visitor needs, and make informed resource allocation and management decisions. Trends in outdoor recreation encompass not only the types of activities people engage in but also broader demographic shifts. For the Division, staying attuned to these trends is essential for delivering a comprehensive approach that supports the Division's three core mission pillars: Conservation, Education, and Recreation.




Understanding key trends from the previous SCORP (2020-2025 update) will help the Division cater to a diverse and changing population as it develops its 2025-2030 plan update. For example, the growing racial and ethnic diversity in the U.S. population corresponds to an increased demand for culturally relevant recreational activities. Similarly, the aging population has implications for the types of facilities and programs needed. By adapting to these demographic changes, the Division can ensure that parks across North Carolina remain diverse and inclusive.

Outdoor recreation trends significantly shape investment and policy decisions in parks across the country. As activities aligned with the Division's mission of conservation, education, and recreation gain popularity, resources are allocated to develop or enhance facilities and infrastructure that support these priorities. For example, an increase in hiking and biking may prompt the expansion of trail networks, while a growing demand for water sports could lead to the construction of new boat ramps and docks. These strategic investments improve visitor experiences and have the potential to also support economic development by attracting tourists and boosting local economies. Trends also guide policies focused on conservation, sustainability, and education, ensuring that recreational activities do not compromise the natural environment.

Education is a key goal for the Division with a focus on fostering a connection to nature and promoting conservation. Both local and state parks implement measures to protect sensitive ecosystems and manage the impact of high visitor numbers. The previous SCORP highlighted the need for parks to offer educational programs that enhance visitors' understanding of the natural world and encourage sustainable practices, aligning with the growing public interest in environmental stewardship.

## Key 2020-2025 North Carolina SCORP Findings

The previous SCORP captured several key trends shaping the future of outdoor recreation

- There is a growing emphasis on equitable access, which aims to ensure that all individuals, regardless of background or ability, have the opportunity to enjoy outdoor recreation.
- Increased recreation opportunities are needed in economically depressed areas.
- Promoting awareness of natural resources among underserved populations will reflect a commitment to inclusivity and access for all.
- Access to opportunities for physical activity in natural settings can help address public health concerns, such as obesity and mental well-being.

There is a growing emphasis on outdoor and environmental education, prompting park agencies and partners to develop programs that foster resource protection and awareness. Educational programs help visitors, especially younger generations, understand the importance of conservation and sustainable practices. These targeted investments focus on educational initiatives and equitable access allowing parks to offer meaningful outdoor experiences for all visitors.

This chapter highlights the national, statewide, and local recreation trends. A comparison against demographic projections will help understand the future needs and desires of the community to participate in outdoor recreational activities. This comparison will help the Division take strategic actions to meet the community's needs at the state and local levels through the provision of amenities, programs, and funding. The trends are described in detail as recreation, education, and conservation trends as they directly relate to the mission of the Division.

# Recreation Trends

## High Participation Activities

### Outdoor Industry Association's (OIA) Participation Trends Report[1]

The following information was derived from the 2024 OIA Participation Trends Report. The report is published annually and provides insight into the size, geographic distribution, and preferred activities of outdoor enthusiasts. The 2024 report presents data collected in 2023. Based on the 2024 OIA Participation Trends Report, outdoor recreation in the U.S. continues to grow, with a record 175.8 million participants, equating to 57.3 percent of Americans aged six and older. Notably, the participation base is becoming more diverse, with increases in the number of women, people of color, and older adults engaging in outdoor activities.

According to the OIA report, participation in 2023 in outdoor activities such as hiking, running, camping, fishing, and bicycling saw significant growth, reflecting broader trends in the outdoor recreation landscape. Further information about these activity trends is listed below:

- Hiking remains a popular activity, with day hiking leading at a 20 percent participation rate among the United States population aged six and older.
- Fishing, including fly, saltwater, and freshwater, had an 18.2 percent participation rate, while running, jogging, and trail running collectively reached 17.9 percent
- Camping, ranging from car and backyard to RV options, also saw high engagement, with a 17.7 percent participation rate.

Despite the increase in participation, the frequency of these activities has decreased, indicating a trend towards more casual engagement. The average number of outings per participant fell from 70.5 in 2022 to 62.5 in 2023. This decline suggests that while more people are exploring outdoor activities, they are doing so less frequently.

The shift toward casual participation highlights the need for strategies that encourage more frequent and deeper engagement with outdoor activities to sustain long-term growth and connection to recreation. Local parks and recreation departments can shape these experiences through accessible programs, well-maintained spaces, and partnerships that expand opportunities for engagement.




**Figure 5.1: Outdoor Recreation Activity Trends**

1 Rep., 2024 Outdoor Participation Trends Report (Outdoor Industry Association, 2024).

Collaboration with regional agencies, nonprofit organizations, and outdoor industry partners strengthens these efforts by increasing resources and diversifying recreation options. Well-designed amenities that support multiple activities help create inviting spaces where residents can explore different forms of recreation, stay engaged over time, and develop lasting connections to the outdoors.

## Core vs. Casual Participation

- Information showing the frequency of participation in outdoor activities helps outdoor recreation providers understand the level of engagement of their participants and identify opportunities to develop new activities or services that will appeal to frequent (core) and infrequent (casual) participants. – OIA 2024 Report
- Core is also a key Sports and Fitness Industry Association (SFIA) frequency measurement that indicates a committed player or enthusiast, and fundamentally captures those most likely to be a consumer, fan, and returning participant.




**Leaf Journaling in the State Parks**

## Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA) Topline Participation Report

To effectively harness these evolving participation patterns, it is essential to ground strategies in a variety of data sources that track shifting behaviors and preferences over time. Similar in nature to the annual OIA Report, the SFIA Topline Participation Report is an annual report that provides a comprehensive overview of United States sports, fitness, and outdoor activity participation trends. It is considered a key reference for understanding how Americans engage in physical activities. The 2024 report tracked participation rates among Americans aged six and older across 124 different sports, fitness, and outdoor activities — finding that the number of participatory Americans reached its highest point in the last 15 years at 242 million strong in 2023 [Figure 5.2] and is now approaching 80 percent of the population.[2]

Growth is reflected in increasing participation across a wide range of activities. Based on the SFIA Report, outdoor sports and fitness activities are experiencing growth, mirroring broader outdoor recreation trends identified by the OIA.[3] This reflects changing preferences and the rising appeal of activities that blend fitness, convenience, and outdoor engagement, aligning with a societal shift towards healthier lifestyles and more accessible recreation options. These trends also highlight the importance of providing diverse offerings that meet evolving participant expectations and demands. Figure 5.3 illustrates the key takeaways that highlight these trends.

2 2024 Topline Participation Report, Sports & Fitness Industry Association, Physical Activity Council, and Digital Research. "Sports & Activity Participation in the U.S.," 2024

3 According to the OIA report, participation in 2023 in outdoor activities

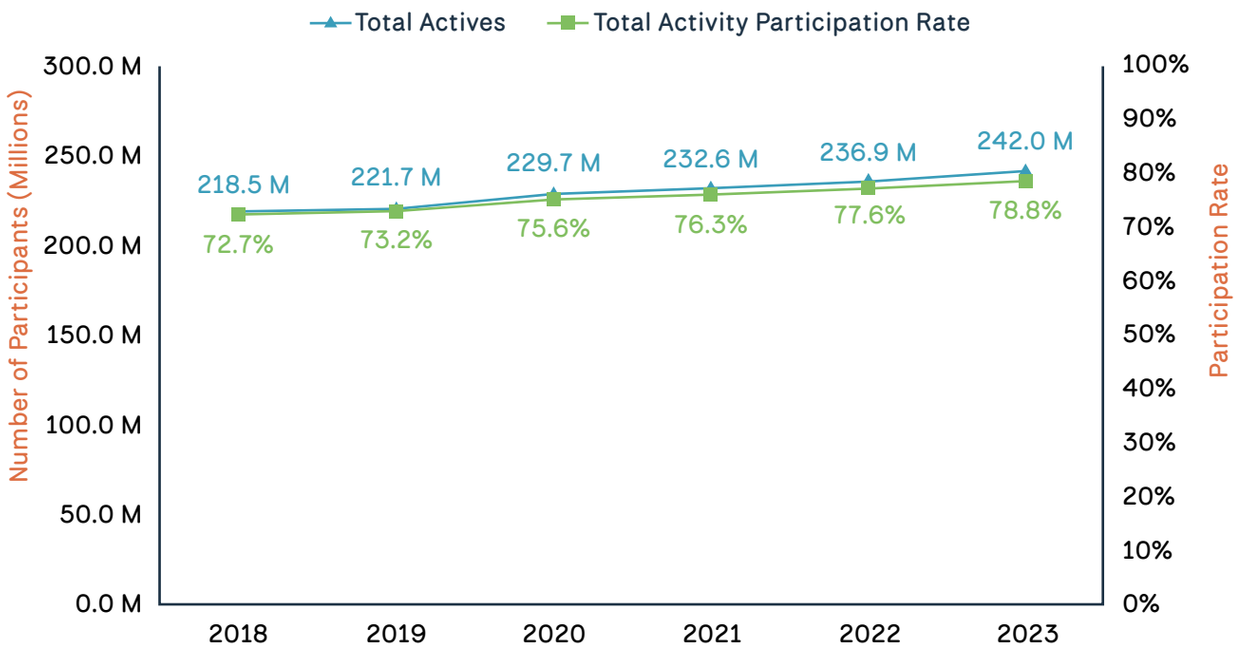



**Figure 5.2: Total Actives 6-Year Trend**

1

## Growing Diversity in Outdoor Recreation

Changing demographics indicate that outdoor spaces are increasingly becoming places for broader community connections.

2

## Decreasing Frequency of Outings

While more people are trying outdoor activities, they are not engaging consistently. This creates challenges for building dedicated user bases but offers opportunities to engage the wider audiences that are more occasional.

3

## Health & Wellness as Key Drivers

The appeal of outdoor activities lies in their ability to offer both physical exercise and mental well-being, reinforcing their role in promoting healthier lifestyles.

4

## Opportunities for Environmental Education

With more people participating in outdoor activities, there is a unique opportunity to integrate environmental education, turning casual participants into conservation advocates.

5

## Demand for Varied Recreational Options

The increasing variety of popular activities highlights the need for adaptable offerings that meet evolving interests and preferences.

**Figure 5.3: Key Takeaways from the 2024 SFIA Report**

## Emerging Activities

The 2024 OIA report also points to the dynamic nature of outdoor recreation preferences and the need for recreation providers to adapt to changing interests and motivations among outdoor enthusiasts. For example, the report highlights the increasing focus on health and wellness that is pushing people towards more physically demanding and exhilarating outdoor pursuits. Conversely, traditional activities like baseball are seeing a decline, possibly due to the preference for activities that offer more personal or flexible experiences. As described below, the report also provides insight into new and emerging outdoor recreation activities gaining popularity.



**Paddleboarding** is growing in popularity due to its accessibility and appeal to both casual participants and fitness enthusiasts.



**Adventure Racing** attracts thrill-seekers by combining running, biking, and water-based challenges into physically demanding competitions.



**Rock Climbing** continues to expand with the rise of climbing gyms, Olympic recognition, and interest in its physical and mental challenges.



**Trail Running** is gaining traction as more people seek fitness activities that immerse them in nature and offer scenic, rugged terrain.



**Gravel Biking** blends roads and mountain biking, drawing riders who enjoy the flexibility of cycling on both paved and unpaved surfaces.

**Figure 5.4: Emerging Activities Based on the 2024 OIA Report**

Similarly, the 2024 SFIA Topline Participation Report highlights several non-traditional United States sports and activities that are trending. These activities are reflective of evolving interests and preferences among participants.



**Cardio Tennis** mixes tennis and workouts, attracting fitness-focused players.




**Pickleball** play is up up 223% in three years, and other racquet sports are growing.



**Golf** participation is growing with simulators and social, off-course formats.



**Small-Sided Soccer** grows for fast play in urban areas.



**Women's Flag Football** grows with media, college play, and inclusivity efforts

**Figure 5.5: Emerging activies based on the 2024 SFIA Report**

# Key Takeaways

- Nationally, there is significant participation in trail-related activities such as hiking, walking, jogging, and running, along with fishing and camping. These activities are often perceived as casual and flexible rather than core recreational pursuits.
- Participation trends indicate that while more individuals are engaging in outdoor activities, the frequency of their participation has decreased.
- Emerging activities reflect a growing preference for individually focused, active programs over traditional organized group sports.
- Overall, national trends highlight a shift toward recreation activities that prioritize personal health and well-being through flexible, non-committal options.


C. Peek

# Education Trends

The Division is dedicated to integrating education into park visitors' experiences. The Division positions North Carolina's state parks as "nature's classrooms," with the aim of teaching visitors about the natural and cultural history of the state, the importance of conservation, and the roles they can play in preserving these resources for future generations.[4] A focus on education helps bridge the gap between recreation and conservation, ensuring that visitors learn about the natural environment and build a foundation for future generations to become informed and active stewards of the environment.

## Nature Exploration

North Carolina's state parks offer a variety of educational opportunities. These initiatives are aligned with the growing trend across United States state parks to integrate outdoor learning, which is increasingly recognized as essential for fostering long-term environmental stewardship.

The Junior Ranger Program invites children ages six to twelve to explore North Carolina's state parks while engaging in meaningful learning experiences. By completing an activity booklet, participating in educational programs, and earning acorn points through activities like hiking and stewardship projects, participants can earn badges and gain a deeper understanding of natural resources. After a successful pilot in five parks, the program is now available statewide and aligns with NC Essential Standards for K-5 education.

Other initiatives such as the Passport Program foster a sense of adventure and exploration, motivating visitors to discover new parks and return to their favorites. It also serves as an educational tool, making learning about the environment enjoyable and interactive.[5] By linking recreation with learning, the program helps visitors build a personal connection to North Carolina's natural and cultural resources.

4 "Education | NC State Parks." n.d. https://www.ncparks.gov/education.

5 "Passport Program | NC State Parks." n.d. https://www.ncparks.gov/education/passport-program.




The Junior Ranger Program delivers impactful experiences, offering children opportunities to connect with nature while gaining valuable skills and knowledge, as highlighted below.

- Opportunities to connect with nature help children explore North Carolina's natural resources through engaging, hands-on activities.
- Educational alignment with state standards enhances classroom learning while fostering environmental knowledge and curiosity.
- Stewardship values are built through service projects and lessons on sustainable practices.
- Chances to explore and discover motivate children to visit multiple parks, collect badges, and experience diverse ecosystems.

## Connecting Children to Nature & Nature Equity

The 2024 OIA report also points to the increasing trend of outdoor participation in activities that provide children access to nature. Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN), a joint national initiative of the National League of Cities and the Children and Nature Network, is spearheading the movement of connecting young people with the environment. The efforts focus on bringing small-scale interventions to the built environments where children frequent the most, including neighborhood parks, schools, libraries, etc.

Nature equity has become another critical area of focus. CCCN is also focusing on diversifying the participation opportunities to bring nature-based programming to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and low-income families.

## Environmental Education

State and national programs recognize the value of partnerships between parks, schools, and cultural institutions in expanding environmental and place-based education. These collaborations provide students with hands-on learning experiences that connect classroom concepts to real-world settings, reinforcing lessons in history, science, and conservation. In North Carolina, initiatives such as the Schools in Parks Collaborative and Learning Happens Here ensure that students engage with the state's natural and cultural resources through structured educational programs, field trips, and professional development for educators. These efforts enhance environmental literacy and create lasting connections between young learners and the outdoor spaces that shape their communities.

Several nationwide programs, supported by nonprofits, play a key role in advancing environmental education and outdoor learning. The National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF) builds public-private partnerships to expand environmental engagement across the country. The North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) promotes environmental literacy and civic engagement through professional development and advocacy. Project Learning Tree (PLT) focuses on using forests as outdoor classrooms, providing educators with curricula and training to integrate environmental topics into their teaching. These initiatives strengthen environmental education by equipping educators, fostering partnerships, and expanding outdoor learning opportunities.

## Environmental Stewardship

The National Park Service also plays a vital role in community-based education. Programs such as the Youth Conservation Corps and the Fish and Feathers Internship Program engage young people in environmental stewardship activities, while also providing training and work experience in natural resource management.[6] Another

6 "Youth Conservation Corps - Youth & Young Adult Programs (U.S. National Park Service)." n.d. https://www.nps.gov/subjects/youthprograms/ycc.htm.




The Schools in Parks Collaborative connects elementary teachers and state park rangers to create engaging, standards-aligned outdoor learning experiences in state parks and on school grounds. Through workshops, field trips, and peer networking, teachers become equipped with tools and knowledge to integrate environmental education into their classrooms. Participants receive professional development, access to resources, stipends, and support for planning memorable outdoor learning experiences for students.




The Learning Happens Here Initiative, led by the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (DNCR), connects students with educational opportunities across the state's museums, parks, historic sites, aquariums, libraries, and zoos. The program emphasizes history, culture, science, nature, literacy, and the arts through hands-on experiences and interactive learning.

To expand access, the initiative offers the Learning Happens Here Field Trip Fund, which provides financial support for public school field trips, and the Teacher Ambassadors Program, which equips educators with resources to integrate DNCR sites into their curriculum.

example of federal support is the National Environmental Education Training Program, which aims to provide long-term training and support for educators, enhancing their ability to teach about environmental issues. The program includes in-service and pre-service training, development of educational materials, and support for state-level environmental education infrastructure.

The initiatives described above highlight the importance of building partnerships and networks to effectively deliver environmental education. They demonstrate that robust learning experiences that engage individuals of all ages, promote sustainable practices, and foster a deeper connection to the natural world can be achieved when schools, parks, and community organizations collaborate. Such efforts are aligned with the Division's mission to make education a core component of outdoor experiences and ensure that state park visitors gain a greater appreciation for nature and their role in protecting it.

## Policy & Legislative Efforts

The Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) was signed into law on August 4, 2020, just three months after North Carolina adopted the 2020-2025 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). As a bipartisan effort, the act passed with strong support in both chambers of Congress and provides $900 million annually in Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) grants and $1.9 billion annually for public land maintenance.

Because GAOA was enacted after the previous SCORP, its full impact on North Carolina's state and local parks is only now being realized. Local parks departments have used these funds to expand trails, develop recreation facilities, and address infrastructure needs, ensuring continued access to outdoor spaces. As the 2025-2030 SCORP is developed, this federal investment plays a key role in supporting local agencies as they improve high-use areas and enhance outdoor recreation across the state.

2023 YEAR OF THE TRAIL

North Carolina's "Year of the Trail" initiative, led by the Great Trails State Coalition, highlighted the importance of trails and outdoor recreation across all 100 counties. Programming included guided hikes, trail maintenance events, and educational activities designed to increase public engagement and volunteerism. This statewide effort emphasized the role of local recreation providers in expanding access to outdoor spaces and strengthening community connections to trails.

Legislative support played a key role in advancing these efforts, with the NC General Assembly approving $55 million for trail and greenway development. This included $25 million for the Great Trails State Program, which funds new trail construction and extensions of existing networks.

Source: "Historic $55 Million Investment in North Carolina Trails Will Continue East Coast Greenway Development," East Coast Greenway, n.d., https://greenway.org/stories/historic-55-million-investment-in-north-carolina-trails-will-continue-east-coast-greenway-development.

YOUTH OUTDOOR POLICY PLAYBOOK

The Youth Outdoor Policy Playbook is a collaboration of leading national organizations working across sectors to ensure that all children have access to high-quality outdoor experiences and environmental education. The organizations publish an annual report highlighting the innovative ideas in youth outdoor engagement to inspire legislators, advocates, communities, and youth to replicate, rethink, and collaborate to build equitable youth outdoor opportunities. Their latest 2024 report summarizes policy trends, initiatives, and specific bills enacted in various states across the United States.

Sources: "2024 Youth Outdoor Policy Trends Report," National Caucus of Environmental Legislators, n.d., https://ncelenviro.org/yopp/annual-trend-reports/2024-youth-outdoor-policy-trends-report/.

"2024 Youth Outdoor Policy Trends Report," National Caucus of Environmental Legislators, n.d., https://ncelenviro.org/yopp/annual-trend-reports/2024-youth-outdoor-policy-trends-report/.

# Key Takeaways

- State Parks as Nature's Classrooms: North Carolina's state parks integrate education into visitor experiences, teaching natural and cultural history, conservation, and stewardship to build future generations of informed advocates.
- Bridging Recreation and Conservation: Educational initiatives in parks help visitors form personal connections to the environment, ensuring that recreation also fosters a sense of responsibility for preserving natural resources.
- Cities Connecting Children to Nature: National initiatives like CCCN focus on providing children access to green spaces, including at parks, schools, and libraries, to encourage outdoor participation.
- Promoting Nature Equity: CCCN emphasizes increasing outdoor opportunities for BIPOC communities and low-income families, addressing generational barriers and promoting awareness of recreation's health benefits.
- Encouraging Exploration Through Programs: Programs like North Carolina's Passport and Junior Ranger initiatives motivate visitors to explore new parks while linking recreational activities with environmental education.
- School Partnerships for Environmental Education: The Schools in Parks initiative ensures every public school student in North Carolina visits a state park, mirroring other states' efforts to integrate parks into school curriculum.
- Leveraging Technology for Learning: Programs like California's Parks Online Resources for Teachers and Students (PORTS)® Program[7] connect classrooms with park resources through technology, expanding access to environmental education across underserved communities.
- Youth Engagement in Environmental Stewardship: National programs such as the Youth Conservation Corps and Fish and Feathers Internship provide hands-on experiences in resource management, fostering stewardship among young participants.
- Building Environmental Education Networks: Collaboration among parks, schools, and community organizations creates robust educational experiences that promote sustainable practices and deeper connections with nature.
- Youth Outdoor Policy and Legislative Efforts: The Youth Outdoor Policy Playbook identifies and promotes innovative legislative efforts focused on outdoor equity, environmental learning, and access to outdoor leadership opportunities.
- Building relationships with elected representatives helps raise awareness of parks and recreation projects in their districts, ensuring they understand the value of these spaces and the impact of ongoing programs. Regular communication can lead to stronger advocacy, increased funding opportunities, and policy support for outdoor recreation initiatives.

7 State Of California, "Home - PORTS Program," PORTS Program, September 4, 2024, https://ports.parks.ca.gov/.




**Big Canoe - Falls Lake State Park**

# Conservation Trends

In the U.S., conservation efforts are increasingly aligned with global goals to address biodiversity loss, climate change, and habitat fragmentation. Parks and protected areas play a critical role in supporting these conservation goals, requiring planners to adopt broader approaches that go beyond isolated preservation to include restoration, sustainable use, and habitat connectivity.

## National Initiatives

A significant initiative driving domestic policy is the "30x30" vision, which aims to protect, conserve, and restore at least 30% of U.S. lands and waters by 2030.[8] Key recommendations in the 30x30 framework include:

- Create more parks and safe outdoor opportunities in nature-deprived communities.
- Support tribally led conservation and restoration priorities.
- Expand collaborative conservation of fish and wildlife habitats and corridors.
- Increase access for outdoor recreation.

## Statewide Initiatives

North Carolina's varied landscape, from the Atlantic coast to the Appalachian Mountains, has made it highly vulnerable to natural disasters. Hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, winter storms, and wildfires have left lasting impacts on the state and its communities. The growing frequency and severity of these events have prompted policymakers to adopt strategies for risk reduction and recovery. However, recent disasters like Hurricane Helene highlight the need for continued efforts to strengthen preparedness and protect residents as extreme weather becomes more common.

8 America the Beautiful 2022 Annual Report, n.d., https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/final-atb-2022-annual-report-508.pdf.




**NC State Parks Ranger Giving a Demonstration**

Parks are increasingly identified as critical infrastructure to protect against floods, increased heat island effect, and habitat loss. The Land and Water Conservation Fund is an invaluable funding resource at the state level to protect natural resources, and capital reinvestment while providing nature-based recreation.

Wildfire risks are managed through practices like prescribed burns, which are used by natural resource managers to reduce fuel loads and maintain healthy ecosystems, particularly in fire-adapted landscapes like pine forests and in particular, the longleaf pine habitats in North Carolina. Coastal resiliency efforts, especially in states like North Carolina, involve restoring wetlands, dunes, and other natural barriers to protect against storm surges and rising sea levels. For instance, North Carolina's living shorelines program use natural solutions—such as salt marshes, oyster reefs, and native vegetation—to combat shoreline erosion and enhance coastal resilience. Unlike traditional bulkheads, living shorelines absorb wave energy, reduce storm surge impacts, and improve water quality by filtering pollutants. The program supports habitat restoration while securing funding to help landowners adopt these sustainable erosion control methods.[9]

The North Carolina Natural and Walking Lands Action Plan details ongoing and proposed conservation and restoration policies and initiatives in North Carolina including a conservation tax credit.[10] In addition, Executive Order 305 established several policies for cabinet agencies including a native plant policy for state-owned property and a directive for state agencies to avoid and minimize adverse impacts to vulnerable ecosystems, particularly wetlands.[11]

Also in North Carolina, efforts are underway to improve habitat connectivity, ensuring that fragmented landscapes remain viable for wildlife movement and ecological health. Other initiatives taking place in the southeast include Florida's Wildlife Corridor initiative, which connects vital habitats, and Tennessee's Open Space Conservation Fund, which safeguards forests and waterways.[12]

9 North Carolina Coastal Federation. 2024. "Living Shorelines | North Carolina Coastal Federation." February 23, 2024. https://www.nccoast.org/living-shorelines/?_page=2#.

10 State of North Carolina. "North Carolina Natural and Working Lands Action Plan." June, 2020. https://www.deq.nc.gov/environmental-assistance-and-customer-service/climate-change/natural-working-lands/nwl-executive-summary/download.

11 North Carolina Office of the Governor "Executive Order 305, An Order to Protect and Restore North Carolina's Critical Natural and Working Lands." 2024. https://governor.nc.gov/executive-order-no-305/open

12 Ibid.

### Southeast Spotlight

In the Southeast, Jasper County, SC, passed a $94 million sales tax measure that includes land conservation funding. Also, the state of Louisiana directed revenues from renewable energy production to coastal protection and restoration efforts.

These developments underscore a growing public commitment to environmental stewardship and the recognition of conservation as a critical component of community well-being.

### Executive Order 305

Executive Order 305 establishes a statewide mandate to:

- Conserve 1 million acres by 2040
- Restore 1 million acres by 2040
- Plant 1 million urban trees by 2040

Similarly, The Nature Conservancy's report[13] on the 2024 United States elections highlights significant state and local ballot measures that collectively secured over $18 billion for climate and conservation initiatives.

## Global Initiatives

Across the globe, parks and conservation efforts are shifting to address the accelerating impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss, and habitat fragmentation. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and declining species populations are prompting a transition from isolated conservation efforts to landscape-scale strategies that restore ecosystems, enhance climate resilience, and reconnect fragmented habitats. Parks and protected areas play a growing role in carbon sequestration, flood mitigation, and water quality improvement, reinforcing their value as essential infrastructure for environmental and community well-being.

Transitioning from awareness to action, several global organizations are at the forefront of developing frameworks that address these conservation challenges holistically.

13 The Nature Conservancy. "CEO Statement on the 2024 Presidential Election." The Nature Conservancy Newsroom (blog), November 6, 2023. https://www.nature.org/en-us/newsroom/2024-presidential-election/.

The Convention on Biological Diversity, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), World Wildlife Federation, The Nature Conservancy, and several other organizations are key players at a global scale in developing a framework to address conservation issues as they relate not only to the core goal of conservation but also their impact on the ability to improve quality of life.

In the past several years, several significant global conservation trends related to parks and natural areas have emerged. Some of these are mentioned below:



## Habitat Connectivity

At a United Nations wildlife meeting in early 2024, a major initiative was launched to connect protected areas globally, particularly those vital for migratory species. This aims to address habitat fragmentation, a key threat to biodiversity. Connecting these natural areas ensures better ecological flow and resilience against environmental pressures.

Source: https://wwf.panda.org/wwf_news/?10698416/Convention-on-the-Conservation-of-Migratory-Species-of-Wild-Animals




## Biodiversity and Protected Areas

The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) set a target of conserving 30% of the world's lands and oceans by 2030. This effort emphasizes equitable governance, ensuring that Indigenous peoples' and local communities' rights are respected the value of traditional territories are considered.

The World Wildlife Fund's 2024 conservation initiatives reflect these global commitments by supporting large-scale habitat restoration and wildlife protection efforts. Recent projects include securing long-term funding for conservation in Bolivia and restoring the Rio Grande basin to improve water security and biodiversity.

Source: https://www.cbd.int/gbf/targets

## Equity and Human Rights in Conservation

A new global roadmap, launched by the IUCN, outlines 11 priority areas to advance human rights in conservation, including the rights of Indigenous peoples. This initiative highlights the importance of equity in conservation efforts, ensuring that local communities are involved in decision-making and that their lands are part of the solution.

Source: https://iucn.org/story/202405/new-global-roadmap-advancing-rights-and-equity-conservation-launched

# Key Takeaways

- Parks as Critical Infrastructure: Parks are increasingly recognized as essential infrastructure to mitigate environmental risks, including flood protection, heat island reduction, and habitat preservation, supporting both community resilience and ecosystem health.
- National trends towards the "30x30" goal to protect 30% of U.S. lands and waters by 2030, with priorities including creating more parks in underserved areas, supporting tribal conservation, and expanding wildlife corridors.
- Focus in the Southeastern U.S.: Key regional trends include wildfire protection through prescribed burns and enhancing coastal resiliency by restoring wetlands and dunes, crucial for protecting against rising sea levels and storms.
- Global Conservation Efforts: Efforts are intensifying to address biodiversity loss, climate change, and habitat fragmentation as critical threats to ecosystems and human well-being.




**Lake James State Park Prescribed Fires**

# Other Relevant Trends

## Social Media

Social media plays a dual role in shaping outdoor recreation trends, enhancing visibility and accessibility while also raising concerns about safety and environmental impact.[14] Platforms like Instagram and TikTok showcase adventurous and picturesque outdoor activities, inspiring many to seek similar experiences.[15] However, this often leads to risky behavior as individuals strive for the perfect shot, sometimes ignoring safety warnings, trespassing, damaging fragile ecosystems, and blatant vandalizing.[16] Notable examples include visitors venturing off designated trails, climbing dangerous areas, or engaging in other risky behaviors, all in pursuit of social media validation.

This increased exposure has led to overcrowding at popular outdoor spots, straining local environments and creating potential safety hazards. People may underestimate the risks involved in certain outdoor activities, resulting in accidents or even fatalities. The need for rescue missions has grown as unprepared hikers or climbers find themselves in dangerous situations.[17] To mitigate these risks, it is crucial to promote responsible outdoor behavior and increase safety education, particularly as social media continues to influence how people engage with natural spaces.

## Outdoor Recreation & Technology

Technological advances and a perpetual state of being "online" are also impacting outdoor recreation experiences. According to a Pew Research Center study, only 7 percent of American adults don't use the internet, whereas 20 years ago nearly 50% of American adults reported never going online. Additionally, research shows that nearly 60% of U.S. children began engaging with a smartphone before the age of five. In 2015, there were an estimated 4.9 billion devices connected to the internet, and this figure is estimated to increase to 25 billion by 2025.[18]

Digital tools and apps are becoming increasingly popular, helping users engage more deeply with natural environments. Trail apps, for example, provide real-time information on trail conditions, weather forecasts, and navigation, making outdoor activities safer and more accessible. Additionally, many parks and recreation departments are leveraging virtual tours and augmented reality to offer interactive and educational experiences.[19] These technologies allow users to explore parks from home or enhance their in-person visits with augmented reality features, such as virtual wildlife sightings or historical reenactments.

The rise of these digital tools is driven by a desire to make outdoor recreation more engaging and accessible to a broader audience. Mobile apps that gamify outdoor exploration are being used to reconnect youth and families with nature, fostering curiosity and learning through interactive content. Such innovations are not only enhancing visitor experiences but also promoting conservation and environmental stewardship by providing users with information about the ecosystems they are exploring.[20] As these technologies continue to evolve, they offer new ways for people to connect with the outdoors, supporting recreational and educational goals.

14 Weber, Jesse. 2018. "'Like' It or Not: The Realities of Social Media in the Outdoors." Outdoor Project. November 30, 2018. https://www.outdoorproject.com/articles/it-or-not-realities-social-media-outdoors.

15 Hung, Wei-Tien, and Guo-Bao Liou. n.d. "The Influence of Social Media on Outdoor Recreation Participation." AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). https://aisel.aisnet.org/pacis2022/333/.

16 Shannon, Morgan. 2021. "How Social Media Is Affecting the Outdoors." Wilderness Culture. June 7, 2021. https://wildernessculture.com/blogs/adventures/how-social-media-is-affecting-the-outdoors.

17 Berger, Eric. 2024. "The Number of Hikers Visiting US National Parks Is Increasing. So Is the Challenge of Keeping Them Safe." The Guardian, August 18, 2024. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/aug/18/national-park-hiker-safety-yosemite-half-dome.

18 Anderson, Monica. 2024. "7% Of Americans Don't Use the Internet. Who Are They?" Pew Research Center, April 14, 2024. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/04/02/7-of-americans-dont-use-the-internet-who-are-they/.

19 CivicPlus. 2024. "Tech Trends in Parks and Recreation: 2023 and Beyond - CivicPlus." CivicPlus. May 2, 2024. https://www.civicplus.com/blog/pr/6-tech-trends-in-parks-and-recreation-from-2023-and-what-to-look-for-in-2024/.

20 Colin Loch, Erik Zaft, Sydney Huotari. 2023. "Digital Technology in Outdoor Recreation:" ArcGIS StoryMaps, April 10, 2023. https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/7106bf3b1f9a4de0ad3d36c20ce6dd1e.

## Tourism-Dependent Economic Impact Trends

Outdoor recreation significantly drives tourism, boosting local economies and creating jobs. As of 2022, the outdoor recreation economy accounted for $1.1 trillion in gross output in the United States, representing 2.2 percent of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP).[21] This sector supports approximately five million jobs nationwide, demonstrating its critical role in economic growth.

The U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) has released its most current economic data, measuring outdoor recreation's powerful and positive economic impact on the United States economy in 2022. Despite continuing inflation, workforce, global supply chain, and climate challenges, North Carolina's outdoor recreation economy remains a powerful state driver, ranking 11th in the nation. The 2023 State Outdoor Recreation Economies Report[22] shows, by BEA measured metrics, outdoor recreation generates $14.6 billion in value added for North Carolina, accounts for two percent of the state's economy, and 2.9 percent of employment, or over 146,000 jobs.[23]

In 2023, North Carolina's state parks welcomed over 20.1 million visitors, a four percent increase from the previous year, highlighting the growing popularity of outdoor recreation in the state. This visitation contributes to local economies by supporting tourism-related businesses such as lodging, dining, and outdoor gear rentals.[24] Emerging visitation preferences reflect a growing demand for nature-based and adventure tourism. Activities such as hiking, biking, and water sports attract tourists seeking unique and active experiences.

The National Park Service reported that visitors to national parks in North Carolina spent $2.6 billion in the state in 2023. That spending resulted in 38,800 jobs and had a cumulative benefit of $4.1 billion to the state economy.[25] Outdoor recreation plays a central role in this growth, as visitors are drawn to the state's natural beauty, including its national parks, mountains, and coastlines.

## Need-Focused & Societal Trends

Recreation trends are evolving to address pressing societal challenges, positioning parks and open spaces as essential infrastructure investments to improve residents' quality of life. These trends emphasize the creation of multigenerational amenities that offer flexible, adaptable spaces for all ages, from children to seniors. These include amenities such as trails and greenways, open play areas, gardens, and low-impact sports such as pickleball, disc golf, etc.

There is also a growing focus on inclusivity, with recreation opportunities being designed to accommodate people of different abilities, including those with physical disabilities and neurodiverse conditions, ensuring that everyone can enjoy the benefits of parks. Inclusive playgrounds, which follow the Americans with Disabilities Act compliance and universal design principles and consider the physical and sensory needs of users with other types of disabilities, are a growing trend. Adaptive sports amenities are also becoming core recreation elements of the parks system.

In addition, parks are being leveraged to support broader community needs, such as establishing community gardens in areas identified as food deserts, helping to increase access to fresh, healthy food. Efforts are also being made to direct funding toward historically marginalized communities, expanding equitable access to well-maintained, quality open spaces. Furthermore, parks are being identified as unique sites to educate the public about local history and celebrate cultural legacies, enriching the community's connection to its heritage.

Finally, parks are now being known as essential health infrastructure. Access to high-quality parks and open space is now being linked to positive health outcomes to combat obesity-related disorders as well as mental health disorders.[26] Parks provide opportunities for people

21 "New Analysis Reveals Strength of the Outdoor Economy - Outdoor Industry Association." 2023. Outdoor Industry Association. November 17, 2023. https://outdoorindustry.org/article/new-analysis-reveals-strength-of-the-outdoor-economy/.

22 "Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2022 | U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA)."

23 "Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2022 | U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA)." n.d. https://www.bea.gov/news/2023/outdoor-recreation-satellite-account-us-and-states-2022.

24 "State Parks System Grew in Visitation, Size in 2023." 2024. NC DNCR. January 26, 2024. https://www.dncr.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2024/01/26/state-parks-system-grew-visitation-size-2023

25 "National Park Tourism in North Carolina Contributes $4.1 Billion to State Economy - Office of Communications (U.S. National Park Service)." n.d. https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1207/national-park-tourism-in-north-carolina-contributes-$4-1-billion-to-state-economy.htm.

26 Stigsdotter, Maller, Active Living Research, Alcock, White, BoP Consulting, and King's Fund. 2015. "Making the Case for Designing Active

to connect with others and mitigate the negative effects of loneliness and depression. Parks also provide places for solitude and reflection to help alleviate stress-related health problems. These trends represent a holistic approach to parks and recreation by fostering inclusivity, equity, health, and community resilience.

Cities." https://www.nrpa.org/contentassets/9c491783f73a45f89abb0443b1a3e977/parks-improved-mental-health-quality-life.pdf.

Societal challenges being addressed with parks and recreation as essential infrastructure:

- Multigenerational amenities and programming
- Specialized recreation for physical disabilities and neurodiverse user groups
- Access to food
- History and cultural Identity
- Fair access to quality open space and recreation
- Health and well-being




## DID YOU KNOW?

River Otters can be found throughout North Carolina. Since they are primarily nocturnal, it is hard to spot these very curious creatures during the day, but they are known to swim directly up to boats for a visit.

Today, River Otters are found throughout North Carolina, but this was unfortunately not always the case. By the 1930s, due to the trapping and selling of Otter pelts, the River Otter was virtually extinct in western North Carolina. It was not until 1990-1995 when the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission re-introduced 49 Otters to the western part of the state did the population begin to heal. Now, the Otter population has been fully restored in North Carolina!

Other than spending their time hunting for fish and crayfish under water, otters are known for their love of sliding down mud and snow. The heel pads on their feet allow the otter better traction on slippery surfaces, allowing these furry friends to climb back up to the top and enjoy another ride down the slide![1]

1 North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, 2022–2023 Regulations Digest (Raleigh, NC: NCWRC, 2022), https://www.ncwildlife.org/media/2210/open.

# Key Takeaways

- The Influence of Social Media on Visitor Management: As social media drives visitors to specific locations, parks must implement crowd management strategies to mitigate environmental degradation and safety risks caused by increased foot traffic and risky behavior.
- Promoting Responsible Recreation through Education Campaigns: Parks and recreation departments need to adopt proactive social media strategies that promote responsible outdoor behavior, encouraging visitors to prioritize safety and environmental stewardship.
- The Role of Digital Tools in Enhancing Access and Engagement: The adoption of trail apps, virtual tours, and augmented reality tools allows parks to offer more inclusive and interactive experiences, appealing to diverse audiences while supporting environmental education goals.
- Balancing Technology and Nature Experiences: While digital tools attract younger and tech-savvy users, planners must ensure that technology complements, rather than replaces, meaningful in-person engagement with nature to foster deeper connections.
- Economic Impact of Outdoor Recreation on Local Communities: With outdoor recreation contributing significantly to GDP and job creation, parks can position themselves as essential drivers of local economic growth through partnerships with tourism and hospitality sectors.
- Adapting to Shifting Tourism Preferences: As nature-based and adventure tourism grows, parks need to diversify offerings such as trails, water sports, and low-impact activities to meet evolving visitor demands and generate additional revenue streams.
- Inclusive and Adaptive Recreation for Community Resilience: The growing trend toward adaptive sports and inclusive playgrounds reflects the need to design parks that serve people of all abilities, fostering a sense of belonging and enhancing social cohesion.
- Addressing Broader Community Needs through Parks: Parks are increasingly recognized as solutions to community challenges, such as addressing food insecurity through community gardens and improving health outcomes in marginalized areas.
- Parks as Essential Health Infrastructure: With parks linked to improved mental and physical health outcomes, planners must emphasize the role of green spaces in combating obesity, loneliness, and stress-related disorders.
- Preserving Cultural History through Park Design: Parks are evolving to serve as spaces for community storytelling, celebrating cultural legacies, and promoting public awareness of local history, strengthening community identity and connection.




Bill Russ - Visit NC



# STATE ENGAGEMENT

# OVERVIEW

Engagement is an essential component of the planning process. A well-executed engagement effort provides insight into the needs and desires of North Carolina residents, builds trust throughout the state, and ensures the long-term success of the planning work establishing a sense of ownership with the residents.

Engagement was a vital component to the 2025-2030 SCORP to ensure that all voices are heard in the planning process and the plan recommendations are rooted in public input. Throughout the two-year project cycle, the Division made a conscious effort to engage North Carolina's residents from the mountains to the sea. This plan used a combination of input from residents across the state via in-person events, digital surveys, a scientific survey, as well as focus groups and stakeholder involvement.




## Methodology

North Carolina is the fourth fastest-growing state in the nation[1], with two of the top ten fastest-growing cities, Charlotte and Raleigh[2], within its borders. Spread across 100 counties with varying topographies, needs, resources, and access levels, the project approach to engagement was stretched far and wide. The focus of the engagement events was to host at least one event within each of the eight prosperity zones to gather insight and opinion from that region. A robust digital survey was publicized during attendance at special events and through media outlets in DNCR and the Division. Survey respondents were asked to provide their zip code which allowed the project team to access in real time which counties and zones had low participation and adjust the engagement plan accordingly to increase outreach to those areas. **Due to the flexible nature of the outreach plan, all 100 counties were represented in the digital Public Opinion Survey!** The project team worked closely with the Division staff to identify stakeholders for more focused conversations around the mission of the Division and the key themes identified by the Division leadership related to access, health and wellness, environmental resiliency, and economic impact. Finally, a scientific survey was distributed by ETC Institute across the state as a market research tool to capture feedback representative of the state's population.

1 US Census Bureau, "NET International Migration Drives Highest U.S. Population Growth in Decades," Census.gov, September 29, 2025, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2024/population-estimates-international-migration.html.

2 South Continues to Lead the Way With Largest and Fastest Growth. (2024, May 16). United State Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2024/subcounty-population-estimates.html

### Intentions & Barriers to Engagement

The engagement plan intentionally addressed key barriers to public engagement, ensuring a more inclusive approach that reached as many residents as possible. Recognizing limited broadband access in some areas, especially in northeastern and western counties according to the North Carolina Broadband Availability Index conducted by the Division of Broadband and Digital Opportunity[3], outreach efforts included both online and in-person events to gather input. North Carolina spans 53,819 square miles and is 150 miles in width and 500 miles in length, making in-person participation difficult for those in remote areas. To mitigate this, engagement activities were strategically planned within seven of the eight prosperity zones, with virtual options and already planned regional events to accommodate all residents. These efforts demonstrate a commitment to removing as many barriers as possible and fostering a planning process that truly reflects the voices of the entire state.

By employing outreach methods such as online platforms, mail-in surveys, and phone calls, the survey process minimizes barriers to participation, allowing voices from various communities to be heard. Using a scientific survey also removes barriers and ensures that participants are a diverse representation of the State's demographics. This approach is a best practice and proven market research tool that provides several

3 "NC Broadband Map." NC Department of Information and Technology Division of Broadband and Opportunityn.d. https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/1ca29805a2454ffab6b9579702b99e59/page/Broadband-Availability.

critical advantages, particularly in fostering equitable and inclusive engagement. Additionally, scientific surveys enhance data reliability and mitigate bias. Standardized methodologies reduce errors, ensuring the data is both accurate and trustworthy. The thoughtful design of the survey distribution and the rigorous statistical analysis applied to the results further minimize the influence of disproportionate or biased opinions, which may arise in less structured forms of public engagement. This comprehensive approach ensures that the findings are robust and reflective of the broader population with varying levels of access and influence.

## Engagement Branding Efforts

The project team developed a custom branding package for the Division to advertise the SCORP outreach efforts as well as to educate the state about what a SCORP is and what exactly the Division does. **"Shaping Outdoor Recreation from Mountains to Sea"** is a calling card to the state and local parks located amongst the Appalachian Trail within the mountains, through the Piedmont where large parks like Umstead and Eno River reside, all the way to Atlantic Ocean where Fort Macon State Park has blended history and recreation for over 100 years. It is also a calling card to the Mountains-to-Sea Trail (MST) which runs through many state and local parks and is a major driver of economic value within outdoor recreation due to successful marketing campaigns from VisitNC and the Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail.

The branding for this project was thoughtfully crafted to reflect the natural beauty of the state. The chosen logo, color scheme, and typography symbolize the project's focus on the uniqueness of the outdoor recreation opportunities for its residents and visitors. For example, the vibrant colors evoke a sense of energy and collaboration, while the typography provides a modern take on the signage font seen when welcoming people into state park areas. The branding aims to resonate with more than just those who already participate in outdoor recreation but also with those who are curious and learning, fostering a sense of connection and shared purpose that aligns with the Division's mission **"to inspire all its residents and visitors through conservation, recreation, and education."**

The project team also developed a branding package for the Division to advertise the outreach efforts. This included digital material such as marketing graphics, yard signs, stickers, and flyers. This branding package also included a pre-written social media marketing campaign distributed to local agencies.




# DID YOU KNOW?

North Carolina has the only confirmed wild Red Wolf population in the world, with 15-17 wolves roaming free (at the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in Eastern NC). Their population drastically declined more than 85% from 2010 to 2020. Due to their drastically low population numbers, the Red Wolf is the world's most endangered wolf. Their population decline primarily derived from intensive predator control programs and the alteration of their habitats.[1]

Today, 241 Red Wolves are cared for in captivity across the United States in the hopes of rehabilitating their dwindling numbers. In Eastern North Carolina, locals are working diligently to advocate for and care for their local Red Wolves as we hope to slowly restore Red Wolf populations.[2]

1 https://ncwf.org/wildlife/red-wolves/

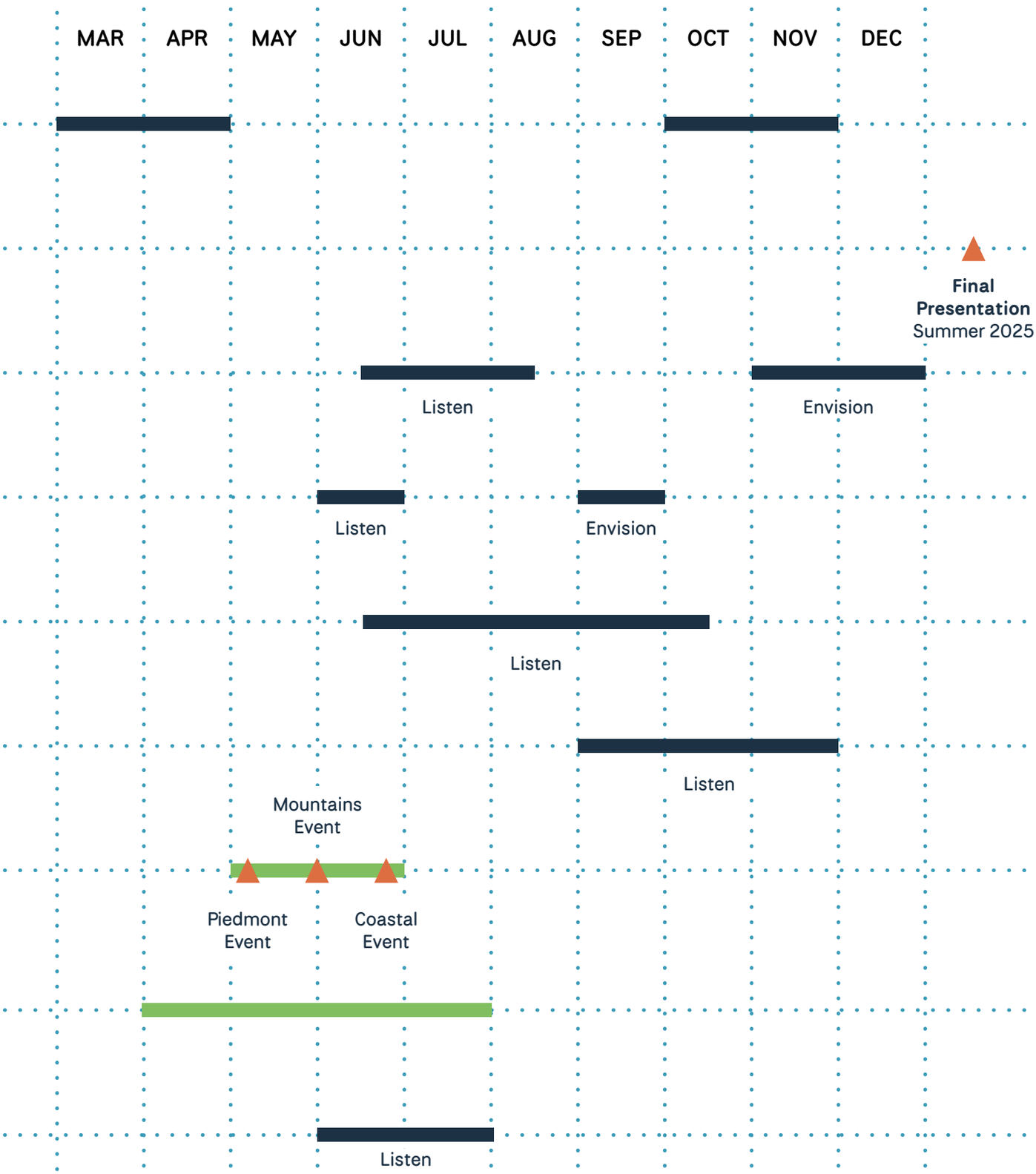
2 1. "Red Wolf (Canis Rufus): U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service," U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, n.d., https://www.fws.gov/species/red-wolf-canis-rufus.




Knightdale Arts & Education Festival Engagement

| Meeting Name | Meeting Milestone | Meeting Goal | Venue/Platform | Groups Involved |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Division Staff Meetings | Listen, Envision, Recommend | Feedback | Virtual | Division Core Team |
| Interdivisional Meeting | Recommend | Inform | Virtual | DPR Staff Final Project Presentation |
| Stakeholder Committee | Listen, Envision, Recommend | Inform, Feedback | Virtual | Community Members |
| NCDEQ/US Fish & Wildlife/Wetlands | Listen | Inform, Feedback | Virtual | Department Staff |
| Focus Group Meeting | Listen, Envision | Inform, Feedback | Virtual | Key Themes Focus Groups |
| In-Person Community Outreach | Listen | Inform, Feedback | In-Person | COGs & Project Team |
| In-Person Community Events | Listen | Inform, Feedback | In-Person | CDGs & Project Team |
| Scientific Survey | Listen | Feedback | Main-In/Virtual | ETC |
| Public Opinion Survey | Listen | Feedback | Virtual | ETC |

**Figure 6.1: Engagement Schedule**


MAR
APR
MAY
JUN
JUL
AUG
SEP
OCT
NOV
DEC
Final Presentation
Summer 2025
Listen
Envision
Listen
Envision
Listen
Listen
Mountains Event
Piedmont Event
Coastal Event
Listen

## Engagement Events

| Event | Date | Location | Prosperity Zone |
|---|---|---|---|
| Fort Macon 100th Anniversary Celebration | June 4, 2024 | Fort Macon *State Park* Atlantic Beach, NC | Southeast |
| World Refugee Day | June 8, 2024 | Moore Square (City of Raleigh Park) Raleign, NC | North Central |
| Durham Bulls Game | June 15, 2024 | Durham Bulls Stadium Durham, NC | North Central |
| West Marion Community Forum Juneteenth Freedom Celebration - Family Fun Day | June 21, 2024 | Lake James *State Park* Nebo, NC | Northwestern |
| Folkmoot Festival | July 19, 2024 | Waynesville, NC | Western |
| Durham Bulls Game | August 17, 2024 | Durham Bulls Stadium Durham, NC | North Central |
| 47th Annual International Folk Festival | September 28, 2024 | Downtown Fayetteville Fayetteville, NC | Sandhills (South Central) |
| Mum Festival | October 12, 2024 | Union Point Park (City of New Bern) New Bern, NC | Southeast |
| Halifax County Harvest Days Festival | October 19, 2024 | 4H Rural Life Center Halifax, NC | Northeast |
| Brutal Bike Ride | August 16, 2025 | Jefferson, NC | Northwestern |
| Knightdale Arts & Education Festival | August 16, 2025 | Knightdale Station Park Knightdale, NC | North Central |
| Carolina Beach Farmers Market | August 23, 2025 | Lake Park Carolina Beach, NC | Southeast |

**Table 6.1: Engagement Across the Eight Prosperity Zones**

## Key Partnerships

Embarking on an effort such as a statewide comprehensive plan requires collaboration and intentionality. North Carolina is a unique and beautiful state filled with many champions of the great outdoors. During this project, the Division was intentional in not only gathering the public's opinion, but also gathering insight from partner agencies, organizations, and industries. From their involvement, the Division created new bonds and relationships with other recreational providers, environmental caretakers, and outdoor retail professionals. The Division would like to thank the groups on the following pages for their willingness and participation throughout this process and hope this is the beginning of accomplishing each organization's shared visions around conservation, education, and recreation:

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| North Carolina Recreation and Park Association (NCRPA) | WayPoint Adventures | The Conservation Fund | Great Outdoor Provision Co. | Catalyst Sports |
| The Nature Conservancy | Raleigh Parks, Recreation & Cultural Resources | Raleigh Accessibility Consulting | North Carolina Coastal Federation | Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail |
| American Rivers | North Carolina Wildlife Federation | Young Men's Christian Association of North Carolina | Friends of State Parks | The Pew Charitable Trust |
| National Park Conservation Association | Triangle Land Conservancy | Young Men's Christian Association of High Point | Aidilisms | Friends of Lower Haw River |
| Young Men's Christian Association of Western NC | Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) | Three River Land Trust | Young Men's Christian Association of Greensboro | Culture Queen Outdoors |
| New River Conservancy | Young Men's Christian Association of Southeastern NC | Black Folks Camp Too | Mainstream Conservation Trust | Dan River Basin Association |
| VisitNC, Outdoor NC | Eno River Association | REI Co Op | North Carolina State University Tourism Extension | Davidson Land Conservancy |


Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy
Rocky Mount Parks and Recreation Director
Coastal Land Trust
North Carolina Land and Water Fund
Friends of Valdese Recreation
Catawba Land Conservancy
Association for the Preservation of the Eno River Valley, Inc.
America's State Parks
North Carolina Department of Commerce
United States Forest Service (National Forest)
North Carolina American Indian Heritage Commission
United States Fish and Wildlife Service
NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (DNCR)
African American Heritage Commission (under NCDNCR)
Piedmont Land Conservancy
North Carolina Department of Transportation (DOT)
NC Forest Service
North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission
Blue Ridge Conservancy
East Coast Greenway
North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality (NCDEQ)
American Indian Heritage Commission (under DNCR)
Foothills Conservancy
Great Trails State Coalition
Historic Sites (under NCDNCR)
Conserving Carolina
Mountain True
North Carolina Outdoor Recreation Office (OREC)
Roanoke River Partners
Yadkin Riverkeeper
City of Fayetteville Arts Council
Alamance County Parks and Recreation
North Carolina Office on Disability and Health (DHHS)
North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
Recreation Resources Service (RRS)

# Key Findings

## In-Person Engagement Events

The intention of the in-person engagement events was to gather insight and opinions regarding the values that residents believe should drive the 2025-2030 SCORP. What the project team also discovered was that the in-person events also served to introduce the public to the North Carolina Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) and Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) funding opportunities, which can be used to meet local park and trail needs. In most areas where engagement events were held, there was a state park within an hour of the event location that residents were familiar with and spoke fondly about. Regarding their own local park systems, residents were more attuned to provide deeper feedback as those parks and open spaces are often closer and visited more frequently. The project team used these engagement events to not only gather information, but also to share what SCORP is and how the values shared will help drive PARTF and LWCF funding allocations over the next five years. Residents were asked which conservation, education, and recreation values should guide plan priorities and decision-making. Those values are summarized here.



### Recreation

- Beach access and renovation following storms.
- Quality trails and places to walk/run around.
- Picnics and leisure activities in the park.
- More inclusive play areas for children's with disabilities.
- Free fishing clinics for families.
- Places where families can spend time together.
- More programs for individuals with disabilities.
- Accessibility and the awareness of public parks.
- More restroom facilities.
- Accessibility issues at state park sites.



### Conservation

- History of park lands and sites.
- Conservation of coastal assets.
- Encourage native biodiversity.
- Keep parks from being overused.
- Preserve native vegetation and species.
- Plant native plants.
- Protect sensitive environments and species.
- Support park education in schools and encourage stewardship.
- Save the marine animals.
- Preserve the environment.
- Maintain a healthy relationship between park spaces and the built environment.



### Education

- Having access to trails for bird watching and other ecosystem viewing.
- Guided tours and narration throughout park faciltiies.
- Education on insects and bugs.
- Wildlife trainings and demonstrations.
- Homeschool activities during the week.
- Signage of birds and wildflowers are around site and facilities.
- Flora & Fauna educational materials accessible online and on site.
- Increased marketing of state parks.
- Plant identification.
- Contest to have kids draw nature and encourage visitation.
- Availability of broadband and wifi access at parks.

In addition to the values exercise, an online survey was advertised during the events by distributing stickers, postcards, and flyers to event attendees. This effort helped gather feedback in a centralized place on the web-based platform.

## Public Opinion Survey (N=6040)

To better understand how the public interacts with state, local, and federal parks, outdoor recreation areas, programs and facilities, the project team, Division, and partners launched the online Public Opinion Survey, open to all residents within the state. The survey was utilized to gauge the public's current involvement in parks, any barriers to accessing parks, priority outdoor recreation provisions for the future, and whether the public supports the idea of financially contributing to the betterment of outdoor recreation provision across the State. The Public Opinion Survey was distributed through the SurveyMonkey platform from June 2024 through October 2024. Over 6,000 people responded to the survey, surpassing the Division's participation goals.

When assessing the survey findings, and the state as a whole:

- **Greatest Barrier to Access:** Overcrowding, followed by no personal time, and lack of facilities or services that meet individual needs.
- **Would Like to Try or Spend More Time:** On trails, camping, and participating in water-based activities.
- **Ranked the Goals as the Highest Priority for Recreation Providers:** Protection of natural resources, providing local, regional, and statewide trails, and the improvement and maintenance of existing facilities.
- **Very Supportive of the Alternative Funding Options:** Donations via land and estate planning, concessions & sales, and dedicated funding sources like an excise tax.
- **Determined the Improvement & Expansion Actions as Most Important to their Households:** Actively pursue watershed protection and preservation of environmentally sensitive areas, develop more traditional recreational opportunities, (like trails, campgrounds, playgrounds, picnicking, etc.), and acquire more land for the preservation of habitat and naturally and/or historically significant features of the state.

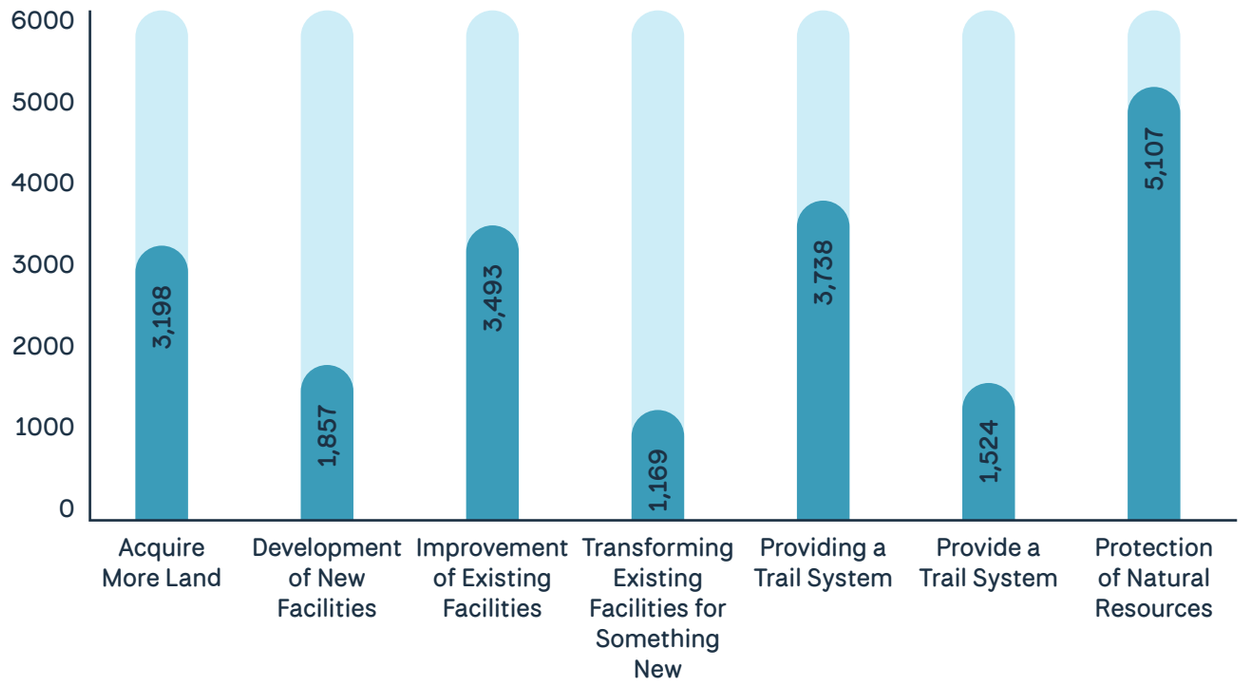



**Figure 6.2: Public Opinion on Goals Prioritization by North Carolina Parks and Recreation Providers.**

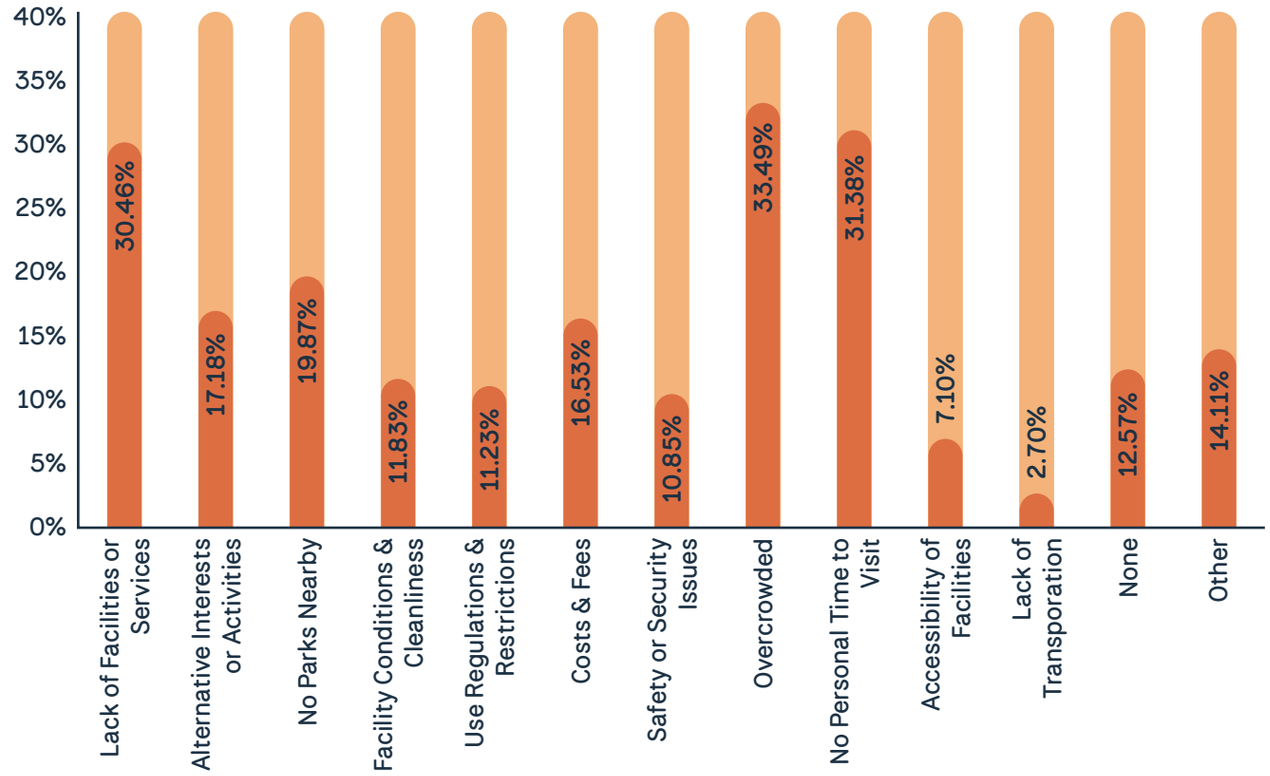



**Figure 6.3: Barriers to Enjoying Outdoor Recreation Activities**

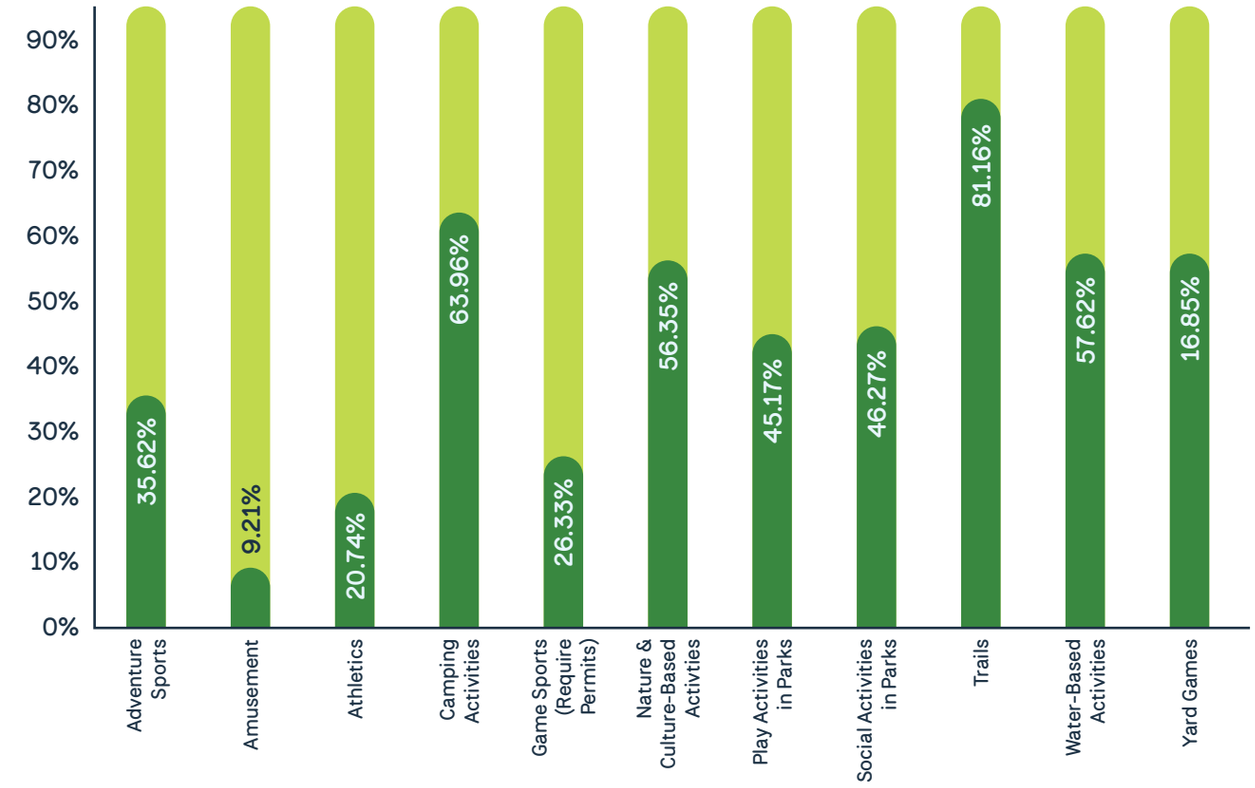



**Figure 6.4: Activities People Would Like to Try or Spend More Time Doing**

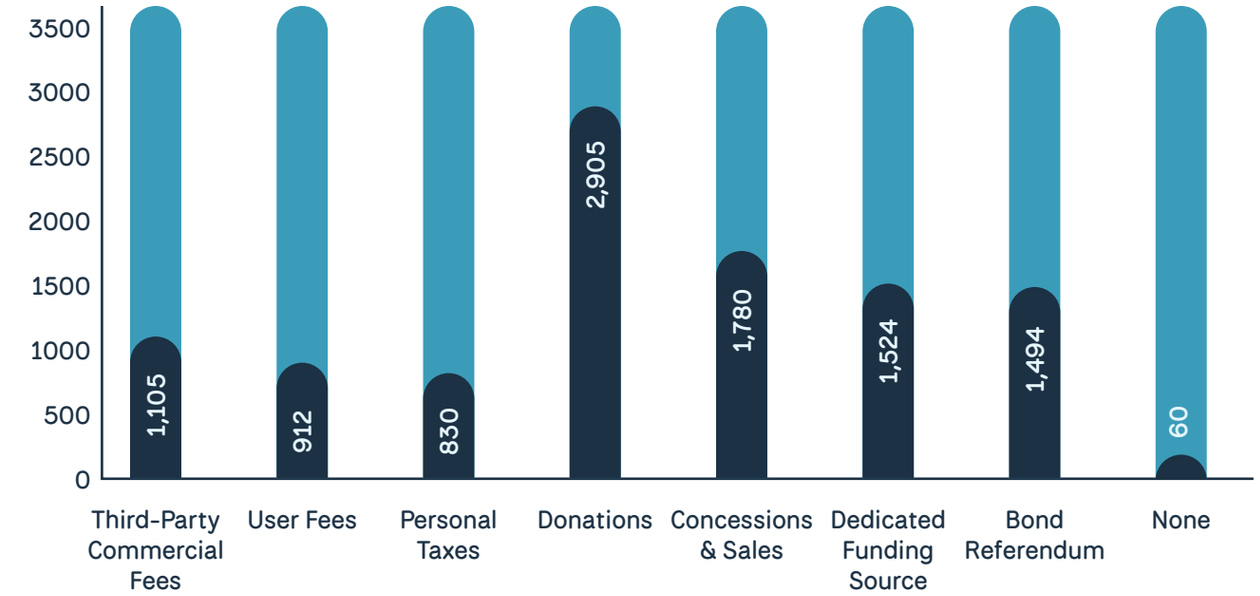



**Figure 6.5: Support for Alternative Funding Sources**

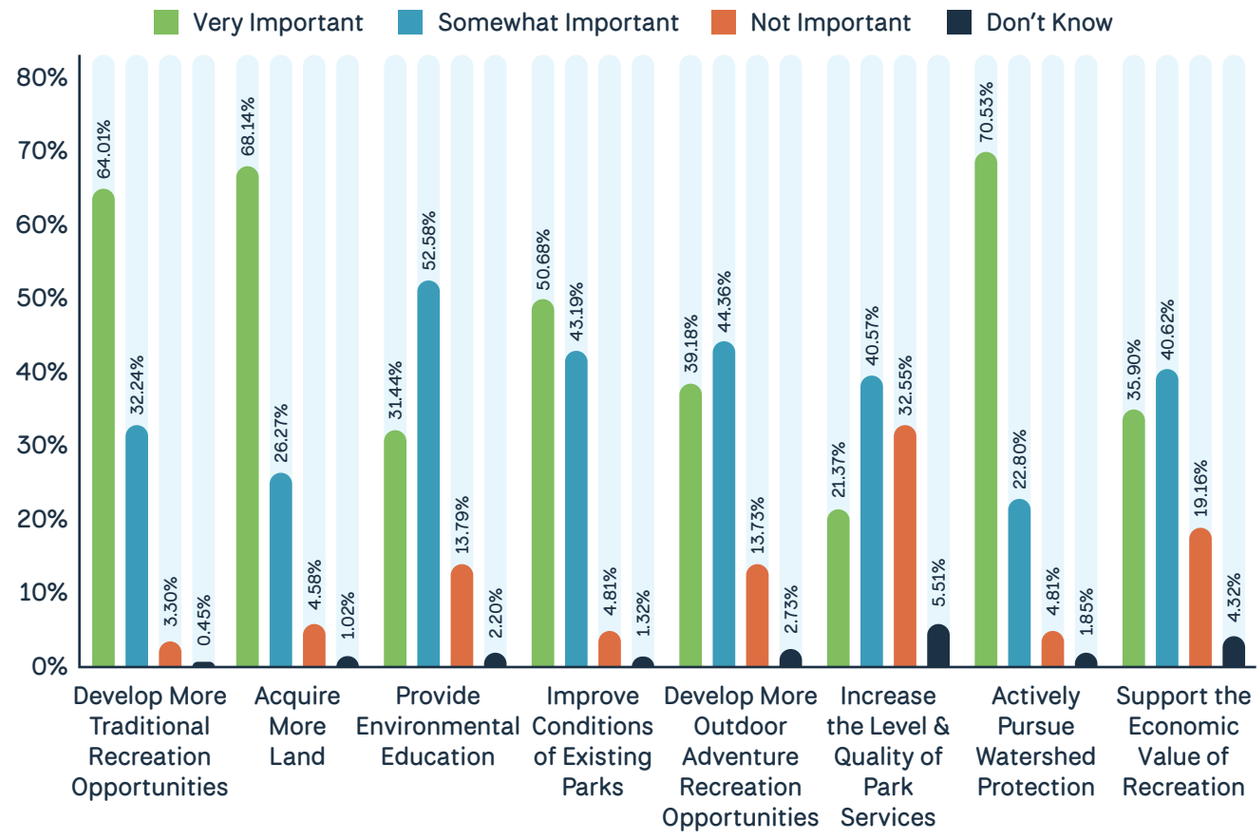



**Figure 6.6: Priority Actions for Improvements and Expansions**

The North Carolina Department of Commerce operates eight administrative regions known as Prosperity Zones. Each Zone features a one-stop, physical location, providing residents and businesses the ability to interact with representatives from multiple state agencies, as well as to encourage better collaboration between the agencies themselves. The Division uses prosperity zones to track the allocation of LWCF funding grants throughout the eight zones.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **North Central**<br>**$12,574,220** | **Piedmont Central**<br>**$10,976,448** | **Southwestern**<br>**$10,512,100** | **Southeast**<br>**$7,050,160** |
| **Sandhills**<br>**$4,818,945** | **Western**<br>**$4,637,615** | **Northwestern**<br>**$4,462,146** | **Northeast**<br>**$2,800,953** |

Since 1965, the LWCF program has supported the creation and maintenance of park areas for current residents and visitors, for generations to come.

When assessing distribution of LWCF funding, there is almost a $10 million funding gap between the most funded zone (North Central) and the least funded zone (Northeast).

From the Public Opinion Survey data, the following information was gleaned at the Prosperity Zone level:

## North Central Prosperity Zone (n=1918)

- **Greatest Barrier to Access:** No personal time, followed by overcrowding, and lack of facilities or services that meet individual needs.
- **Would Like to Try or Spend More Time:** On trails, camping, and participating in water-based activities.
- **Ranked the Following Goals as the Highest Priority for Recreation Providers:** Protection of natural resources, providing local, regional, and statewide trails, and the acquisition of new parks and open space.
- **Very Supportive of the Following Alternative Funding Options:** Donations via land and estate planning, a bond referendum, and concessions & sales.
- **Determined the Following Improvement & Expansion Actions as Most Important to their Households:** Actively pursue watershed protection and preservation of environmentally sensitive areas, acquire more land for the preservation of habitat and naturally and/or historically significant features of the state, and develop more traditional opportunities like trails and campgrounds.

## Northeast Prosperity Zone (n=239)

- **Greatest Barrier to Access:** Lack of facilities or services that meet individual needs, followed by no personal time, and no parks being located within a reasonable distance.
- **Would Like to Try or Spend More Time:** On trails, participating in nature and culture-based activities, and participating in water-based activities.
- **Ranked the Following Goals as the Highest Priority for Recreation Providers:** Improvement and maintenance of existing infrastructure and facilities, providing local, regional, and statewide trails, and the acquisition of new parks and open space.

- **Very Supportive of the Following Alternative Funding Options:** Donations via land and estate planning, concessions, and dedicated funding sources like an excise tax.
- **Determined the Following Improvement & Expansion Actions as Most Important to their Households:** Actively pursue watershed protection and preservation of environmentally sensitive areas, acquire more land for the preservation of habitat and naturally and/or historically significant features of the state, and develop more traditional opportunities like trails and campgrounds.

## Northwestern Prosperity Zone (n=502)

- **Greatest Barrier to Access:** Overcrowding, followed by no personal time, and lack of facilities or services that meet individual needs.
- **Would Like to Try or Spend More Time:** On trails, camping, and participating in nature and culture-based activities.
- **Ranked the Following Goals as the Highest Priority for Recreation Providers:** Protection of natural resources, providing local, regional, and statewide trails, and the improvement and maintenance of existing infrastructure and facilities.
- **Very Supportive of the Following Alternative Funding Options:** Donations via land and estate planning, concessions, and dedicated funding sources like an excise tax.
- **Determined the Following Improvement & Expansion Actions as Most Important to their Households:** Acquire more land for the preservation of habitat and naturally and/or historically significant features of the state, develop more traditional opportunities like trails and campgrounds, and actively pursue watershed protection and preservation of environmentally sensitive areas.

## Piedmont Triad Prosperity Zone (n=722)

- **Greatest Barrier to Access:** Overcrowding, followed by no personal time, and lack of facilities or services that meet individual needs.
- **Would Like to Try or Spend More Time:** On trails, camping, and participating in water-based activities.
- **Ranked the Following Goals as the Highest Priority for Recreation Providers:** Protection of natural resources, providing local, regional, and statewide trails, and the improvement and maintenance of existing infrastructure and facilities.
- **Very Supportive of the Following Alternative Funding Options:** Donations via land and estate planning, concessions, and a tie for third between dedicated funding sources like an excise tax and a bond referendum.
- **Determined the Following Improvement & Expansion Actions as Most Important to their Households:** Actively pursue watershed protection and preservation of environmentally sensitive areas, acquire more land for the preservation of habitat and naturally and/or historically significant features of the state, and develop more traditional opportunities like trails and campgrounds.

## Sandhills (South Central) Prosperity Zone (n=295)

- **Greatest Barrier to Access:** Lack of facilities or services that meet individual needs, followed by no parks being located within a reasonable distance, lack of facilities, and no personal time.
- **Would Like to Try or Spend More Time:** On trails, camping, and participating in water-based activities.
- **Ranked the Following Goals as the Highest Priority for Recreation Providers:** Protection of natural resources, improvement and maintenance of existing infrastructure and facilities, and providing local, regional, and statewide trails.
- **Very Supportive of the Following Alternative Funding Options:** Donations via land and estate planning, concessions, and dedicated funding sources like an excise tax.
- **Determined the Following Improvement & Expansion Actions as Most Important to their Households:** Develop more traditional recreational opportunities, actively pursue watershed protection and preservation of environmentally sensitive areas, and improve the conditions of existing parks.





Sharon Beckett and other NC State Parks Staff Search for the White Irisette

## Southeast Prosperity Zone (n=620)

- **Greatest Barrier to Access:** Lack of facilities or services that meet individual needs, no parks located within a reasonable distance, and lastly, overcrowding.
- **Would Like to Try or Spend More Time:** On trails, camping, and participating in water-based activities.
- **Ranked the Following Goals as the Highest Priority for Recreation Providers:** Protection of natural resources, improvement and maintenance of existing infrastructure and facilities, and providing local, regional, and statewide trails.
- **Very Supportive of the Following Alternative Funding Options:** Donations via land and estate planning, concessions, and dedicated funding sources like an excise tax.
- **Determined the Following Improvement & Expansion Actions as Most Important to their Households:** Actively pursue watershed protection and preservation of environmentally sensitive areas, acquire more land for the preservation of habitat and naturally and/or historically significant features of the state, and develop more traditional opportunities like trails and campgrounds.

## Southwestern Prosperity Zone (n=884)

- **Greatest Barrier to Access:** No personal time, followed by overcrowding and the lack of facilities or services that meet individual needs.
- **Would Like to Try or Spend More Time:** On trails, camping, and participating in nature-based activities.
- **Ranked the Following Goals as the Highest Priority for Recreation Providers:** Protection of natural resources, providing local, regional, and statewide trails, and the improvement and maintenance of existing infrastructure and facilities.
- **Very Supportive of the Following Alternative Funding Options:** Donations via land and estate planning, concessions, and a bond referendum.
- **Determined the Following Improvement & Expansion Actions as Most Important to their Households:** Actively pursue watershed protection and preservation of environmentally sensitive areas, acquire more land for the preservation of habitat and naturally and/or historically significant features of the state, and develop more traditional opportunities like trails and campgrounds.

## Western Prosperity Zone (n=657)

- **Greatest Barrier to Access:** Overcrowding, followed by a lack of facilities or services that meet individual needs, and no personal time.
- **Would Like to Try or Spend More Time:** On trails, camping, and participating in water-based activities.
- **Ranked the Following Goals as the Highest Priority for Recreation Providers:** Protection of natural resources, providing local and state trails, and a tie between the acquisition of new parks and the improvement and maintenance of existing infrastructure and facilities.
- **Very Supportive of the Following Alternative Funding Options:** Donations via land and estate planning, concessions, and dedicated funding sources like an excise tax.
- **Determined the Following Improvement + Expansion Actions as Most Important to their Households:** Actively pursue watershed protection and preservation of environmentally sensitive areas, acquire more land for the preservation of habitat and naturally and/or historically significant features of the state, and develop more traditional opportunities like trails and campgrounds.

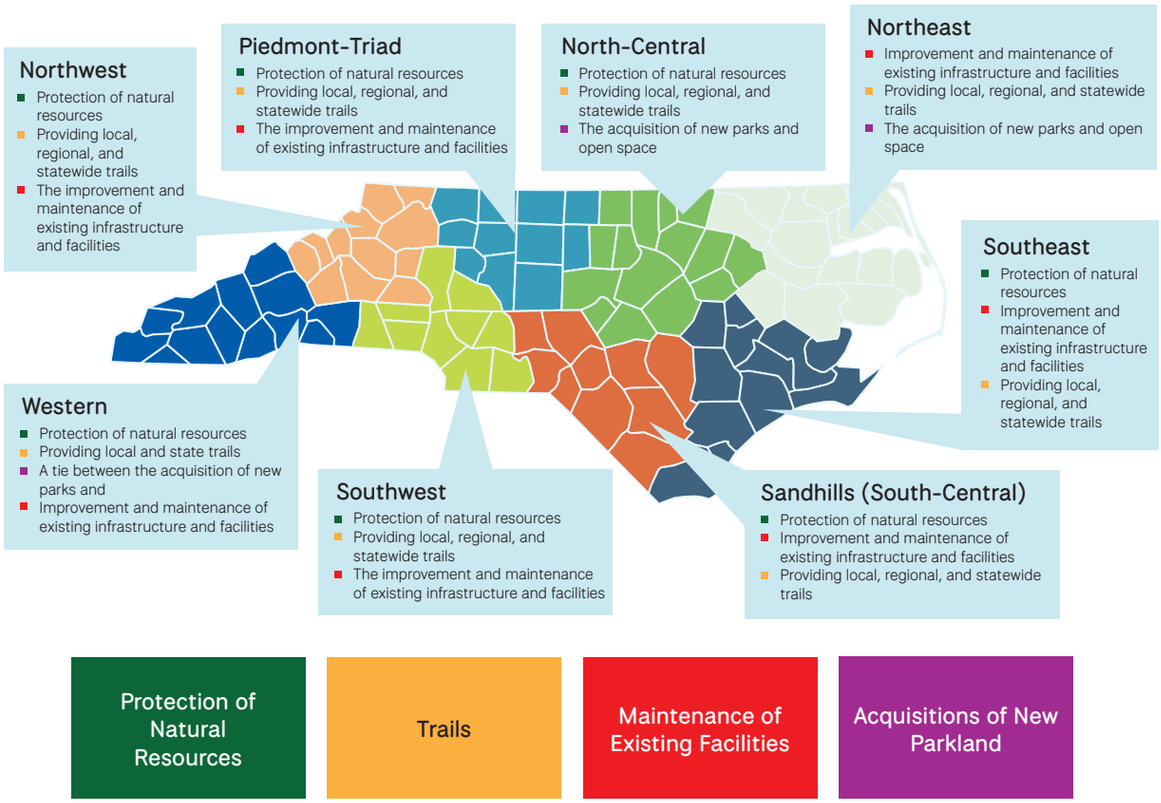



**Figure 6.7: Prosperity Zone Recreation Provider Priorities**

## Collective Findings

- As seen in Figure 6.7, seven of the eight Prosperity Zones have indicated their number one priority is protection of natural resources. The Northeast Zone noted their highest priority as improving and maintaining existing infrastructure which is consistent with the assessment of LWCF Funding in this Zone over the past ten years. It is worth noting, the Northeast Zone had the least amount of funding, almost six times less than the North Central Zone. Given that the Northeast Zone includes the majority of the Outer Banks, which have been impacted by hurricanes frequently and remain vulnerable, it is notable that Protection of Natural Resources did not fall in their top three priorities.
- Providing Local, Regional, and Statewide Trails was ranked second for six out of eight zones – with the Southeast and Sandhills Zones ranking that as their third highest priority.
- Almost all zones noted that Improvement and Maintenance of Infrastructure and Existing Facilities is a top three priority – except the North Central Zone.
- The North Central and Northeast Zones were the only zones to note that the Acquisition of New Parks and Open Space as a top priority. This is not surprising for the North Central Zone which includes the Triangle area and Wake County. Given the rapid growth in this region, land is a very valuable commodity that is being rapidly taken up for residential development. It's clear that residents recognize land acquisition and conservation is critical to provide this rapidly growing region with outdoor recreation opportunities.

## Tribal Community Engagement

In the first effort of its kind, this project included a robust effort to engage the tribal communities throughout the state. Although North Carolina has only one federally recognized tribe eligible for LWCF, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, the state is home to seven additional tribes and four urban Indian organizations. Those tribes and organizations are: Coharie Tribe, Haliwa-Saponi Indian Tribe, Sappony, Waccamaw Siouan Tribe, Meherrin Indian Nation, Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina, Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation, Cumberland County Association for Indian People, Metrolina Native American Association, Triangle Native American Society, and Guilford Native American Association.

Anchored within a growing partnership with the North Carolina Indian Affairs Commission, the project team aimed to understand how tribal communities interact with the great outdoors and their individual needs and perspectives as descendants of the original stewards of the land.

The Division also conducted a Tribal Communities Survey to better understand the outdoor recreation programs offered within Tribal community areas as well as funding and facility needs. The team also attended the Statewide Tribal Leaders Meeting in February 2025. From the Tribal Communities survey, the project team learned the following regarding the tribal community's relationship to outdoor recreation:

- **Greatest Barrier to Access:** Lack of facilities or services that meet individual needs, cost and/or fees, and a tie between no parks within a reasonable distance and the conditions/cleanliness of facilities.
- **Would Like to Try or Spend More Time:** Participating in social activities in parks, partaking in game sports that require permits like fishing and hunting, and a three-way tie between participating in nature and culture-based activities, camping activities, and using trails.
- **Ranked the Following Goals as the Highest Priority for Recreation Providers:** Protection of natural resources, improvement and maintenance of existing infrastructure and facilities, and providing educational programs and visitor services.
- **Very Supportive of the Following Alternative Funding Options:** Donations via land and estate planning, concessions, and dedicated funding sources like an excise tax.
- **Determined the Following Improvement & Expansion Actions as Most Important to their Households:** Actively pursue watershed protection and preservation of environmentally sensitive areas, improve the condition of existing parks, and a tie between developing more traditional opportunities like trails and campgrounds and supporting local/state economic development/tourism by focusing on the economic value of parks and recreation.

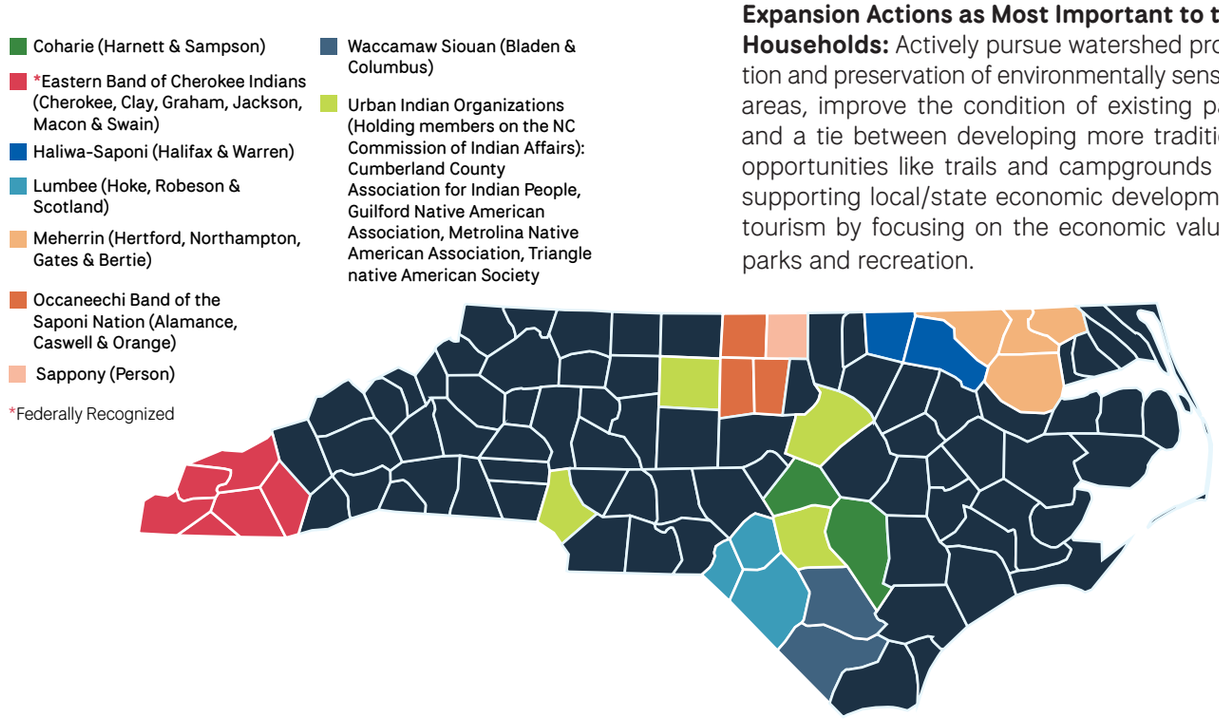



**Figure 6.8: NC Commission of Indian Affairs - NC Tribal and Urban Communities**

## Scientific Survey (N=1200)

A scientific survey was conducted using a sample size of 1,200 residents from across the State. Unlike the Recreation Provider and Public Opinion Surveys, the respondents of the scientific survey were randomly selected to ensure the survey was statistically valid. The Scientific Survey consists of questions that are aimed to gain an understanding of how the public participates in outdoor recreation. The primary benefit of conducting the Scientific Survey is that through random sampling, the responses will be an accurate representation of the overall state population, including varying races, genders, socioeconomic, and political backgrounds. The Scientific Survey was distributed by ETC Institute (ETC)via mail from June 2024 and responses were collected until the desired number of responses are received.

The scientific survey is an industry best practice and an approved market research tool that provides an opportunity to reach individuals who are not as inclined as others to participate in community engagement processes. A more detailed description of methodology for ensuring statistically valid results is contained in the Appendices.

## Recreation Activities (Facilities) Needs & Priorities

**Activities Needs:** Respondents were asked to identify if their household had a need for 31 recreation activities and to rate how well their needs for each were currently being met. Based on this analysis, ETC was able to estimate the number of households in the community that had the greatest "unmet" need for various activities. The three activities with the highest percentage of households indicating that they have an unmet need were:

1. Picnic shelter/areas
2. Educational exhibits/visitor center
3. Public/arboretum garden

**Activity Importance:** In addition to assessing the needs for each activity, ETC also assessed the importance of each activity to residents. Based on the sum of respondents' top four choices, these were the four activities that ranked most important to residents:

1. Tent camping
2. Camping with cabins
3. Public/arboretum garden
4. Picnic shelter/areas

**Priorities for Activity Investments:** The Priority Investment Rating (PIR) was developed by ETC to provide organizations with an objective tool for evaluating the priority that should be placed on recreation and parks investments. The PIR equally weighs (1) the importance that residents place on activities and (2) how many residents have unmet needs for the activities.

Based on the PIR, the following activities were rated as high priorities (PIR greater than or equal to 100) for investment:

- Public/arboretum garden (PIR=171)
- Camping with cabins (PIR=161)
- Tent camping (PIR=150)
- Swim beach-lake (PIR=143)
- Educational exhibits/visitor center (PIR=136)
- Boat/canoe/kayak/SUP lake access (PIR=131)
- Zoological area (PIR=120)
- Swim area-pool (PIR=118)
- Amphitheater/stage/concerts (PIR=116)
- Orchard (PIR=113)
- Hike-in/backpack camping (PIR=103)
- Dog park (PIR=100)



Visit NC - North Carolina Botanical Garden

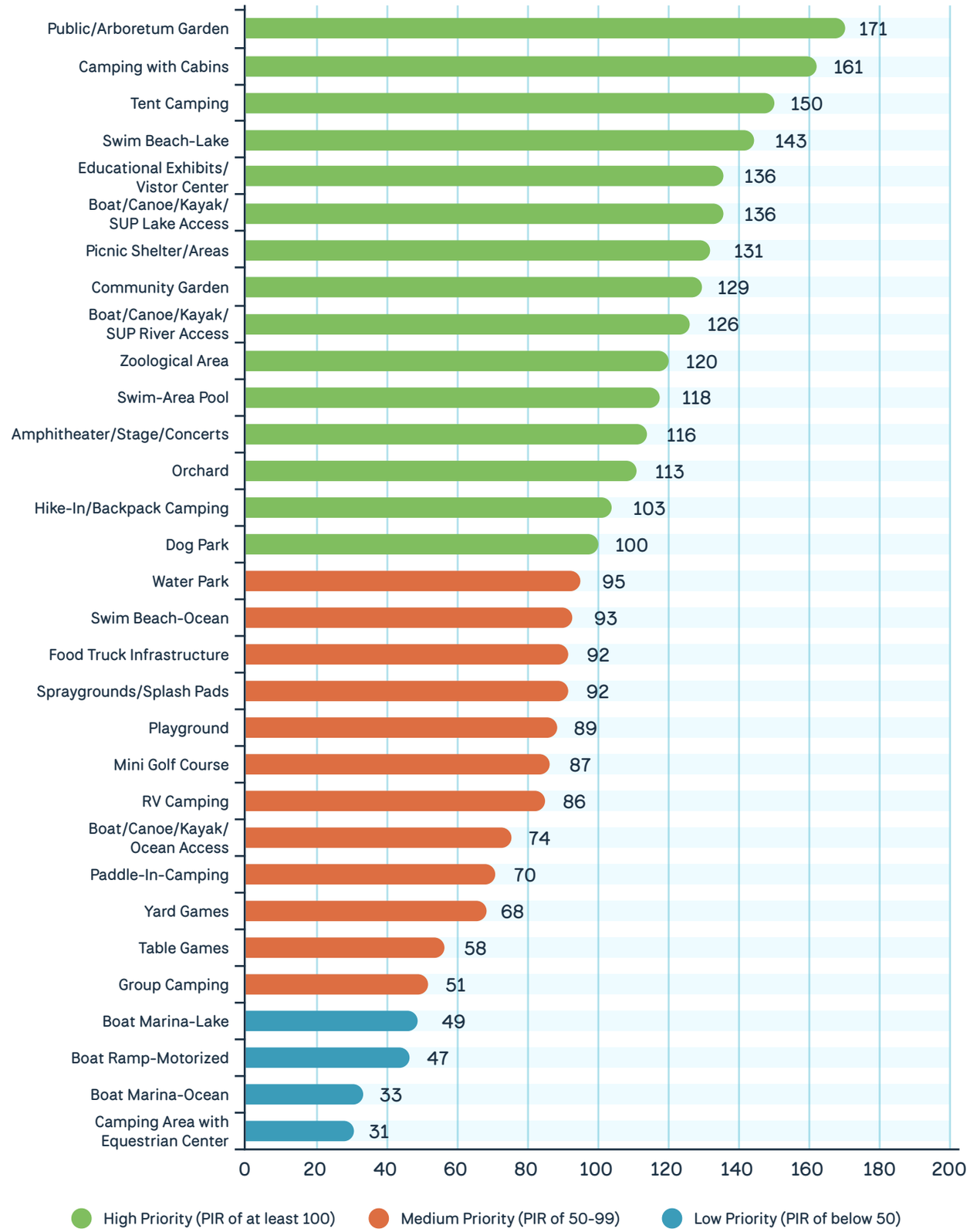



**Figure 6.9: Top Priorities for Investment for Activities Based on Priority Investment Rating**

## Recreation Activities (Programs) Needs & Priorities

**Activities Needs:** Respondents were asked to identify if their household had a need for 42 recreation activities and to rate how well their needs for each were currently being met. Based on this analysis, ETC was able to estimate the number of households in the community that had the greatest "unmet" need for various activities. The three activities with the highest percentage of households indicating that they have an unmet need were:

1. Trails (Walking, Hiking, Biking, etc.)
2. Paddling
3. Fishing-freshwater from a bank and/or pier

**Activity Importance:** In addition to assessing the needs for each activity, ETC also assessed the importance that residents placed on each item. Based on the sum of respondents' top four choices, these were the four activities that ranked most important to residents:

1. Trails (Walking, Hiking, Biking, etc.)
2. Paddling
3. Fishing-freshwater from a bank and/or pier
4. Bike riding/rollerblading

Based on the PIR, the following activities were rated as high priorities for investment:

- Trails (Walking, Hiking, Biking, etc.) (PIR=184)
- Paddling (PIR=138)
- Bike riding/rollerblading (PIR=128)
- Fishing-freshwater from a bank and/or pier (PIR=108)
- Fitness/challenge course area (PIR=108)
- Shooting range (PIR=106)



**Knightdale Arts & Education Festival**

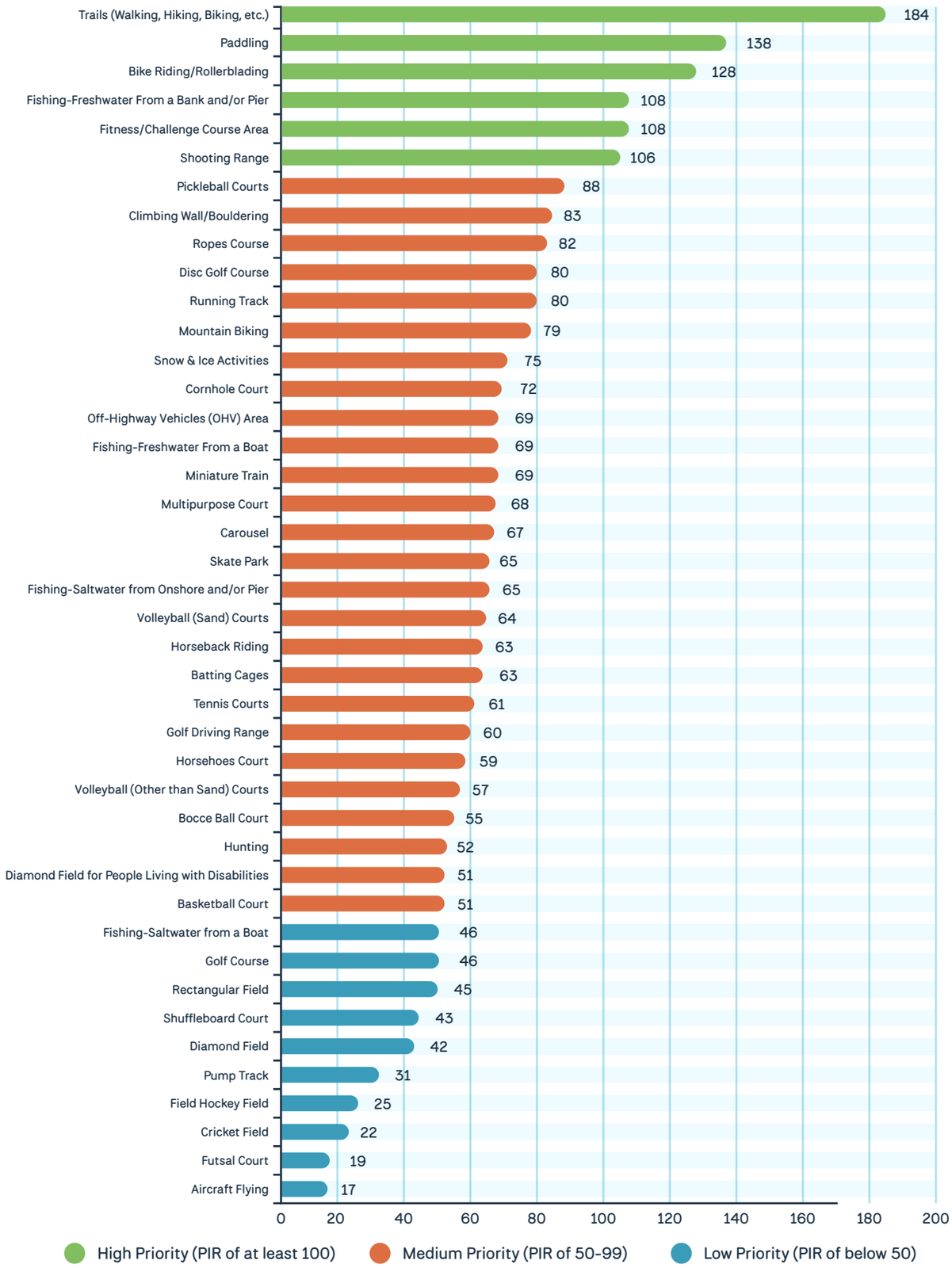



**Figure 6.10: Top Priorities for Investment for Activities Based on Priority Investment Rating**

# Stakeholders & Focus Group Meetings

## Focus Groups

Focus groups are an important part of the planning process because they provide qualitative insights into community needs, preferences, and concerns that might not be fully captured through surveys or engagement events alone. In these small, guided discussions, participants can voice their opinions in a more conversational, open-ended setting, allowing for deeper exploration of key issues.

Focus groups can help uncover fresh perspectives, highlight unique challenges faced by specific agencies and organizations, and reveal underlying motivations that shape people's opinions on various topics. This depth of insight aids the Division in designing policies, programs, and projects that are better aligned with partner agencies and organizations that have a shared vision. Furthermore, focus groups help build trust with those organizations, fostering a sense of inclusion and ownership in the planning process, which is crucial for the successful implementation of any long-range plan.

Participants for this exercise represented various age groups, all of which have unique and specific recreational needs. They responded from their unique positions, expressing their needs, wants, and concerns, and the needs of the people they represent. Each group added value to the overall community engagement effort representing varied roles in improving the quality of life across the State. Considering age and age groups is important when planning park and recreation amenities, programs, and services. Varied age ranges have distinct needs, interests, and preferences, making it essential to tailor offerings for relevance and participation. Different developmental stages, safety considerations, and social interaction dynamics further underscore the importance of intentional park planning. When taken into account with other engagement efforts, the approach ensures operational efficiency for the parks department by optimizing resource allocation and ensuring the effectiveness of recreational initiatives.




**Halifax Harvest Days Engagement Event**

## RECREATION FOCUS GROUP KEY TAKEAWAYS

- As outdoor recreation-centered economic impact and development becomes a focus across the state, it is importance that these small, park-adjacent towns are prepared for increased visitors.
- Collaboration between state agencies like the Division of Parks and Recreation, the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, and NC Department of Transportation is crucial for trail maintenance and feasibility studies.
- The involvement of nonprofit organizations and local communities throughout both the planning and project construction process is essential.
- Overcrowding and conservation are pressing concerns for parks and outdoor enthusiasts.
- Development pressures and habitat loss are significant environmental challenges.
- Federal funds are often underutilized due to local funding constraints to match the allocations. Importance of bridging funding sources and leveraging state support.
- Engaging with programs like AllTrails can improve public communication. AllTrails allows park rangers or organizations to manage their own park accounts which can help reduce the spread of misinformation.
- Emphasize land acquisition for new state parks and trails.
- Develop measurable goals for trail development and park amenities.
- Encouraging visitation to smaller parks to distribute visitor impact as the state continues to grow and some of the favorite parks experience overcrowding.

## CONSERVATION FOCUS GROUP KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Many partners noted that they consistently monitor population changes and demographic projections to plan for expanding outdoor recreation access and necessary land conservation.
- It was suggested that there should be a statewide focus on creating conservation corridors to support migration and habitat transitions due to environmental changes.
- Many agreed that engaging communities as stakeholders in the planning process would enhance conservation efforts and encourage environmental stewardship.
- It was noted that there are opportunities for the Divsion to enhance resources by streamlining environmental review processes and increasing staff resources.
- Those in Forest Management and Emergency Response noted the importance of developing fire plans and shoreline stabilization projects to mitigate climate change effects.
- A need for diversified funding sources to support various recreational opportunities and infrastructure development was mentioned; many people competing for the same pools of funding.
- Introducing new programs at the state level is supported so long as the Division can ensure adequate staffing levels to implement programs and maintain facilities.

## EDUCATION FOCUS GROUP KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Emphasis on including tribes in planning and decision-making processes, elevating their voices, and implementing their recommendations.
- Programs to educate the public on climate resiliency and the environmental impact of park infrastructure with the hope of promoting environmental stewardship.
- Partnerships to connect state parks to national historic trails, enhancing the national story and cementing North Carolina's role in a greater story.
- Need for more camping facilities, public access, and infrastructure to accommodate increased visitation as the state population grows.
- Community engagement presents opportunities to connect with community leaders and increase awareness of state parks and their resources.

## Stakeholders Meetings

Stakeholder meetings are another critical component of the planning process as they ensure that key voices, including those who may be directly impacted by the Plan or have specific expertise relevant to the plan, are actively involved. These meetings bring together representatives from diverse groups—such as government agencies, community organizations, businesses, nonprofits, and advocacy groups—to provide input, share information, and discuss potential challenges and opportunities. By involving stakeholders, the Division can gain valuable insights, identify concerns, and understand varying perspectives that may affect the plan's development and implementation. This collaboration enhances transparency, builds trust, and helps to address potential conflicts, leading to more balanced, well-rounded, and widely supported outcomes. Additionally, stakeholder meetings facilitate networking and partnership opportunities, which can be crucial for mobilizing resources and ensuring long-term commitment to the plan's goals.




**Project Kickoff Meeting**

## HEALTH & WELL-BEING

- Continued funding support for land conservation and trail development to enhance health and wellness access.
- Focus on underserved communities, addressing physical and mental health outcomes.
- Addressing climate change, tree canopy, and flood prevention as critical issues to health and wellness.
- Ensuring safe access to parks, especially for minority communities who may not feel safe outdoors.
- Programs to prevent diabetes and other chronic illnesses through lifestyle changes.

## RECREATION FOR ALL

- Address physical, programmatic, and informational barriers for individuals with disabilities.
- Implement training for park rangers and staff to better understand and accommodate diverse needs and populations.
- Develop marketing strategies that reflect diverse demographics.
- Plan to educate and diversify the workforce in state parks to reflect changing demographics by 2030.
- Measure success through increased diversity in park visitors and staff, and enhanced community engagement.

## RESILIENCY

- Population growth is increasing pressure on land conservation efforts, especially at the coast where more and land is being washed away.
- Strong educational programs in schools to inspire environmental advocacy among youth.
- Focus on understanding human behavior to enhance access to clean recreational waters.
- Advocacy education and training are vital for smaller nonprofits to understand how they too can utilize funding opportunities in partnership with local governments.
- Importance of aligning conservation efforts with development pace. There is a feeling that there is not enough time to "wait it out" or "create another plan" when development is happening so rapidly.

## ECONOMIC IMPACT

- The Division's strongest assets include its ability to facilitate partnerships and access to grants.
- Cultural tourism and storytelling at park sites were noted as key areas of strength.
- Strengthening collaborations with tribal communities and leveraging partnerships with organizations like VisitNC and Outdoor NC Partners can enhance economic and cultural impact.
- Priority areas include improving communication and data availability around visitation, enhancing public engagement, and addressing budgetary constraints.
- Actions needed include conducting audits to identify native community imprints and increasing access to tribal communities.

## Recreation Provider Survey (N=128)

To better understand the issues and challenges faced by recreation facility and service providers throughout the state, the Division conducted a Recreation Provider Survey. With the help of organizations like North Carolina Recreation and Parks Association (NCRPA), the Recreation Provider Survey was distributed across the state to municipal agencies, nonprofit organizations, as well as volunteer organizations that provide recreational facilities and services. The goal of the survey is to understand how those organizations operate daily including: the size of their programming portfolio, challenges in staffing, budget concerns, identified trends in recreation, as well as success in accessing grant funding. The Recreation Provider Survey was distributed through SurveyMonkey from June 2024 through October 2024.

A total of 128 surveys were completed by agencies and organizations involved in providing outdoor recreation, including representatives from state, county, and municipal government. When surveyed, outdoor recreation providers noted that renovating existing park infrastructure is their top priority over the next five years, followed by expanding the trail system and connecting regional trails. Many also noted within the comments that providing pickleball facilities is another great need within their communities which aligns with the growing participation rates in the sport. According to providers, acquisition of land is possible but funding for construction and development is insufficient. While providers appear to be interested in increasing their offered services, most noted the challenges in making that happen are due to staffing shortages and lack of financial support.

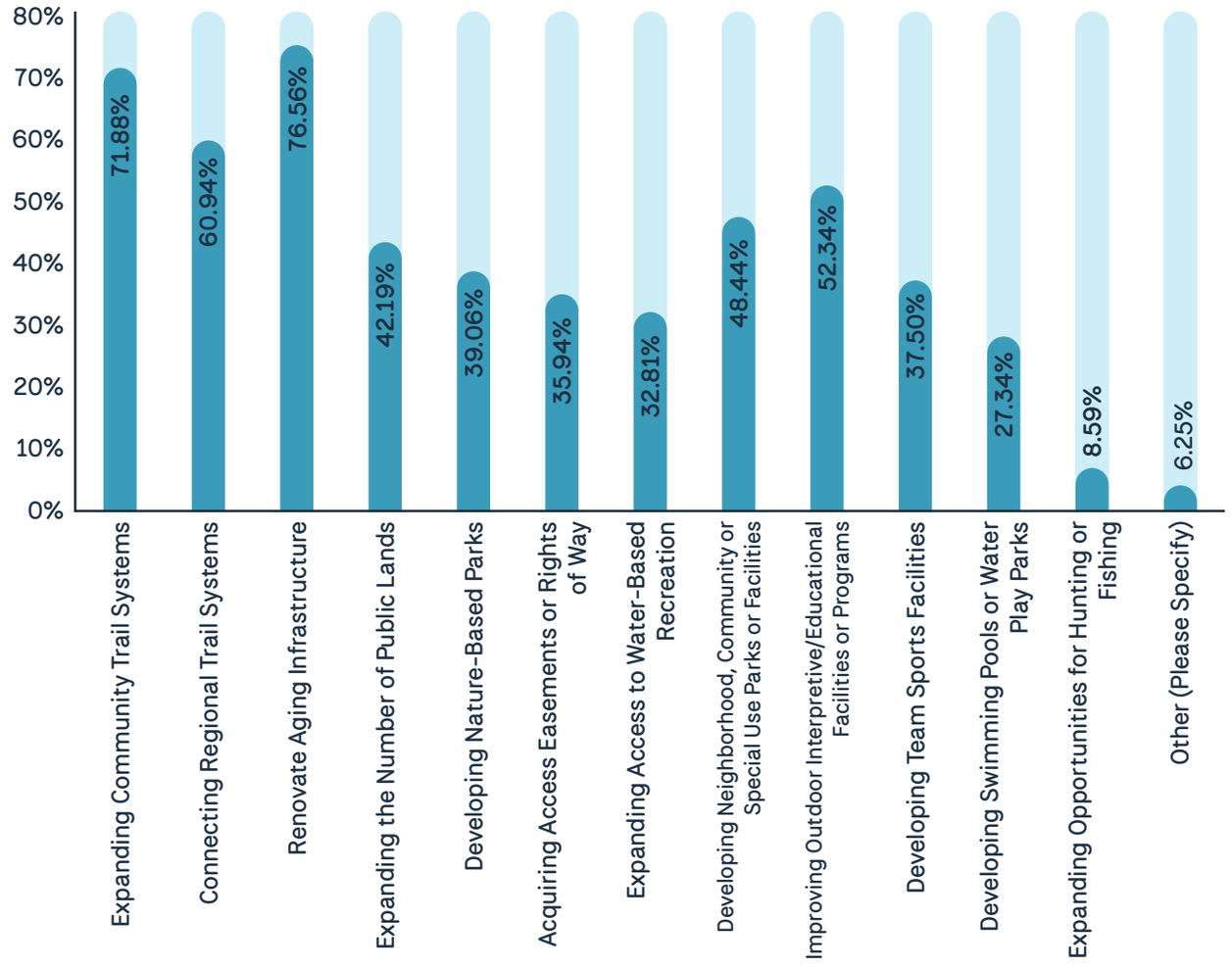



**Figure 6.11: Five Year Priorities for Recreation Providers**

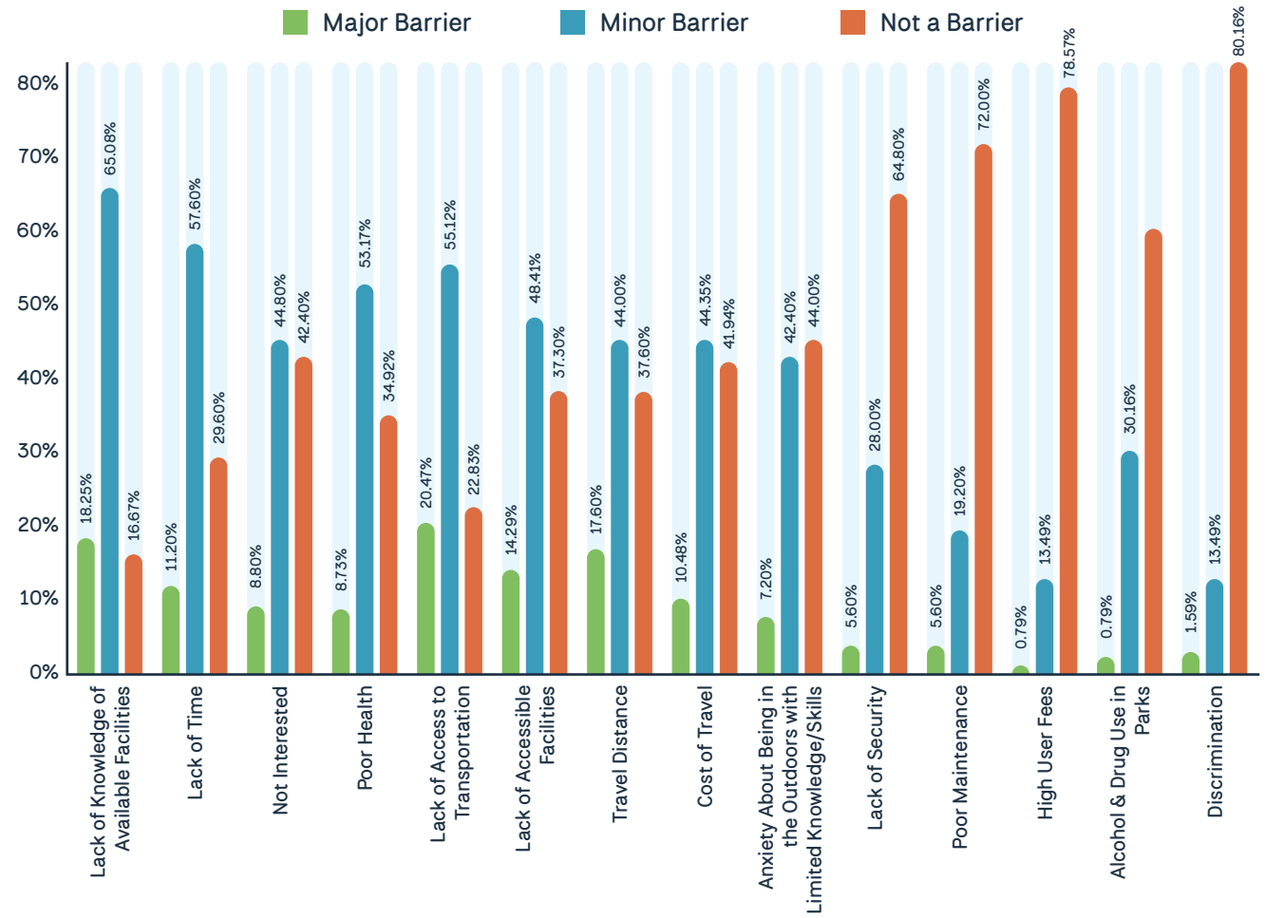



**Figure 6.12: Identified Barriers to Resident Participation**

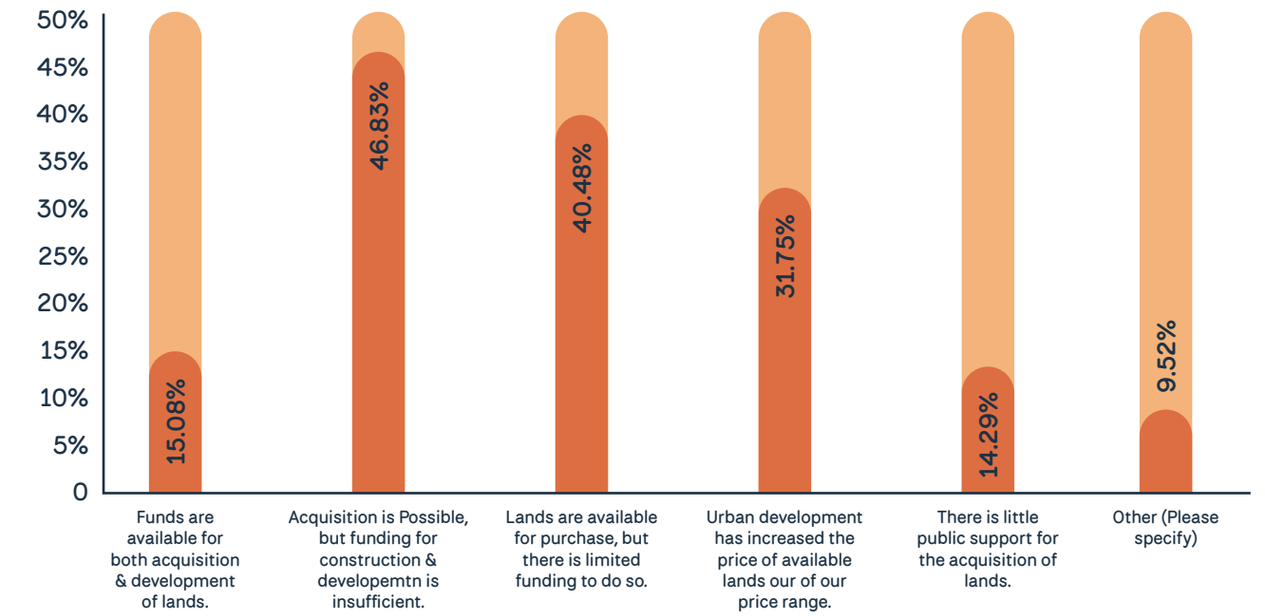



**Figure 6.13: Challenges Related to Land Acquisition and Development**

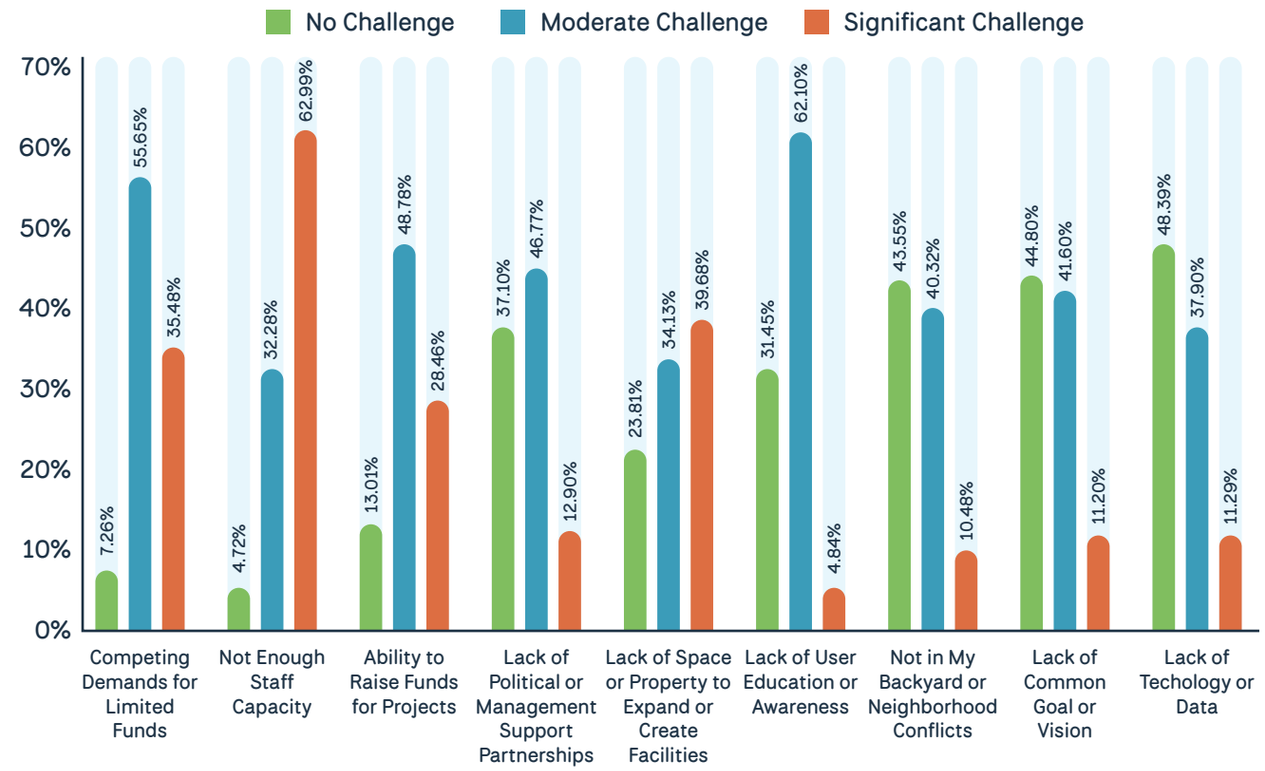



**Figure 6.14: Challenges in Addressing Program or Facility Issues**

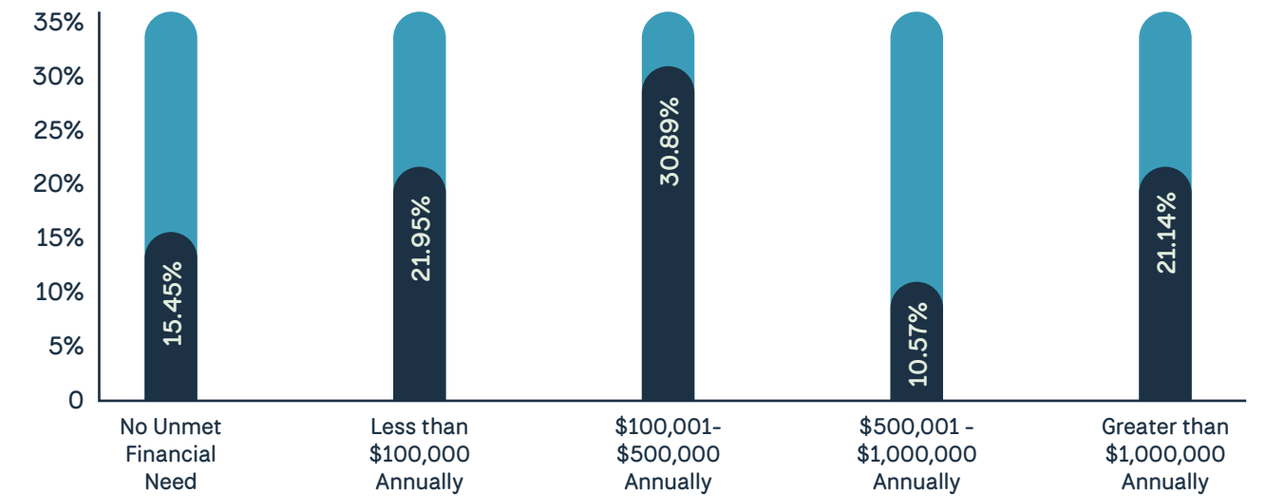



**Figure 6.15: Magnitude of Unmet Financial Needs Related to New Facilities**




**Figure 6.16: Magnitude of Unmet Financial Needs Related to Existing Facilities**

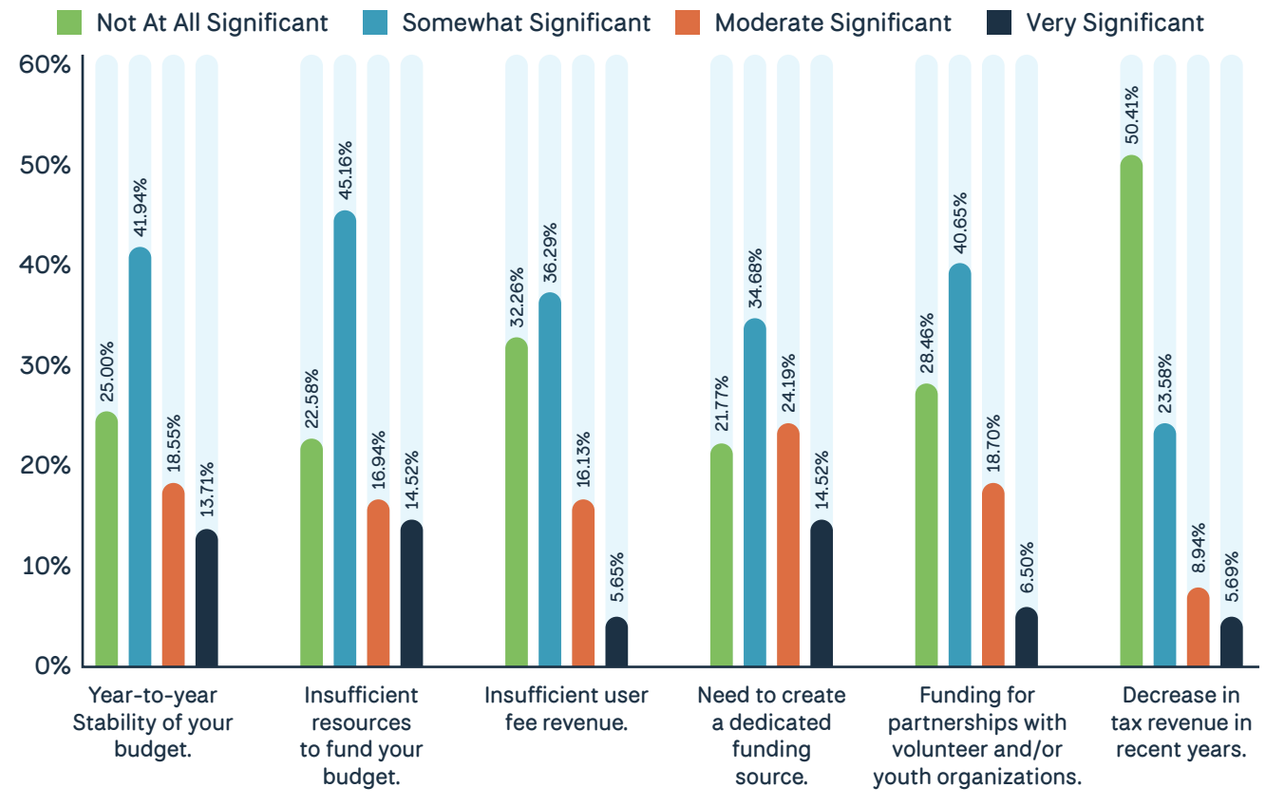



**Figure 6.17: Significance of Common Funding Challenges**

# Recommendations Feedback

Prior to the adoption of the plan, the Division conducted an additional round of engagement to gather feedback on the themes and recommendations suggested within the plan. Three in-person events were held within the Northwestern, North Central, and Southwestern Prosperity Zones. At each event, the community was able to review the executive summary of the plan, provide their input on parks around the state and within their communities, as well as receive instructions and information on how to access to the online recommendations feedback survey. Event participants overwhelmingly supported the plan and expressed excitement and enthusiasm at there being a clear, statewide plan for parks, recreation, and open space.

## Recommendations Survey (N=114)

Coinciding with the in-person events, there was also an online survey that was open for four weeks closing on September 18th, 2025. The survey asked respondents to rank their support for the five different themes and the recommendations within each theme on a scale of one to five with one being "strongly disapprove" and five being "strongly approve". All of the themes and recommendations received an average score of four or higher, representing that the community strongly supports the direction the plan is guiding the Division in over the next five years. There was an additional opportunity for open responses asking survey respondents to provide any additional insight into what they would like to see within parks, recreation, and open space over the next five years. Over the 60 open ended responses received, there were five overarching themes that emerged:

**Preservation & the Importance of Experiencing Nature**

**Park Infrastructure & Maintenance**

**Accessibility & Inclusive Design**

**Trail Maintenance**

**Campground Services**

These themes, although from a completely different engagement period and audience, are consistent with the feedback heard during the initial engagement period and have been at the forefront of the drafting of the recommendations and implementation plan. Over the course of the past two years, the Division has intentionally reached out to residents and visitors of North Carolina to ensure that this plan is something the community supports, believes, and will help bring into reality.



**Knightdale Arts & Education Festival**



**Brutal Bike Ride**


Shaping Outdoor Recreation from Mountains to Sea
2025-2030 NC Outdoor Recreation Plan
Place a dot on the image to tell us where you are from!
STATE PARKS
Mountains
Piedmont
Coastal
State Park
State Recreation Area
Other State Parks System Unit
DEMOGRAPHICS
North Carolina continues to grow rapidly, largely driven by people moving into the state from elsewhere. Communities adjacent to the state's major cities are growing the fastest.
RECREATION TRENDS
Recreation trends show there is an emerging need to provide more programming that is relevant to a diversifying population to ensure that there's ample activity for all residents. Increasing climate awareness is also driving a trend towards parks as infrastructure to protect our communities
SPEED LIMIT 25
MCADAMS



# NEEDS ASSESSMENT

# NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A comprehensive needs assessment is the foundation of a successful statewide outdoor recreation plan, offering a data-driven understanding of community priorities, gaps, and challenges. By analyzing public input and identifying health, social, and climate-related vulnerabilities, this chapter highlights the state's most pressing recreation needs. The assessment ensures future investments align with resident expectations, promote fair access, and enhance outdoor experiences. Ultimately, these findings will shape recommendations and strategic actions, guiding policies, and projects that strengthen the state's recreational network.




## Overview

This Needs Assessment chapter is a compilation of eight different assessments, which, taken together, provide a comprehensive overview of the key factors that are shaping outdoor recreation across the State. Each of these assessments is essential for developing informed long-range plan recommendations.

The summary of past planning efforts forms a foundation upon which subsequent assessments were built. The supply and demand dynamics offer insight into current and future needs and identify commonly occurring recreation participation barriers. The chapter further explores the roles of various recreation providers, funding mechanisms, and land acquisition strategies, all of which are critical for sustainable growth. A series of assessments, including health and well-being, recreation for all, and resiliency, ensures that planning recommendations are both fair and forward-thinking. These assessments are necessary to identify and address disparities, promote social and health-improving strategies, and enhance the community's ability to adapt to changing conditions. The final section focuses on trails, emphasizing their importance in connectivity and community well-being. Collectively, these sections provide the foundation for actionable long-range planning.

Specifically, the chapter is divided into the following sub-chapters:

**7.1 Previous Plans & Studies**

**7.2 Supply & Demand**

**7.3 Funding & Third Party Recreation Providers**

**7.4 Land Acquisition**

**7.5 Recreation for All**

**7.6 Health Assessment**

**7.7 Resiliency Assessment**

**7.8 Trails**

# 7.1 PREVIOUS PLANS & STUDIES

Evaluating current and past state and regional plans for the 2025 North Carolina Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) is crucial for ensuring that outdoor recreation initiatives align with broader goals of Health & Wellness, Accessibility & Equity, Environmental Resiliency, and Economic Impact. By reviewing and integrating state and regional priorities, North Carolina can develop a cohesive strategy that maximizes the use of its natural resources, expands equitable access to outdoor spaces, and fosters community engagement. This evaluation process allows for the identification of gaps in infrastructure, opportunities for collaboration, and the prioritization of projects that meet the diverse needs of local populations, visitors, and stakeholders across the state. It also ensures that investments in outdoor recreation contribute to long-term environmental resiliency and economic vitality, supporting both current and future generations.






**Jordan Lake State Recreation Area**

# DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL & CULTURAL RESOURCES, DIVISION OF PARKS & RECREATION PLANS




E. Farr

North Carolina State Parks Ranger Patch



# NC STATEWIDE COMPREHENSIVE OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN 2020-2025

## DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL & CULTURAL RESOURCES, DIVISION OF PARKS & RECREATION

### Key Takeaways

Primary focuses of the 2020-2025 NC SCORP included:

- Targeting funding to renovate, replace, and revitalize existing recreation amenities for state and local agencies before facilities go into disrepair due to overwhelming demand.
- Retrofitting existing facilities to make them more eco-friendly.
- Developing innovative and comprehensive planning efforts that examine underutilized or underdeveloped recreation opportunities.
- Increasing marketing efforts of local and state outdoor recreation opportunities in economically challenged areas to increase participation and enhance the economic impact.
- Developing and promoting recreation programs, events, and facilities that attract regional travelers to encourage overnight stays in economically challenged areas.
- Developing targeted recreation opportunities that both help residents in economically challenged areas and serve to improve the local and regional economic vitality.
- Providing adequate park land and recreational facilities to encourage children and their families to be more physically active.
- Promoting public and private partnerships, especially recreation providers, healthcare organizations, and insurance companies, to encourage physical activity through outdoor recreation.
- Increasing the use of environmental education and conservation curriculum in the state's K-12 school systems. Promote opportunities to take students outdoors to learn about the environment through visits to state and local parks.

### Implications for the 2025 2030 SCORP

- Many recommendations and action items from the 2020–2025 SCORP remain relevant today—some even more so, given the global pandemic, substantial population growth across the state, and devastating hurricanes over the past five years. This plan carries forward select recommendations and action items, which are marked with an asterisk (**) in the recommendations matrix in **Chapter 8, Vision & Recommendations.**



# NC STATE PARKS SYSTEMWIDE PLAN 2023

## NC DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL & CULTURAL RESOURCES,DIVISION OF PARKS & RECREATION

### Key Takeaways

- There are increasing demands for protecting natural and scenic resources and providing low-impact outdoor recreation.
- The Division aims to continue expanding the State Parks system as the population increases, while maintaining the ongoing need to protect important natural and cultural resources.
- Careful planning and evaluation of statewide priorities is essential to ensure the best use of funding.
- The Division seeks to improve the accessibility to parks for all people and improve visitors' experience.
- With new additions to the state parks system comes increased visitation, and high public interest places greater demands on the Division's resources.
- State parks are important regional attractions and form the cornerstone of the local efforts for ecotourism.

### Implications for the 2025-2030 SCORP

- Staffing needs continue to challenge and remain a priority for the Division, especially as the state continues to grow.
- Some of the State's natural landscape and heritage ecosystems and cultural features are among the most threatened. The Division's natural resource management initiatives aim to correct or compensate for the disruption of natural processes caused by human activity.
- Division can support local economic development by coordinating multijurisdictional recreation planning, offering grants to local park and trail projects, and providing environmental education opportunities for schools and universities.
- State parks and trails can help increase the average time spent in unstructured outdoor play by providing outlets for physical activity. Developing partnerships with public and private health organizations can lead to exploratory ways to use state parks to encourage physical activity and healthy lifestyles for all.

# NATURAL RESOURCES PLANS




Wrightsville Beach

# NC FOREST SERVICE STRATEGIC PLAN/NCDAS STRATEGIC PLAN

## NC DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE & CONSUMER SERVICES

### Key Takeaways

- The North Carolina Forest Service major goals are to: Protect Forests, Manage the Forests, Promote the Forests, Leadership in Forestry, Safety, and Business Efficiencies and Effectiveness.
- The North Carolina Forest Service Initiatives include:
  - » Developing geospatial reporting tools.
  - » Developing prescribed fire tools.
  - » Finalize burning permit legislation.
  - » Maintaining and restoring forests in decline.
  - » Increasing acres treated with prescribed fire.

### Implications for the 2025-2030 SCORP

- The Division is a potential partner and resource on the Forest Service's initiatives, especially those regarding developing tools to report and prescribe fires.
- As the climate changes, the Division should consider partnering with the Forest Service to develop educational pamphlets about how to respond and react to a forest fire.

# NC WILDLIFE RESOURCES COMMISSION 2023 - 2025 STRATEGIC PLAN

## NC WILDLIFE RESOURCES COMMISSION

### Key Takeaways

The North Carolina Wildlife Resource Commission's vision is to provide safe, comprehensive, effective, and efficient fisheries, wildlife, and boating programs that:

- Conserve the diversity and abundance of the State's wildlife resources.
- Provide diverse opportunities for all residents regardless of age or physical abilities to access and enjoy hunting, angling, boating, and other wildlife-associated experiences.
- Demonstrate to the residents of North Carolina through education and communication the critical role of wildlife management in sustaining the quality of our wildlife resources and their habitats.
- Sustain working lands and their associated wildlife communities.
- Have a strong and unequivocal statutory base that supports constituent needs and agency sustainability.
- Feature strong partnerships with other natural resource entities to complement the mission of the NC Wildlife Resources Commission and leverage resources to achieve that mission.
- Are financially secure through diverse, dedicated, and ample funding.

### Implications for the 2025-2030 SCORP

- The Division is a potential partner and resource on the Wildlife Resource Commission's initiatives, especially those regarding educational information wildlife management and habitats.
- As the climate changes, the Division should consider partnering with the Commission to determine if there are any shared resiliency and hazard mitigation initiatives across both organizations.

# CLIMATE RISK ASSESSMENT AND RESILIENCE PLAN 2020

## DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

### Key Takeaways

- Climate Change Impacts in North Carolina will include rising sea levels, increased heat index values, and increased heavy precipitation and hurricane intensity, as seen with Hurricane Helene in 2024.
- The future beyond the lifetime of this plan (2025-2030) may bring an intensity of severe droughts and increased flooding caused by precipitation.
- Areas of non-climate stressors facing North Carolina that will have an impact on SCORP: include population growth, aging infrastructure, disparity among socioeconomic areas, safety and security, the rural-urban divide, and threats to public health.
- Each of the climate change factors present climate hazards to North Carolina, including public recreational areas.
- Nature-Based Solutions through Natural and Working Lands (NWL) encourage the state to act quickly to protect, restore, and manage sufficient land area as "green infrastructure" to provide community and ecosystem resilience.

### Implications for the 2025-2030 SCORP

- It is a statewide priority to protect and restore critical portions of the 13 million acres of floodplains and wetlands to mitigate floods, including outdoor recreation areas.
- The Division may release planting standards to be applied across the state as plants and animals that rely on cooler temperatures may not be able to thrive in warmer temperatures and may migrate to cooler areas, and/or be outcompeted for by other more heat tolerant species.
- The Division, and other recreational organizations, should participate in the Interagency Climate Council process by providing equitable and educational public participation on climate change mitigation and resilience efforts.
- As many East Coast State Parks and Western State Parks face increasingly intense hurricane seasons, the Division should implement resilience best practices such as living shorelines, wetlands and marshes protection, and continued proactive risk assessments.
- North Carolina Emergency Management should collaborate with Division staff and surrounding park communities to continuously update state hazard mitigation, emergency preparedness, and response plans, while increasing communication and participation.
- The Division should work closely with DEQ on updated mapping that may have an impact on detailed climate projections and vulnerable park areas and communities.

# NATURAL AND WORKING LANDS ACTION PLAN 2025

## DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL & CULTURAL RESOURCES

### Key Takeaways

- As the climate changes, conserving and restoring natural and working lands represents an opportunity to retain and improve sites for outdoor recreation, wildlife habitat, and water and air quality, while also increasing carbon sequestration and climate resilience (such as by helping mitigate extreme heat, catastrophic wildfires, and flooding).
- Expected statewide climate impacts by 2100 as outlined with a high degree of confidence by Kunkle et al (2020) include increased storms, heavy rainfall, very hot days (over 95 degrees), drought, and wildfire. Sea level rise will also continue to affect North Carolina's coast and saltwater inundation of coastal areas will continue to affect popular recreation sites. Planning for parks' resilience to these impacts can help improve economic, community and environmental outcomes.
- Inter-agency and cross-sectoral collaboration on conservation and restoration projects and goals are essential to ensure community and environmental benefits. Protecting and restoring peatlands, floodplain forests and wetlands, Appalachian forests, and submerged aquatic vegetation will provide significant carbon sequestration benefits. Additional relevant synergies can be found with NCWRC efforts to restore grasslands and pollinator habitat, NCDMS efforts to restore wetlands, and the work of land trusts to preserve varied ecosystems statewide.

### Implications for the 2025-2030 SCORP

- The Division is a potential partner and resource on the Wildlife Resource Commission's initiatives, especially those regarding educational information wildlife management and habitats.
- As the climate changes, the Division should consider partnering with the Commission to determine if there are any shared resiliency and hazard mitigation initiatives across both organizations.

# TRAILS PLANS




**Crabtree Falls**

# NC TRAILS PROGRAMS ANNUAL REPORT 2021 - 2022

## DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL & CULTURAL RESOURCES, DIVISION OF PARKS & RECREATION

### Key Takeaways

- In North Carolina, regional and state trails directly contribute millions of dollars to local businesses including retail shops, hotels and restaurants as well as provide jobs for local residents.
- The conservation- and recreation-based tourism industry preserves natural resources and increases the quality of life in a community.
- New trails-related businesses have rejuvenated the economy in and around areas and along trails.
- Regional trails increase property values and are the most desired community amenity that homeowners seek when buying a new home.
- Protected natural corridors for regional trails and greenways can filter pollutants from runoff. Protected corridors also serve as "highways" for habitat for many wildlife species.
- Hiking, biking, and walking are available to people from all economic levels and combat diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and obesity. Trails also serve to reduce vehicle emissions and decrease traffic congestion.
- According to the American Heart Association, every dollar invested in trail development saves $3 in health care costs.

### Implications for the 2025-2030 SCORP

- The Division's mission to to conserve and preserve North Carolina's rural landscape through implementation of trails. Where possible, the Division should identify opportunities to support or fund initiatives by local governments in the conservation of land through the creation of trails.
- The report notes the health benefits of having access to trails. The Division may consider partnership with other statewide organizations within the healthcare field to identify opportunities for shared funding and resources around trail infrastructure development.

# GREAT TRAILS STATE PLAN FINAL REPORT 2022

## NC DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION, DIVISION OF INTEGRATED MOBILITY

### Key Takeaways

- The Great Trails State (GTS) Plan and network seeks to connect all 100 counties in North Carolina and key destinations throughout the state to a growing network of strategic greenways.
- The network aims to foster connections between urban and rural areas in all 100 counties of North Carolina.
- The GTS Network will create opportunities for conservation, recreation, education, physical health, environmental health, tourism, and economic prosperity.
- The plan encourages the facilitation of multi-jurisdictional partnerships to support, develop, manage, and maintain the system.
- Once funded and complete, the plan will improve health, safety, mobility, recreation, environment, and economic development, benefiting residents for generations.

### Implications for the 2025-2030 SCORP

- With many trails adjacent or running through North Carolina State Parks, including some segments of the MST, the Division should consider all opportunities for partnerships with the GTS Network to further increase trail diversity and offerings across the state.
- As a resource hub, the Division may facilitate introductions and coordination between various jurisdictions, recreation providers, and the GST around a shared mission of conservation, education, and recreation for all.

# WILDERNESS GATEWAY STATE TRAIL PLAN 2022

## DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL & CULTURAL RESOURCES, DIVISION OF PARKS & RECREATION

### Key Takeaways

- The Wilderness Gateway State Trail (WGST) is an unparalleled regional recreational resource for significant natural, cultural, scenic, and recreational value.
- The corridor of the WGST will provide options for camping and attract users from far outside of the region becoming an economic driver.
- Trail corridors provide safe passages for wildlife traveling in increasingly urbanized environments.
- Trails help air quality by reducing motor vehicle use and by maintaining trees, which absorb pollutants.

### Implications for the 2025-2030 SCORP

- The Department and Division are responsible for identifying trail sponsors.
- As North Carolina grows, the Division and other organizations must continue to assess how the growth and development, even of recreational infrastructure, works with their combined missions around conservation, recreation, and education.

# MOUNTAINS-TO-SEA NC STATE TRAIL MASTER PLAN 2015

## DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL & CULTURAL RESOURCES, DIVISION OF PARKS & RECREATION

### Key Takeaways

- The plan called for a cost/benefit analysis to be conducted and shared. The Friends of the MST should study and share the economic benefits that result from the trail. They will include educational resources about the importance of trails and greenways and their impacts on communities, including real examples of economic impacts using examples from North Carolina.
- Building the MST on public land has helped move some segments forward. Greater points are awarded to segments where public land is available near the planned route to potentially accommodate the trail. Public land includes but is not limited to state parks, agriculture research properties, game lands, wildlife refuges, military bases, and conservation properties. The percentages were estimated using the approximate amount of public land intersecting or adjacent to the 1/4-mile planned route buffer.
- The organization should work with large tract property owners to explain the benefits of conservation easements and how to establish them on their property in order to acquire the needed land for the trail.
- County-wide recreation departments and regional (county-wide or Council of Governments COG) plans have been successful in moving forward other segments of trail and may be an option to consider locally.

### Implications for the 2025-2030 SCORP

- The Division should support efforts to complete the MST, especially in Western North Carolina where some progress was disrupted by Hurricane Helene in 2024.
- The Division should review the cost-benefit analysis as a resource to learn from and share as trail infrastructure is a prime priority across the state.

# CROATAN REGIONAL BICYCLE AND TRAILS PLAN 2014

## NC DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION, DIVISION OF BICYCLE & PEDESTRIAN TRANSPORTATION

### Key Takeaways

- The plan aims at improving public awareness and education of traffic laws and safety issues, specifically bicycle pedestrians.
- Construction constraints for MST trail routing mainly involved environmental constraints like salt marsh wetlands.
- Agencies can acquire trail and bicycle rights-of-way through several methods, many of which offer benefits to landowners. The implementing agency—such as a municipality, county, or DEQ (formerly NC DENR)—should engage property owners early in the process and provide information before beginning design.
- Priority trail corridors should be located near populated areas or connect directly to them. Trails offer users a wide range of benefits, including health and wellness, recreation, and transportation. Wherever possible, planners should ensure these benefits are easily accessible to the majority of residents.
- As segments of trail are developed, each new segment should have an "anchor" or destination, preferably on each end. Examples include trailheads, scenic rest areas, recreation areas, neighborhoods, downtown areas, schools, shopping areas, military bases and other daily destinations.

### Implications for the 2025-2030 SCORP

- Implementation should include education and encouragement programs and activities. Programs help spread the word about the bicycle and trails system, encourage use, and provide a revenue source. As a statewide organization, the Division may act as a liaison to regional efforts to promote resources to community members.
- The plan states that county parks and recreation directors should formulate an annual program of action for the trails program. The Division, as a funding source, should identify opportunities for collaborative efforts to increase trail infrastructure across jurisdictions.
- There is an opportunity for collaboration on Education and Encouragement programs. These programs are designed to teach children safe bicycling and walking skills while educating them about the health benefits, and environmental impacts. Projects and programs may include creation, distribution, and implementation of educational materials; safety-based field trips; interactive bicycle and pedestrian safety video games; and promotional events and activities (e.g., assemblies, bicycle rodeos, walking school buses).



# DEEP RIVER TRAIL CONCEPTUAL PLAN 2017

## DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL & CULTURAL RESOURCES, DIVISION OF PARKS & RECREATION

### Key Takeaways

- The plan encourages the marketing of health, exercise, and passive recreation benefits of trail implementation.
- Randolph County should continue to utilize Recreation Trails Program and Duke Energy foundation funding to acquire easements and implement trail development towards Worthville.
- Randolph County should seek grant funding to develop recreation improvements (e.g. swimming, boat access and picnicking) adjacent to the trail near Worthville dam.
- The county should continue Stormwater education programs in schools through Stormwater SMART.

### Implications for the 2025-2030 SCORP

- The Division, and NC State Park Rangers, may consider partnering with Stormwater SMART, a stormwater education program.
- Where possible, the Division may act as a funding source for the trail infrastructure improvements.



# EAST COAST GREENWAY ALLIANCE STRATEGIC PLAN: 2021 – 2025

## EAST COAST GREENWAY ALLIANCE

### Key Takeaways

- The Alliance aims to build the Greenway by securing funding and deploying it effectively. They plan to do so by:
  - » Advocating for a Greenway Stimulus, collaborating with partners and representatives from underinvested communities.
  - » Sharing the Alliance's vision with all state and federal legislators representing districts on the Greenway corridor and create opportunities for registering and publicizing their support for the Greenway.
  - » Identifying diversity benchmarks, gaps, and goals for each state along the Greenway using GIS data.
  - » Compiling an online library of economic impact studies for states and regions along the Greenway, conduct and support additional studies, and leverage media and communications strategies to drive awareness and engagement.
  - » Ensuring equitable distribution of funding along the Greenway, and—whenever possible— drive increased funding in underinvested communities.
- The Alliance aims to develop strategic, collaborative partnerships that lead to equitable investment in the communities along the Greenway route. They will do so by:
  - » Compiling local, state, and regional data on Greenway corridor demographics to better inform our efforts to advance access.
  - » Cataloging existing partnerships in each state, identifying partnership gaps and detail an explicit timeline to fill gaps.
  - » Continuing to distribute inclusionary trail toolkits and greenway design guides and developing a schedule to manage ongoing updates.

### Implications for the 2025-2030 SCORP

- Where possible, the Division should share its resources to boost awareness of the Greenway to advance the Alliance's bold vision and values. Many key division partners like DOT, DEQ, and others share a like vision with the Alliance and can provide further support.
- The Alliance's library of GIS data and economic impact studies is a valuable resource for both the Division and other recreational providers. The Division may consider sharing the link on the webpage as they are known to be an information hub of resources.
- The Alliance's inclusionary trail toolkits is another resource that can be shared to recreational providers and organizations, especially those communities without access to trails.

# SOUTHEASTERN NC COG REGIONAL TRAILS TECHNICAL REPORT 2022

## NC DIVISION OF PARKS & RECREATION

### Key Takeaways

- Trails and greenways provide important mobility, recreational, economic, and health opportunities for regions, communities, and for the people that access them.
- This plan provided information for communities in the southeastern part of the state with a vision for how trails and greenways could connect the region to other communities in the region to national and state trails that run through the area such as the Mountains-to-Sea State Trail and East Coast Greenway.
- The plan recommend priority segments built in phases with the coordination of several agencies.

### Implications for the 2025-2030 SCORP

- This regional plan is stitched together by various partners such as county parks and recreation departments will focus on trails in their county. As a resource and funding hub, the Division may be called to help in collaboration with other organizations.

# WALKBIKE NC STATEWIDE PEDESTRIAN PLAN 2013

## NC DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

### Key Takeaways

- When greenways are planned, it is essential to involve the local land trust to assist in obtaining conservation easements or additional land protection.
- The plan encourages local governments to use the Conservation Planning Tool and Green Growth Toolbox. Using tools like these will help communities to ensure they avoid transportation impacts and impacts to streams, wetlands, and natural areas through local land use planning.
- Planning for green infrastructure can also cost effectively help mitigate flooding, protect streams, improve air quality, provide wildlife habitat, and improve network connectivity.
- The plan notes the importance of developing program grants for municipalities to lead local education, encouragement, and enforcement efforts.
- More emphasis should be given to multimodal transportation-efficient land use discussions at all levels at DOT, regional entities, and local communities since each partner has a different understanding of this term. A common understanding can assist in addressing issues during planning, design, and funding.

### Implications for the 2025-2030 SCORP

- The plan recommends initiating a new public health collaboration with DHHS and Community Transformation Grant to reach more communities and schools around the state. It also states engage Department of Commerce, Board of Education, and the Department of Public Instruction as part of this collaboration. As a fellow statewide entity, the Division should lend its resources where applicable to this collaborative effort.
- As an information hub, the Division may share out the Conservation Planning Tool and Green Growth Toolbox to its network.




NC State Parks

Junior Ranger Day

# PUBLIC HEALTH PLANS




Lumber River State Park

# CDC ACTIVE PEOPLE, HEALTHY NATION 2024

## CENTER FOR DISEASE CONTROL

### Key Takeaways

- Studies show that people who have more access to green environments, such as parks and trails, tend to walk and be more physically active than those with limited access.
- Less than half of people in the United States live within half a mile of a park. Even fewer people live in a community that has both safe streets for walking and access to places for physical activity.
- Parks and trails that are well-designed offer many benefits. They provide a place where people can be physically active to reduce stress, which can improve their mental health. They also provide a place where neighbors can meet, which improves community connections.
- Recreation providers should offer inclusive programs that are based on the needs of the community and address barriers, including physical limitations, safety concerns, cultural preferences, and costs.
- Communities should be designed so that they are safe and easy places for people to walk, bike, wheelchair roll, and do other physical activities.
- It is imperative to teach people about the benefits of physical activity and places to be active within their community.
- Recreation providers should work with community partners and municipal departments to set up shared-use agreements to increase public access to places to be physically active. These may include school yards, municipal building grounds, or university pools and training facilities.
- Consider using mapping tools to assess the location and quality of current parks. It may be advantageous to work with a local coalition to locate and improve parks, trails, and recreational facilities near homes, schools, worksites, and other places where people regularly spend time.

### Implications for the 2025-2030 SCORP

- The Division may work with other recreation providers to determine how to survey communities for their input on ways to create or improve local recreation areas and green spaces.
- Partnerships between local planning and transportation departments are needed to build and maintain sidewalks, crosswalks, bike racks, bike paths, and shade trees, as well as routes within and between parks, trails, and other key destinations. These partnerships also ensure that city policies are updated to include goals designed to increase access to park, trails, and recreational facilities.
- The Division may lead by example, creating ready-made templates and frameworks to promote equitable programs and policies in parks that make it safe and easy for residents to be physically active, regardless of their age, race, income, ability, or disability.
- The Division should focus its resources in areas with populations that lack access to parks or other safe places to be physically active. Ideally, by partnering with local organizations to bring inclusive community programs to existing parks, trails, and green spaces.
- The Division understands the importance of providing adequate signage and will share its resources on how to provide wayfinding signs to help people find safe places to be active. These signs should include information about accessibility for people with mobility or other limitations as well as be translated into languages other than English.

# NC STATE HEALTH IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2023 (NC SHIP)

## NC DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

### Key Takeaways

- Health begins in families and communities impacted by both social and economic factors. Health behaviors and physical environments are responsible for quality of life and life expectancy.
- Improving North Carolinians access to exercise opportunities through increasing, promoting, improving, maintaining the number of safe and well-lit sidewalks, bike trails and lanes, walking trails, and greenways to improve connectivity and accessibility.
- Increasing the number of joint use/open use policy agreements for school playground facilities opens more opportunities for recreation and play.
- Positive health effects were found through increased opportunity for exercise for school children including active recess, physically active classrooms, school-based physical education enhancements, Walking School Buses, and Safe Routes to School.
- NC Local Health Department Community Health Assessment ranked Mental and Behavioral Health and Chronic Disease as their highest priorities, both of which have been seen to be improved or eradicated by a physically healthy lifestyle.
- The plan notes the importance of building and expanding key metrics, reporting, and dashboards that identify and monitor health disparities in key health outcomes to drive action and provide transparency into health equity initiatives.

### Implications for the 2025-2030 SCORP

- The Division should be a part of the promotion, sustainability, and expansion of multimodal transportation options to increase access to places for physical activity.
- Recreation providers across the state, including the Division, have a responsibility to continue to share resources regarding the health benefits of accessing park and recreation areas and should continue supporting programs, initiatives, and funding opportunities for communities with low access to recreation.
- As an information hub, the Division should provide dashboards containing further information about health disparities to other recreation providers.

# ECONOMIC IMPACT PLANS




Nantahala National Forest Camping

# NC STRATEGIC ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2021

## DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

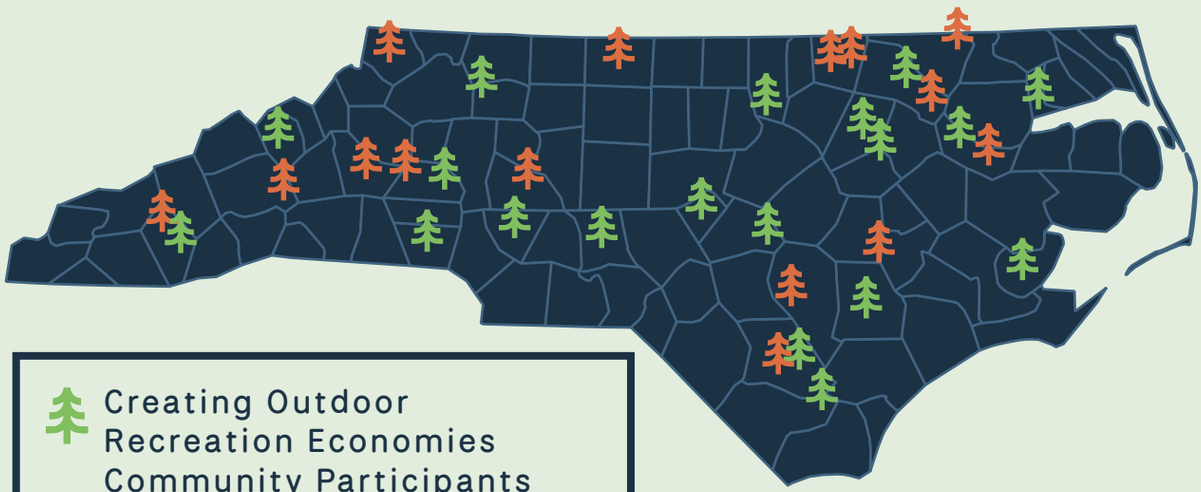
### Key Takeaways

- Following implementation of the plan, North Carolina will lead the nation in work-based learning engagement through learning opportunities including apprenticeships, internships, and cooperative learning.
- The plan aims to increase labor force participation through workforce system enhancements to better support populations with barriers to employment.
- The plan aims to strengthen initiatives that foster high-quality, productive work environments promoting talent development and enhanced growth opportunities in the parks and recreation industry.
- The Department should promote talent development and enhance sector partnerships.
- The department should support initiatives that seek to build healthier communities.
- The department should foster the local leadership and expertise needed to build vibrant communities that attract talented businesses and workers.

### Implications for the 2025-2030 SCORP

- As staffing shortages are an issue, the Division should look for opportunities to work with the department to create work-based learning engagement including apprenticeships, internships, and cooperative learning.
- Partnering with community colleges and universities may help create these pipelines to the recreational workforce.

# CREATING OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMIES (CORE) PARTICIPATING COMMUNITIES



Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies Community Participants

Communities with Completed Plans

Note: All Locations depicted are Participants, but only some have completed CORE plans

- Ashe County
- Town of Black Mountain (Buncombe County)
- Bladen County
- Cabarrus County
- Town of Catawba (Catawba County)
- City of Creedmoor (Granville County)
- Town of Dallas (Gaston County)
- Duplin County
- Town of Edenton (Chowan County)
- Town of Erwin (Harnett County)
- Halifax County
- Town of Hamilton (Martin County)
- City of Hickory (Catawba County)
- Jackson County
- Town of Jonesville (Yadkin County)
- Lee County
- Martin County
- Montgomery County
- Town of Nashville (Nash County)
- Pamlico County
- Rockingham County
- Town of Roseboro (Sampson County)
- Town of Sandyfield (Columbus County)
- Town of Scotland Neck (Halifax County)
- Town of Seven Springs (Wayne County)
- Town of Severn (Northhampton County)
- Town of Shapsburg (Edgecombe County)
- Town of Spencer (Rowan County)
- Town of Sylva (Jackson County)
- Town of Valdese (Burke County)
- Warren County
- Town of Warrenton (Warren County)
- Town of White Lake (Bladen County)
- Yancey County

* The CORE program, which is funded by a U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) State Tourism Grant, offers strategic planning and technical assistance to help rural North Carolina communities leverage the state's abundant outdoor recreation assets to support local economic growth. For more information visit: https://www.commerce.nc.gov/about-us/divisions-programs/rural-economic-development-division/nc-main-street-rural-planning-center/rural-planning#Tab-CORE-2627

# 7.2 SUPPLY & DEMAND

The purpose of a supply and demand assessment within the SCORP is to acknowledge the projected growth happening around North Carolina – a growth in population that can be represented in acres of farmland converted to residential zoning or the acres of wetlands and coastal areas converted to commercial and urban uses. As the state grows in population and land availability decreases, the state must determine how to meet the recreational needs of present and incoming residents as well as millions of visitors. Through programs like the NC Department of Commerce's Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies (CORE)[1], assessments are already occurring amongst partner organizations regarding the impact of recreational tourism and how to bolster demand in visitation to rural communities by highlighting those community's natural resources and the recreational activities they offer.



1 "Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies (CORE)." North Carolina Department of Commerce Rural Planning Program Services n.d. https://www.commerce.nc.gov/about-us/divisions-programs/rural-economic-development-division/nc-main-street-rural-planning-center/rural-planning#Tab-CORE-2627.




Chimney Rock State Park

# Introduction

Outdoor recreation relies on the collaboration between federal, state, and local governments, as well as private institutions, businesses, and non-governmental organizations. The Division plays a key role in coordinating efforts amongst public and private recreation providers to ensure accessibility and strategic planning when addressing the diverse recreational needs across the state. Local governments are responsible for offering a variety of recreational opportunities that enhance community well-being, with the Division acting as a bridge between that responsibility and available federal and state funding.

Private and commercial recreation providers contribute significantly by meeting the demand for both resource-based and user-oriented outdoor activities, especially in areas driven by tourism like the eastern and western parts of the state. Non-profit organizations and land conservancies also play a role, acquiring land for their members and, in cases like the Eno River Association in Durham or the Coastal Land Trust along the eastern part of the state, making those lands available to the public. Additionally, private industry lands are sometimes utilized for resource-based recreation, further increasing the range of outdoor opportunities across the State.

All of these partnerships and organizations aid in expanding the number of parks, open space, and recreational amenities within the State's supply. In the context of open space, parks, and recreation, supply and demand[1] refers to the relationship between the number of available park spaces, facilities, or recreational activities and the number of people wanting to use them within a community, or in this case the state. It can also be described as the number of people wanting to use a park compared to how much capacity that park must have to accommodate them. When demand exceeds supply, it can lead to overcrowding or limited access to the parks, open spaces, and recreational facilities, issues that have been noted throughout the engagement portion of this planning process.

1 Morse, Wayde C., Lee K. Cerveny, and Dale J. Blahna. "Coordinating and Standardizing Outdoor Recreation Supply and Demand Databases to Facilitate Management and Promote Conservation, Health, and Accessibility." Journal of Park and Recreation Administration 40 (1), 2022: 175–94. doi:https://doi.org/10.18666/JPRA-2021-11062.

## Supply

The available number of park spaces or recreational activities.

## Demand

The number of people within a community that want to use the supply.

## Approach

Utilizing the Public Opinion and Scientific Survey results, a clear perspective of the existing supply and demand throughout the State can be gained. This assessment will take this perspective into account while also evaluating major gaps in the overall outdoor recreation provisions, comparing North Carolina to national trends, identifying opportunities for partnerships, and creating a strategic direction for the next five years of funding and priorities to mitigate gaps. During the planning process, the Recreation Resources Service (RRS) was in the process of conducting their study of the facilities and recreational supply inventory around the state, as well as identifying the state's expenditures and revenues related to parks and recreation. This assessment was conducted prior to any annual reporting from RRS. SCORP and subsequent LWCF funded projects should use components of any pending RRS report(s) to continue assessing the balance of supply and demand for outdoor recreation.




**Volunteers with the Eno River Association**

# Assessment of Outdoor Recreation Supply

RRS is the nation's oldest technical assistance program for parks and recreation agencies. A partnership with DNCR and the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management at North Carolina State University (NCSU) established this program. In addition to technical assistance, RRS provides applied research, as well as professional development and grant administration in support of the Division. Their services are available to government agencies, advisory boards, civic and service groups, schools, youth agencies, hospitals, senior centers, commercial, and nonprofit organizations. RRS can assist in establishing, improving, and expanding recreation and leisure services with regional staffing across the state.

For years, RRS has assessed the outdoor recreation supply by surveying departments across the state using the Municipal and County Parks and Recreation Services Study (MCPRSS). For each department, the MCPRSS reviews:

- Size of the Population Served
- Which Prosperity Zones Those Departments are Located Within
- Indoor and Outdoor Facilities Within Each Jurisdiction
- Outdoor Passive Facilities Presence and Details
- Universal Design Facilities
- Support Facilities
- Trails
- Total Park Acres Reported
- Personnel Data
- Budget Data

The 2022-2023 MCPRSS found the top five Indoor Active Facilities and the top five Outdoor Active Facilities that were present in departments include:

## Top Five Indoor Active Activies

- Rentable Spaces/Rooms
- Tennis Courts
- Basketball Courts
- Pickleball, Courts
- Gymnasiums

## Top Five Outdoor Active Activies

- Tennis Courts
- Diamond Fields (Baseball/Softball)
- Playgrounds (5-12 years old)
- Rectangular Fields Regulation (e.g., soccer/football/lacrosse)
- Pickleball Court

From the pending MCPRSS report, the Division gains an understanding of how expenditures and revenues have changed as North Carolina population continues to grow and as parks become increasingly popular for residents and visitors. Collaborating with recreational partners like RSS, the Division will continue to build a digital inventory of what facilities and amenities exist at local, state, and national levels. As an information hub for recreational departments and organizations across the state, the Division should continue to provide necessary information about trends, successes, and shortfalls within the outdoor recreation industry.

# MCPRSS 2022-23 FACILITIES SPOTLIGHT

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## WHAT IS MCPRSS?

The Municipal and County Parks and Recreation Services Study (MCPRSS) annually assesses the status of local government parks and recreation departments in NC based on a number of rotating metrics.



## ABOUT

- 73rd year of assessment for municipal leisure service providers
- 53rd year for county leisure service providers
- Conducted yearly by NCSU Recreation Resources Service



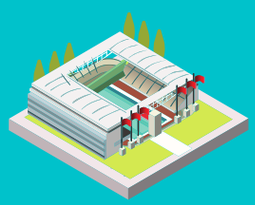
## GOALS

- Understand the recreation landscape of NC
- Provide data to help park leadership with decision making



## AREAS OF STUDY

- Indoor/outdoor facilities
- Trail usage types/miles
- Full-time staff
- State budget data for recreation expenditures and revenues



## REPRESENTATION

**53%** response rate

- 253 county, municipal, and combination departments surveyed
- 133 usable responses recorded

## TOP FIVE

**Indoor Active Facilities:** Rentable Spaces / Rooms, Tennis Courts, Basketball Courts, Pickleball Courts, Gymnasiums

**Outdoor Active Facilities**: Tennis Courts, Diamond Fields (Baseball/Softball), Playgrounds (5-12 years old), Rectangular Fields Regulation (e.g., soccer/football/lacrosse), Pickleball Courts

Between **40-50%** of all respondents indicated the presence of an amphitheater, a fishing pier, or an inclusive playground

**68-92%**

of respondents indicated the presence of restrooms and concession stands, which aligns with high representation of athletic fields

**TOTAL TRAIL MILES**

**1,474**

**TOTAL PARK ACRES**

**84,874**

## 2021-22 Annual Financial Information Report

Parks and Recreation Expenditures

**$823 Million ($83/Resident)**

Parks and Recreation Revenues

**$109 Million ($11/Resident)**

Spending is up from $81/resident in 2020-21

Read Full Report: https://rrs.cnr.ncsu.edu/resource-library/

2022-2023 MCPRSS Report Facilities Spotlight Infographic

# "Strive for Access" Initiative

The Division recently commenced the Strive for Access initiative to identify current gaps in recreational opportunities and strive to fill the unmet demands. This research will advance the visibility of outdoor recreation resources through a comprehensive inventory and spatial database of outdoor recreation opportunities in the state, conducting gap analyses to identify recreation "deserts," and developing recommendations for collaborative data collection procedures and management to achieve broader goals.

## Project Goals

- Develop a comprehensive inventory of public outdoor recreation spaces that accounts for different types of recreation lands and associated amenities.
- Identify gaps in provision of public outdoor recreation spaces (including different types of outdoor recreation lands and other amenities) with a focus on recreation for all.
- Work with government agencies and other key partners associated with the Strive for Access initiative to develop a coordinated approach to data collection, data sharing, data management, and spatial analyses related to outdoor recreation access.
- Engage with key partners related to the Strive for Access initiative (including those currently involved, and those who should be involved) and characterize the nature of those collaborations to highlight challenges and opportunities for enhancing and sustaining access to outdoor recreation.

## Project Objectives

- Integrate and expand existing data layers to create a digital inventory of public outdoor recreation opportunities, in coordination with Division and its initiative partners.
- Identify vulnerable areas to map existing conditions (using socioeconomic and demographic factors) then conduct a spatial gap analysis to compare access to several types of public outdoor recreation spaces and amenities with social vulnerabilities across the landscape.
- Engage with key players related to the Strive for Access initiative (including those currently involved, and those who should be involved) to gather their input and feedback on data sharing processes and describe the extent and nature of current collaborations aimed to enhance access to outdoor recreation.
- Recommend procedures for collaborative data collection and management (including digital inventory development) based on this network, with an emphasis on how data might be used to enhance outdoor recreation for all.

Note: The project is slated to be finished by June 2026.

# Assessment of Outdoor Recreation Demand

When determining supply and demand, the project team utilized the Scientific Survey and the Public Opinion Survey as the most valuable resources in understanding how people engage in outdoor recreation and why they do not; what barriers may exist for them; and what opportunities exist to improve.

A scientific survey and a public opinion survey differ primarily in their methodology, reliability, and intended use.[2] A scientific survey follows strict research methods, including random sampling, representative demographics, and statistical analysis, to ensure accuracy and minimize bias. It is designed to provide reliable, generalizable results that reflect the views of a broader population, in this case the state as a whole. These surveys are often conducted by professional researchers or institutions and use structured questionnaires with carefully designed questions to avoid leading or misleading responses.

In contrast, a public opinion survey is often informal, open to self-selection, and may not follow strict sampling methods. These surveys, such as the one conducted in the process of drafting this plan, provide insights into public sentiment but may not be representative of the entire population. The public opinion survey findings, however, boasted participation from all 100 counties. While scientific surveys are beneficial for policymaking, trend analysis, and large-scale decision-making, public opinion surveys are useful for gauging community attitudes and gathering insights quickly. Both types of surveys have value; however, scientific surveys offer greater accuracy and credibility, while public opinion surveys are easier to conduct and can provide immediate public feedback.

Lastly, this assessment also includes feedback received from a recreation provider survey. Similar to the public opinion survey, the recreation provider survey is informal and does not follow strict sampling methods. However, the sample size of the respondents is curated to only include recreation professionals from cities, counties, towns, tribal agencies, as well as nonprofit and commercial agencies. These individuals approach the survey from their own level of understanding and perspective, which is a vital resource to understand supply and demand at a local level.

2 Jones, TL, MAJ Baxter, and V Khanduja. "A Quick Guide to Survey Research." The Annals of The Royal College of Surgeons of England, no. 95, 2013: 5–7. doi:https://doi.org/10.1308/003588413X13511609956372.

The supply and demand assessment combined with the understanding of emerging national and local recreation trends offers an insight into what the Division should focus on to continue to enhance the recreation scene across the state.

## Activity Participation

Outdoor recreation continues to be a vital part of life for North Carolinians, with participation trends aligning closely between the scientific survey and public opinion survey. However, one key difference emerged: nature and culture-based activities ranked slightly lower in the scientific survey (#5) compared to the public opinion survey (#4).

The most popular amenity – trails – supporting activities like walking, hiking, biking, rollerblading, and horseback riding, reflects a strong demand for well-maintained and accessible trail systems across the state. It should also be noted that trails support cost-effective and low impact means[3] for people to stay active and engage with nature. Variety of diverse recreational activities from playgrounds to paddling sports highlight the importance of spaces that support everyday recreation for diverse interest groups and demand for spaces that foster both active and community-driven experiences.

Many of these activities are easy to access, requiring little preparation or cost, making them a natural part of daily life. Whether it is a quick round of disc golf after work or a spontaneous picnic with friends and family, these flexible, casual experiences make outdoor recreation more accessible. Their popularity is driven by simplicity—often, all it takes is lacing up a pair of shoes to step outside, support ones own health and wellbeing, and enjoy the outdoors. Overall, these findings reinforce the diverse ways North Carolinians connect with the outdoors, emphasizing the importance of investing in parks, trails, waterways, and community spaces that support recreation, wellness, and social engagement.

3 Mitten D, Overholt JR, Haynes FI, D'Amore CC, Ady JC. Hiking: A Low-Cost, Accessible Intervention to Promote Health Benefits. Am J Lifestyle Med. 2016 Jul 9;12(4):302-310. doi: 10.1177/1559827616658229. PMID: 32063815; PMCID: PMC6993091.

### Scientific Survey Findings

- Trails - walking, hiking, biking, rollerblading, horseback riding (86 percent)
- Play Activities – leisure walking, playground, dog park, disc golf (71 percent)
- Water-based Activities - swimming in pools and natural water bodies, surfing, paddling sports (60 percent)
- Social Activities – picnicking, hanging out, special events, festivals (60 percent)
- Nature and Culture-Based Activities – wildlife viewing, growing vegetables and fruits, or community gardens (59 percent)

### Public Opinion Survey Findings

- Trails - walking, hiking, biking, rollerblading, horseback riding (93 percent)
- Play Activities – leisure walking, playground, dog park, disc golf (75 percent)
- Nature and Culture-Based Activities – wildlife viewing, growing vegetables/ fruits, or community gardens (72 percent)
- Water-based activities - swimming in pools and natural water bodies, surfing, paddling sports (70 percent)
- Social Activities – picnicking, hanging out, special events, festivals (66 percent)

## Activity Participants Would Like to Try or Spend More Time Doing

North Carolinians' desire to try new activities or spend more time outdoors aligns closely with what they already enjoy. The top-ranking activity residents want to do more—trails (81 percent)—mirrors its high participation rate, with 93 percent already engaging in walking, hiking, biking, rollerblading, or horseback riding. This strong alignment underscores the value of continued investment in trail systems that support both existing demand and future growth.

Interest in water-based activities (58 percent) also aligns with participation levels, where 70 percent of residents already swim, surf, or engage in paddling sports. Expanding access to waterways and aquatic recreation could encourage even greater involvement.

**"We have a walking group (ages 75-90) who go to a park every month for a walk of 1-4 miles."**

**- Resident (Greensboro, NC)**

**What can we learn about demand from these survey responses?**

**Prior to assuming that a new sport or adventure activity should be focus of the next fiscal year, assess the supply of simpler recreational facilities like small parks or trail loops.**

Nature and culture-based activities show a particularly strong connection between what people do (72 percent participation) and what they want to do more of (57 percent interest). This suggests a continued emphasis on opportunities like wildlife viewing, gardening, and conservation-focused programs will resonate with residents.

While social activities in parks rank slightly lower in future interest (46 percent), they remain a significant part of outdoor life, with 66 percent already participating. This highlights the continued role of parks as community gathering spaces, even as residents prioritize more nature-based and active recreation.

Camping activities (64 percent) represent an area of expanding interest, offering an opportunity to enhance access to cabins, yurts, RV sites, and backcountry experiences. While not as widely participated in as other activities, the growing enthusiasm suggests a need for more diverse overnight outdoor options. While camping would not be considered low cost or low impact as it often requires reservations, equipment, and prior experience or

**"Campsites are booked up but not used on weekends. Due to work schedule, unable to book 1 year in advance. (Its) becoming more frustrating to try to be spontaneous for camping."**

**- Resident (Durham, NC)**

**"Not enough campsites with full hookups, fully booked for months."**

**- Resident (Bolivia, NC)**

guidance, it is a popular activity, especially in state parks. Many open-ended responses to the survey and within the various engagement events noted that the current camping supply does not meet the current demand as many camping reservations have to be made months, and sometimes years, in advance.

Overall, these results reinforce the importance of ensuring that people have access to the activities they already love while providing room for new experiences.

### Scientific Survey Findings

There was not a question on the scientific survey that asked respondents which activity they would like to try or spend more time doing.

### Public Opinion Survey Findings

- Trails (walking, hiking, biking, rollerblading, horseback riding) (81 percent)
- Camping activities (cabin, yurt, RV, backpacking) (64 percent)
- Water-based activities (swimming in pools and natural water bodies, surfing, paddling sports) (58 percent)
- Nature and culture-based activities (wildlife viewing, growing vegetables/ fruits, or community gardens ) (57 percent)
- Social activities in parks (picnicking, hanging out, special events, festivals) (46 percent)

### Recreation Provider Survey Findings (Identified by Respondents as "Most Urgent")

- Paved trails for walking, hiking, skating, or biking (41 percent)
- Multi-use fields (35 percent)
- Unpaved trails for walking and biking (30 percent)
- Natural park area and open space (30 percent)
- Non-swimming water activities (splashpad, spray ground) (29 percent)

## Motivation to be Outdoors

North Carolinians share a deep connection with the outdoors, driven by a common set of motivations reflecting personal well-being and a love for nature. When asked what inspires them to engage in outdoor activities, residents echoed the same top five reasons identified in the public opinion survey—and in the same order.

The results emphasize a fundamental appreciation for fresh air, open spaces, and natural beauty, followed closely by a desire to have fun, reinforcing the role of outdoor recreation as a source of joy and social engagement. The role of outdoor recreation in reducing stress and improving physical health underscores the critical role of parks and recreation in enhancing quality of life, providing opportunities that align with the community's most valued outdoor experiences.

Several studies have confirmed that separation from nature is detrimental to human health and well-being, and that regular contact with nature is required for good mental health.[4] The Division's mission of conservation dwells on its duty to conserve and protect North Carolina's natural beauty. As hundreds of thousands of people continue to migrate here each year, it can be assumed there will be an increased demand for outdoor recreation and green spaces for people to be outdoors and to be in nature.

### Scientific Survey Findings

- To Be Outdoors (92 percent)
- To Have Fun (85 percent)
- For Relaxation (80 percent)
- Be Closer to Nature (79 percent)
- Exercise and Fitness (78 percent)

### Public Opinion Survey Findings

- To Be Outdoors (95 percent)
- To Have Fun (84 percent)
- For Relaxation (84 percent)
- Be Closer to Nature (84 percent)
- Exercise and Fitness (81 percent)

## Parks & Recreation Priority Goals

When asked to rank seven goals based on how residents think North Carolina parks and recreation providers should prioritize them, the results reveal a clear public preference for conservation, maintenance, and accessibility in North Carolina's parks and recreation system. Protecting natural resources emerged as the highest priority, underscoring the community's strong commitment to preserving the state's landscapes, wildlife, and ecosystems. This suggests that future planning efforts will need to emphasize sustainable practices, environmental stewardship, and resilience against climate change.

**"Mental health! My brain slows down when I am in nature, especially when the beauty I see captures my heart."**

**- Resident (Brevard, NC)**

Maintaining and improving existing infrastructure and facilities ranked higher than building new ones, indicating that people value well-cared for parks, trails, and recreation areas over expansion alone. This suggests a need for increased investment in operations, repairs, and long-term upkeep to ensure these spaces remain safe, accessible, and enjoyable.

Expanding trail networks remains a significant priority across several questions, reinforcing the public's desire for more walking, biking, and multi-use pathways that connect communities and provide accessible outdoor recreation. The emphasis on trails suggests that people see them as essential for both leisure and transportation, making them a strategic investment for public health and mobility.

While acquiring new parks and open space is also important, it ranks below conservation and maintenance, indicating that residents may favor thoughtful land protection strategies over rapid expansion. Similarly, developing new facilities and offering educational programs ranked lower, suggesting that people see parks as places for recreation and preservation rather than extensive built environments or structured programming.

Overall, these findings highlight a strong desire for stewardship over expansion, prioritizing the protection of North Carolina's natural beauty, maintaining high-quality recreational spaces, and ensuring trails remain a key part of the outdoor experience.

4 "Parks and Recreation Fact Sheet: Parks and Improved Mental Health and Quality of Life." National Recreation and Park Associationn.d. https://www.nrpa.org/contentassets/9c491783f73a45f89abb0443b1a3e977/parks-improved-mental-health-quality-life.pdf.

### Scientific Survey Findings

- Protection of natural resources (77 percent)
- Operation and maintenance of existing infrastructure and facilities (66 percent)
- Providing local, regional, and statewide trails (58 percent)
- Acquisition of new parks and open space (50 percent)
- Development of new facilities at existing recreation sites (33 percent)
- Providing educational programs and visitor services (30 percent)
- Transforming existing facilities to serve new purposes (24 percent)

### Public Opinion Survey Findings

- Protection of natural resources (85 percent)
- Providing local, regional, and statewide trails (63 percent)
- Improvement and maintenance of existing infrastructure and facilities (59 percent)
- Acquisition of new parks and open space (54 percent)
- Development of new facilities at existing recreation sites (32 percent)
- Providing educational programs and visitor services (26 percent)
- Transforming existing facilities to serve new purposes (20 percent)

### Recreation Provider Survey Findings

- Renovating aging infrastructure (77 percent)
- Expanding community trail systems (72 percent)
- Connecting regional trail systems (61 percent)
- Improving outdoor interpretive/educational facilities or programs (52 percent)
- Developing neighborhood, community, or special use parks or facilities (48 percent)
- Expanding the number of public lands (42%)
- Developing nature-based parks (39%)

## Most Important Actions to Expand & Improve Parks Facilities

When asked to assess which of the following eight actions that could expand and improve park facilities were more important to their household, the survey findings highlight a strong demand for preserving natural resources while expanding recreation and improving existing park facilities. The public's top priorities emphasize watershed protection (71% public opinion survey, 65% scientific survey) and land acquisition for habitat and historically significant sites (68% public opinion survey, 64% scientific survey). This indicates a clear expectation that parks and recreation providers take an active role in conserving critical landscapes, protecting ecosystems, and securing open spaces for future generations.

Alongside conservation, there is a growing demand for expanded recreation opportunities. Traditional recreation activities such as trails, campgrounds, playgrounds, and picnic areas rank high, reinforcing the need for accessible and well-maintained spaces that serve diverse outdoor interests. Additionally, improving conditions at existing parks remains a priority, suggesting that while people want more recreation opportunities, they also expect investments in maintenance, safety, and modernization of current facilities.

There is also a steady interest in adventure recreation indicating a growing demand for activities such as mountain biking and backcountry hiking. While this ranks lower than traditional recreation, it reflects a niche but enthusiastic segment of park users who seek challenging and immersive outdoor experiences.

While economic development and tourism are recognized as valuable, they are not as highly prioritized as conservation and recreation. This suggests that while parks play a role in supporting local economies, the public is more focused on ensuring high-quality natural spaces and recreation access before emphasizing economic impact.

Environmental education and visitor services rank the lowest in priority, indicating that while amenities like food trucks, equipment rentals, and educational programs are appreciated, they are secondary to conservation and core recreation services.

## Scientific Survey Findings

- Actively pursue watershed protection and preservation of environmentally sensitive areas (65 percent)
- Acquire more land for the preservation of habitat and natural and historically significant features of the state (64 percent)
- Develop more traditional recreation opportunities (59 percent)
- Improve conditions of existing parks (58 percent)
- Support local/state economic development/tourism by focusing on the economic value of parks and recreation (46 percent)
- Provide environmental and nature education at select parks (40 percent)
- Develop more outdoor adventure recreation opportunities (36 percent)
- Increase the level and quality of park services for day and/or overnight visitors (27 percent)




Certified Wildlife Habitat Sign

## Public Opinion Survey Findings

- Actively pursue watershed protection and preservation of environmentally sensitive areas (71 percent)
- Acquire more land for the preservation of habitat and natural and historically significant features of the state (68 percent)
- Develop more traditional recreation opportunities (trails, campgrounds, playgrounds, picnicking, etc.) (64 percent)
- Improve conditions of existing parks (51 percent)
- Develop more outdoor adventure recreation opportunities (mountain biking, hiking in mountains, expedition racing, etc.) (39 percent)
- Support local and state economic development and tourism by focusing on the economic value of parks and recreation (36 percent)
- Provide environmental and nature education at select parks (31 percent)
- Increase the level and quality of park services for day and overnight visitors Increase the level and quality of park services for day and overnight visitors (food trucks, equipment rental, outdoor programs, etc.) (21 percent)




Watershed Protection Signage

## Priority Investment Ratings (PIR) for Activities & Amenities (Scientific Survey Only)

The Priority Investment Rating (PIR), developed by ETC Institute, helps governments determine where to focus parks and recreation investments. It combines importance (how much residents value a facility or program) and unmet need (services meeting 50 percent or less of demand) to create a priority score. The formula is:

### PIR = Unmet Needs Rating & Importance Rating

For example, if playgrounds have an Unmet Needs Rating of 26.5 and an Importance Rating of 52, the PIR would be 78.5 out of 200. This approach ensures that both community demand and service gaps guide investment decisions.

### PIR for Activities

Based on the PIR, hiking and walking trails stand out as the highest priority for investment, reflecting strong public demand for accessible outdoor recreation. Paddling and biking and rollerblading also rank high, emphasizing the need for diverse, active transportation and water-based experiences. Additionally, freshwater fishing, fitness and challenge courses, and shooting ranges were identified as important investment areas, highlighting a mix of traditional and specialized recreational interests. These findings reinforce the need for a balanced approach to future park improvements, ensuring a variety of outdoor activities remain accessible and well-supported.

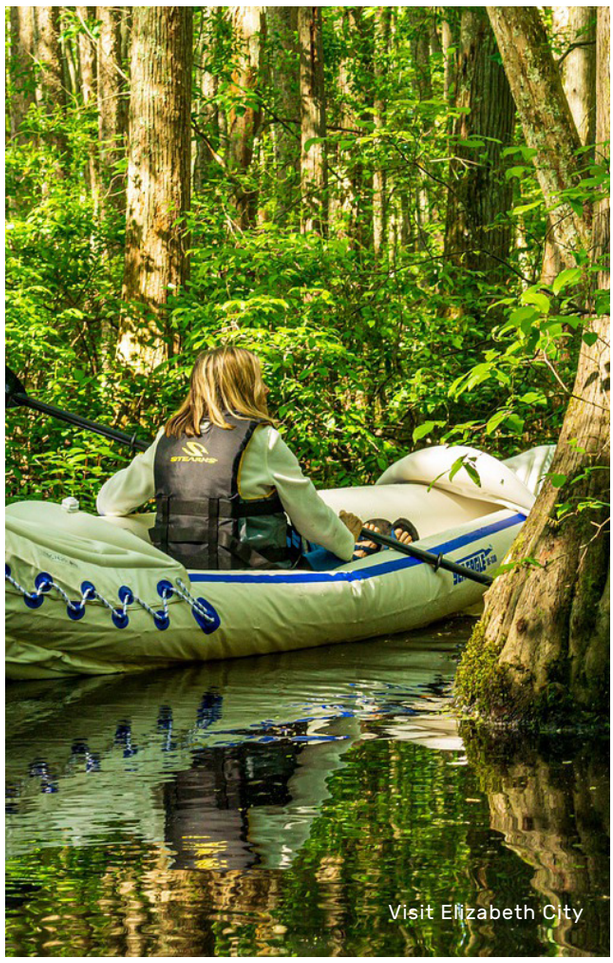



**Hike at Sugar Mountain, NC**

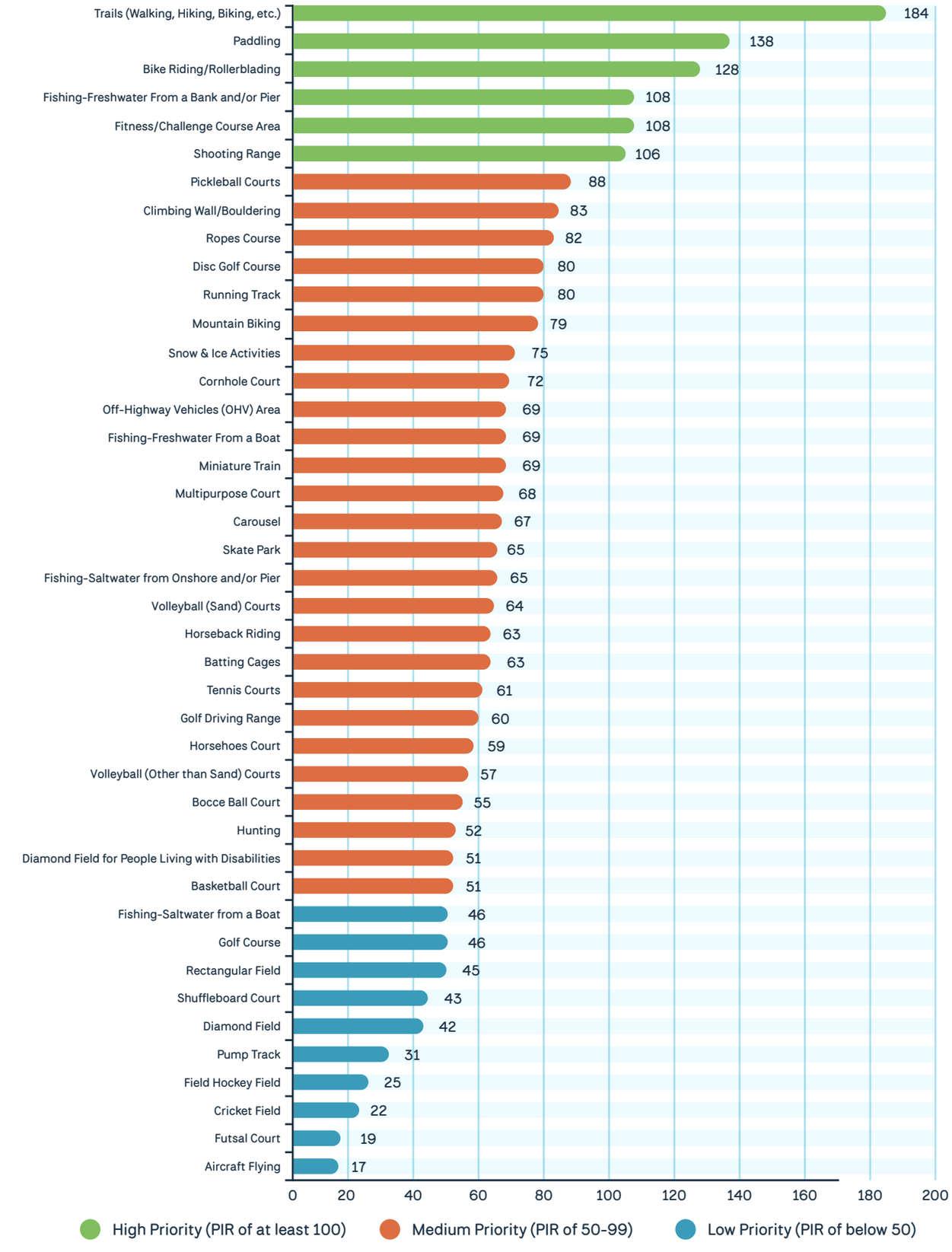
### PIR for Amenities

Survey results highlight strong public interest in nature-based experiences, camping, and educational exhibits and visitor centers. Public gardens and arboretums rank as the highest investment priority, reflecting a desire for scenic, tranquil spaces that support conservation and recreation. Cabin and tent camping follow closely, reinforcing the demand for diverse overnight outdoor experiences.

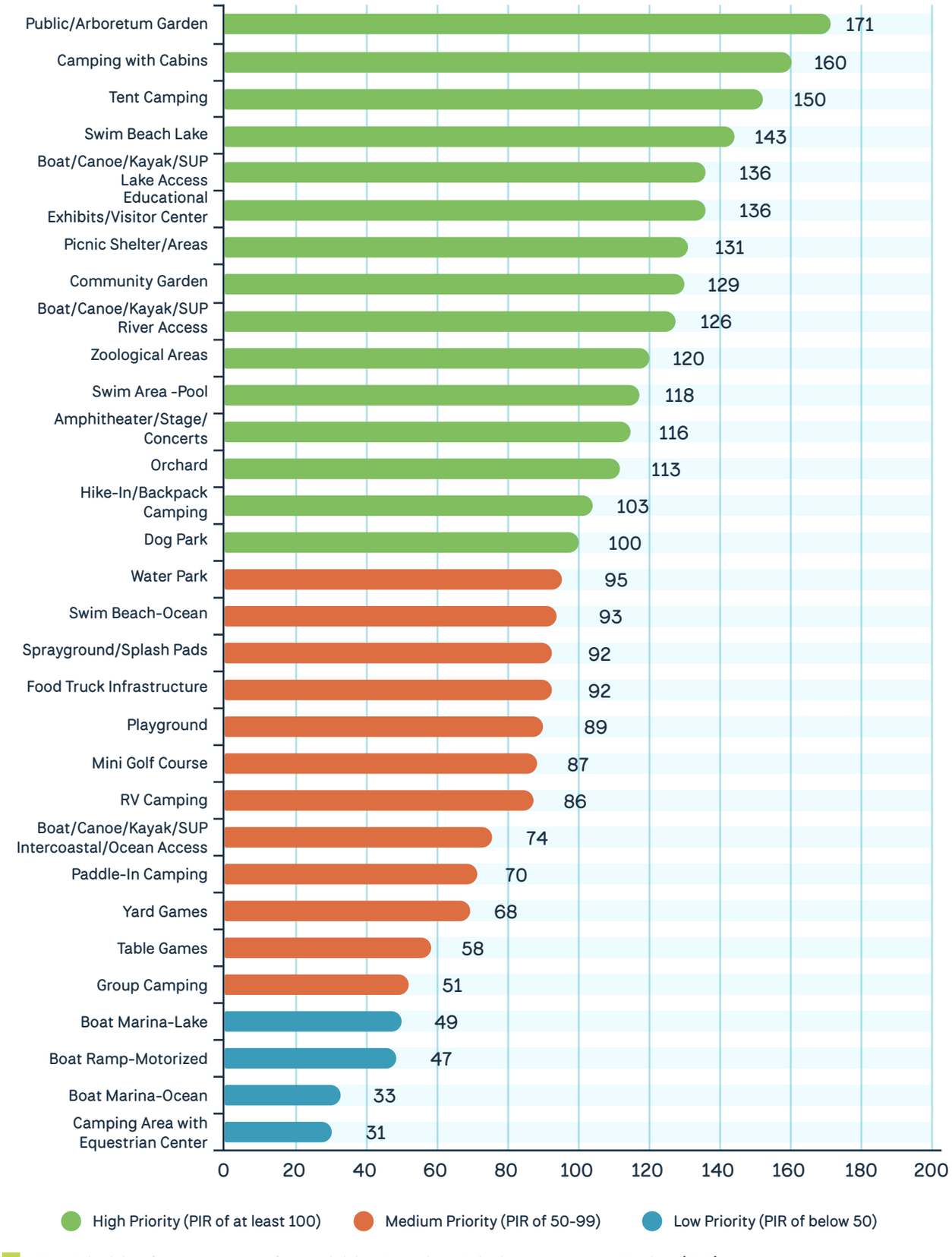
Water-based recreation is also a priority, with swim beaches and lake access for boating, canoeing, kayaking, and paddleboarding identified as key investment areas. Additionally, educational exhibits, visitor centers, and zoological areas show a clear public interest in learning opportunities that enhance outdoor experiences. These findings suggest a strong demand for both active and passive recreation, blending adventure with education and conservation.




**Paddling Elizabeth City's Waterways**




**Top Priorities for Investment for Activities Based on Priority Investment Rating (PIR)**




**Top Priorities for Investment for Activities Based on Priority Investment Rating (PIR)**

## What can we learn about demand from the public opinion survey?

- Providing educational programming at parks trends low in both priority and importance for most respondents.
- Traditional recreational opportunities like the development of trails is a top priority and noted as very important for most respondents.
- Improvement of existing infrastructure and facilities was deemed as a high priority, and was the second highest response. However, it fell in popularity as an important action amongst respondents.
- The preservation and conservation of natural resources is a high priority for 85 percent of respondents. The acqusition of land for preservations sake was deemed as the most important action by 71 percent of respondents.

## What can we learn about demand from the scientific survey?

- Trails is the number one participated activity as well as the number one activity needed by respondents.
- More than anything else, the reasons that people participate in outdoor recreation activities are simply to be outdoors and in nature.
- Conversation and preservation of natural spaces is a high priority and of the upmost importance.
- The elevation of existing facilities could lead to more people becoming consistent visitors to NC State Parks.
- As the Division assesses demand, there may need to be an assessment with a public health organization to determine why so many people do not feel like they have the time to go outdoors.

## Park Visitation

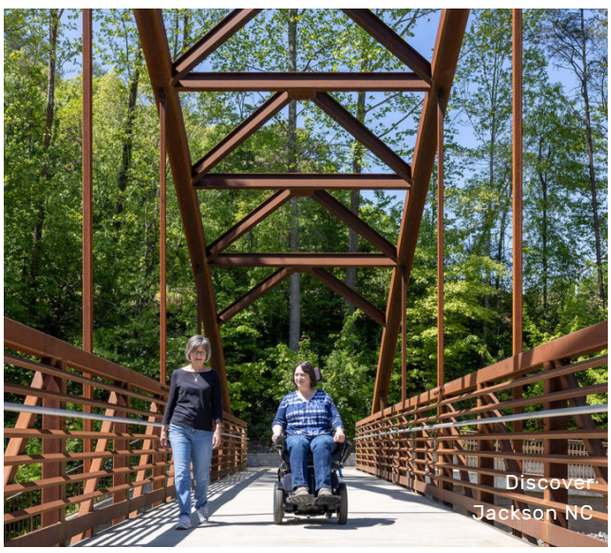
When asked from a user experience, what would increase their NC State Parks visitation, respondents noted that improving existing facilities and developing new parks within a reasonable distance are the primary factors that would increase visitation. Visitors expressed a strong desire for better natural resource management to enhance the overall park experience, while there is also a demand for improvements in the camping reservation system to streamline planning. Additionally, increased accessibility on trails was highlighted, reflecting a need for recreation options that are made with everyone in mind. These findings suggest that upgrading current offerings, expanding park access, and improving user convenience would significantly drive greater engagement with the parks.

### Scientific Survey Findings

- Elevating existing facilities (52 percent)
- A new state park within a reasonable distance (50 percent)
- Better natural resource management (31 percent)
- Better camping reservation system (27 percent)
- Improved accessibility on trails (22 percent)

### Public Opinion Survey Findings

This question was not asked in the public opinion survey.




**Accessible Trail in Jackson County, NC**

# Barriers

## Barriers to Participation

There are several barriers that can limit access to outdoor recreation, ranging from physical and economic challenges to social and environmental concerns. Accessibility and infrastructure issues often pose significant challenges, as many outdoor recreation areas lack adequate transportation options, making them difficult to reach without a personal vehicle. Additionally, inadequate facilities such as restrooms, trails, and accessible pathways can make it difficult for people living with disabilities or mobility impairments to participate.

Socioeconomic barriers are another major factor, as the cost of equipment, parking entrance fees, activity related fees, or necessary gear can make outdoor activities financially inaccessible for some individuals. Time constraints, particularly for low-income families and working parents, can also limit opportunities for recreation. Additionally, awareness and cultural barriers contribute to the issue, as some communities may not be aware of available outdoor spaces due to limited outreach efforts or language barriers. Others may feel that certain outdoor areas do not reflect their cultural or recreational interests, or they may experience a historical sense of exclusion from these spaces.

Environmental and maintenance issues further compound these challenges. Overcrowding in popular parks and trails can make access difficult, while pollution, litter, and poor maintenance can reduce the attractiveness and usability of outdoor spaces. Additionally, climate change and extreme weather conditions can alter recreational opportunities, affecting when and where people can safely engage in outdoor activities as seen with Hurricane Helene's recent devastation in Western North Carolina. Addressing these barriers requires a combination of improved infrastructure, inclusive programming, and outreach efforts to ensure that outdoor recreation is accessible to all communities.

Research at the national, state, and local levels is uncovering significant barriers to outdoor recreation, particularly among communities of color. Further assessment of this topic can be found in the **Chapter 7.5, Recreation for All**. Efforts to increase outdoor participation are gaining momentum through government and private initiatives focused on inclusion and fair access for everyone. Organizations across the state are fostering community engagement, a participant in the focus groups, are

fostering community engagement and leadership to improve outdoor access for underrepresented groups. Research from the NRPA highlights proximity to parks, cost, cultural factors, and safety concerns as significant barriers to participation.[5] As studies continue to reaffirm the extensive benefits of time spent in nature, the Division and all other recreational providers have a calling to ensure efforts are taken to remove barriers and truly make **Recreation for All**.

When asked about barriers to accessing the outdoors, the results from both scientific and public opinion surveys highlight lack of personal time and overcrowding as the most common challenges preventing residents from visiting parks. Many respondents also noted that existing facilities and services do not fully meet their needs, suggesting opportunities to enhance amenities and diversify recreational offerings. Additionally, proximity to parks remains a factor, with some residents citing distance as a barrier. While cost is a concern for some, competing interests and alternative activities also influence visitation choices. Addressing these barriers through improved accessibility, strategic expansion, and more staff for better park management could help increase engagement with North Carolina's outdoor spaces.

## Scientific Survey Findings

- No personal time to visit (40 percent)
- Overcrowded (33 percent)
- Lack of facilities/services that meet your needs (26 percent)
- No parks within a reasonable distance (18 percent)
- Cost/fees (17 percent)

## Public Opinion Survey Findings

- Overcrowded (33 percent)
- No personal time to visit (31 percent)
- Lack of facilities/services that meet your needs (30 percent)
- No parks within a reasonable distance (20 percent)
- Alternative interests and/or activities (17 percent)

5 "Every Park. Every Person. Every Place. ." National Recreation and Park Association n.d. https://www.nrpa.org/siteassets/annual-report-nrpa-2018.pdf.

## Recreation Provider Survey Findings (Identified by Respondents as a "Major Barrier")

- Lack of access to transportation (20 percent)
- Lack of knowledge of available facilities (18 percent)
- Travel distance (18 percent)
- Lack of accessible facilities (14 percent)
- Lack of time (11 percent)

In addition to the surveys, overcrowding was mentioned at the in-person engagement events within each region. The larger, popular parks within the state also happen to offer some of the more unique recreational opportunities. These parks are experiencing substantial growth in their visitation, while not yet having parking, staffing, and programming established for these larger crowds. As noted below by a Raleigh resident, there are impacts to overcrowding and many trails and parks are at risk of being loved to death. As the Division, and other recreational providers across the state assess the demand for outdoor recreation, there is a need to also address the current issues of overcrowding.

In the scientific survey, no personal time to visit is noted as the number one reason people are not able to participate in the outdoors. The CDC[6] recommends these six strategies to try and overcome the feeling of lack of time to live a more active life.

**"The only park that has a swimming pond or lake within a 2-hour drive, has very limited parking and is overcrowded."**

**- Resident (Winston-Salem, NC)**

6 "Overcoming Barriers to Physical Activity: Lack of Time." Center for Disease Control, 2024. April 5. https://www.cdc.gov/physical-activity-basics/overcoming-barriers/index.html.

"Overcrowding negatively impacts everyones experience in parks. Visitors lose the impact of solitude and connection to nature and staff members lose the ability to connect people to Parks resources due to being stretched too thin to offer scheduled programming."

**- Resident (Laurel Springs, NC)**

"No fishing areas around near the waterway. Boat ramp WAY OVERCROWDED and we can't fish there."

**- Resident (Charlotte, NC)**

"There are impacts from overcrowding; trails are in poor condition and were not built to handle the crowds."

**- Resident (Raleigh, NC)**




**Strategies to Integrate Outdoor Experiences in Busy Schedules**

Many people cite lack of personal time as a key reason for not visiting parks. While this challenge is tied to individual schedules and lifestyle demands, parks and recreation providers can take strategic steps to integrate outdoor experiences into daily life and make visits more convenient. Here is how:

1. **Enhance Nearby and Urban Green Spaces** – Investing in small, easily accessible parks, trails, and greenways near workplaces, schools, and residential areas can help people incorporate outdoor activity into their routine.
2. **Promote Quick and Flexible Experiences** – Highlighting short, low-commitment activities—like a 15-minute walking trail loop or fitness stations—encourages people to step outside without requiring a major time investment.
3. **Extend Hours and Improve Lighting** – Providing early morning or evening access to highly used parks and trails, along with improved lighting in key areas, allows visitors to fit outdoor activities into their schedules before or after work.
4. **Integrate Nature into Work and School Life** – Encouraging outdoor meetings, remote workspaces in parks, and school-based outdoor learning can bring people into parks while fulfilling other daily responsibilities.
5. **Expand Programs for Busy Lifestyles** – Offering lunch-hour fitness classes, after-work social events, and weekend pop-up activities can help attract visitors who might otherwise struggle to find time.

By making parks and outdoor spaces more accessible, convenient, and integrated into daily life, we can help break down the time barrier and encourage more people to experience the benefits of nature and recreation.




**Walk With a Doc Program in Winston-Salem, North Carolina**

# Key Takeaways

## Trails as the Cornerstone of Outdoor Recreation

- Trails remain central to outdoor activities such as walking, hiking, and biking. Their prominence underscores the need for well-maintained and accessible pathways that support community health and engagement.

## Optimizing Accessibility for Broader Participation

- The ease of access to many activities, requiring minimal preparation, highlights how simple initiatives can significantly enhance daily outdoor engagement across diverse demographics.

## Leveraging Natural Environments for Health & Well-Being

- A deep connection with nature drives outdoor participation, emphasizing that access to fresh air and open spaces not only fosters physical activity but also improves mental well-being.

## Prioritizing Conservation & Infrastructure Maintenance

- Public sentiment favors sustainable practices that focus on conserving natural resources and maintaining existing park facilities over rapid expansion, ensuring long-term quality and accessibility.

## Strategic Investments in High-Demand Activities

- High-priority activities such as hiking, paddling, and biking indicate clear public demand for a range of active recreational opportunities, guiding future investment decisions.

## Expanding Amenities to Cater to Diverse Preferences

- There is strong interest in a mix of nature-based experiences—from public gardens and camping to water-based recreation—demonstrating the need for a variety of amenities to meet different user interests.

## Enhancing Visitation Through Improved Facilities & Access

- To drive greater park visitation, improvements in existing facilities and the development of new, conveniently located parks are essential, alongside better management of natural resources and services.

## Mitigating Barriers to Park Engagement

- Addressing issues such as overcrowding, time constraints, and unmet facility needs is critical for enhancing overall access and ensuring that more residents can enjoy outdoor spaces.

## Leveraging Partnerships to Create a Balanced System

- The Division will need to work closely in hand with RRS and other recreational providers in the coming future to determine how best to proceed with meeting the demands of an ever-growing population. Shared resources like the MCPRSS report from RRS as well as this very SCORP, will be vital in ensuring that organizations with a shared mission and vision are successful in meeting demand. Following the MCPRSS report, the Division will review the inventory of recreational facilities throughout the state and provide an update on the web page.

# 7.3 FUNDING & 3RD PARTY RECREATION PROVIDERS



The 2025 – 2030 North Carolina Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), Shaping Outdoor Recreation from Mountains to Sea, outlines and provides groupings of funding opportunities. This section of the plan is essential for helping to ensure equitable distribution of outdoor recreation funding across the state. The SCORP plan is a requirement for North Carolina to maintain eligibility for federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) grants and serves as a guide in the allocation of state-level funding through similar programs such as the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF).




North Carolina Zoo

# Partners

North Carolina benefits from strong, collaborative partnerships among state, federal, and local government agencies that work together to manage parks and open spaces while working together. Supporting the efforts are a wide range of nonprofit organizations and private sector partners dedicated to conservation and outdoor recreation. The following sections provide brief summaries of partners that assist in the overall goal and mission, which is to inspire all residents and visitors through conservation, recreation, and education.

## State of North Carolina Programs

The North Carolina State Parks system, established in 1916 with Mount Mitchell as its inaugural park, has evolved into a diverse network of protected areas managed by the Division under the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources.

As of 2025, the State parks system encompassed over 264,000 acres of land, including more than 83 state parks, state recreation areas, natural areas, state lakes, state trails, and state rivers. Each location offers a wide range of recreational opportunities, from day-use such as self-guided nature walks to extended vacations at destination parks.

Among North Carolina's state trails is the Mountains-to-Sea State Trail (MST), which is a 1,175-mile trail that stretches from Clingman's Dome in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park to Jockey's Ridge State Park on the Outer Banks. The MST traverses' diverse landscapes, including mountain vistas, rolling Piedmont farms, and coastal plains. There is approximately 725 miles of the MST on trails with connecting backroads along with an optional paddle route, offering hikers the opportunity to hike across the state.

In 2025, the MST faced challenges due to Hurricane Helene. The hurricane caused severe damage, particularly in the mountainous regions and within state parks. As of March 2025, over 45 percent of the MST in the mountains has reopened with the assistance of collaborative efforts from the National Park Service, the US Forest Service, State Park staff, private contractors, and volunteers.

The North Carolina State Parks system continues to expand and adapt, helping to ensure the preservation of natural resources and the provision of recreational opportunities for future generations.




## DID YOU KNOW?

North Carolina is home to the last remaining Appalachian Elktoe populations in the world. The species was listed as endangered in 1994 after factors such as water quality and habitat degradation severely reduced the Elktoe's populations. Since then, scientists have identified added populations in Western North Carolina, and conservationists are working hard to protect these remaining Appalachian Elktoes.

As mussels, the Appalachian Elktoe is a filter feeder, eating small creatures such as phytoplankton, zooplankton, and bacteria in the water. Meaning they get a delicious meal and help clean our waterways![1]

1 U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, "Appalachian Elktoe (Alasmidonta raveneliana)," U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, https://www.fws.gov/species/appalachian-elktoe-alasmidonta-raveneliana.

## North Carolina Aquariums

Established in 1976, the NC Aquariums are a network of public facilities dedicated to fostering awareness, appreciation, and conservation of the state's diverse aquatic environments, including oceans, estuaries, rivers, and streams. There are three main aquariums: NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher, NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores, and the NC Aquarium on Roanoke Island. The aquariums are operated by the NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources and are accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). With over 1.3 million visitors annually, they rank among the state's top 20 most-visited attractions and play a vital role in promoting environmental stewardship and marine conservation across the state.



North Carolina Aquariums

**Roanoke Island**

## NC Coastal Reserve & National Estuarine Research Reserve

The North Carolina Coastal Reserve and National Estuarine Research Reserve is a network of ten protected sites established to support long-term research, education, and stewardship of the state's coastal ecosystems. Together, these sites encompass over 44,000 acres of estuarine land and water, including barrier islands, salt marshes, and tidal waters. These areas provide essential habitats for hundreds of species of fish, birds, and other wildlife.

The estuarine system in North Carolina is the second largest in the United States, covering approximately 2.2 million acres. The diverse system spans two biogeographic regions: the Carolinian and the Virginian as well as features a variety of salinity regimes, basin types, and tidal patterns. The notable reserve sites include the following areas:

Northern Sites:

- Currituck Banks Reserve
- Kitty Hawk Woods Reserve
- Buxton Woods Reserve
- Emily and Richardson Preyer Buckridge Reserve

Southern Sites:

- Rachel Carson Reserve
- Permuda Island Reserve
- Masonboro Island Reserve
- Zeke's Island Reserve
- Bald Head Woods Reserve
- Bird Island Reserve

The Rachel Carson, Masonboro Island, and Zeke's Island sites are part of the National Estuarine Research Reserve System and were managed in partnership with National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The others are state-designated reserves managed by the NC Division of Coast Management.

## North Carolina Department of Transportation Division of Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation

Established in response to the Bicycle and Bikeway Act of 1974, the North Carolina Bicycle Program was the first statewide initiative of its kind in the United States. Its goal was to develop comprehensive plans and programs for bicycle transportation. The program expanded to include pedestrian infrastructure and needs in 1992.

The Division of Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation works to incorporate bicycle and pedestrian safety, accessibility, and mobility into North Carolina's broader transportation network. The Division provides educational safety programs for all ages and encourages active transportation to and from schools, overseeing a network of over 3,000 miles of state and regional bicycle routes.

## North Carolina Historic Sites

Managed by the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, North Carolina Historic Sites offer a window into the state's rich past. With 27 sites across the state, visitors can explore the stories of the people and events that have shaped North Carolina. Educational topics include Indigenous communities and early colonial settlements to the rise of agriculture and industry.

The sites are dedicated to preserving and interpreting historically significant places, themes that reflect North Carolina's cultural heritage, and artifacts. Visitor centers are located at many of the centers that feature engaging exhibits with multimedia displays. Educational programming and picnic areas are also available, which make the sites valuable destinations for learning, exploration, and connection for school groups and other visitors.

## North Carolina Outdoor Recreation Industry Office

Established in 2017, the NC Outdoor Recreation Industry Office was developed through a partnership between the Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) and the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina. The office aims to bolster economic development and the outdoor recreation economy by identifying and recruiting companies interested in relocating to or expanding within the state. It serves as a central hub for coordinating efforts to enhance North Carolina's outdoor recreation infrastructure and promote the state's diverse natural resources.

The OIA conducts annual studies on participation in outdoor recreation activities and assesses the economic contributions of outdoor recreation at both state and national levels.

## North Carolina State Forests

North Carolina Forest Service manages a diverse network of 12 forests, including six that are Educational State Forests (ESFs) and DuPont State Recreational Forest (DSRF). The forests span the states landscape from the Appalachian Mountains to the coastal plains and serve as vital resources for education, recreation, and sustainable forest management.




**Fort Dobbs State Historic Site**




**A Demonstration at Ramsour's Mill Historic Site**

The state forests are designed to educate the public about forestry, ecology, and conservation through interactive exhibits, guided programs, and self-guided trails. Each forest features the following:

- Self-guided trails with interpretive signage and tree identification markers
- Talking Tree Trails that provide audio information about various tree species
- Forest Education Centers offer exhibits on forest ecosystems and management
- Picnic facilities
- Rangers who are specially trained to conduct educational programs for school and youth groups

ESF sites include:

1. Clemmons ESF – Located in Johnston and Wake Counties and 825 acres offering a variety of educational programs and trails.

2. Holmes ESF – Located in Henderson County, the forest covers 235 acres and provides insight into mountain forest ecosystems.

3. Jordan Lake ESF – Situated in Chatham County, the forest encompasses 900-acres and focuses on Piedmont ecology.

4. Mountain Island ESF – Spanning between Lincoln and Gaston Counties, the forest is 2,000 acres and offers guided tours.

5. Turnbell Creek ESF – Within Bladen County, the forest encompasses 890 acres and highlights the coastal plain forests.

6. Tuttle ESF – Located in Caldwell County, the 288-acre forest provides programs on sustainable practices.

## DuPont State Recreational Forest (DSRF)

Spanning over 10,400 acres and within the counties of Henderson and Transylvania, the DSRF is renowned for its waterfalls, an extensive trail system, and diverse recreational opportunities. Those who visit can enjoy hiking and biking, horseback riding, fishing, and scenic waterfalls. The forest also serves as a site for educational programs and research for forest management and conservation.

## North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission

The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) is the state agency charged with the conservation and management of North Carolina's fish and wildlife resources. Its responsibilities include enforcing state wildlife and boating laws on inland waters, issuance of hunting, fishing, and trapping licenses, and registering boats for residents of North Carolina. The Commission also promotes outdoor recreation and education that encourage public participation with nature.

NCWRC manages more than two million acres of game lands across the state that include a mix of state-owned federally owned, and privately owned properties. Those lands are accessible to the public for regulated activities such as hunting, trapping, and fishing which often require a special permit. The Commission also provides free, 24-hour boating access through more than 250 Boating Access Areas (BAAs) on over 100 bodies of water.

With a comprehensive approach to conservation, regulation, and recreation, the NCWRC plays a vital role in sustaining the state's natural resources while expanding public opportunities for outdoor enjoyment.

## North Carolina Zoo

Located south of Asheboro in Randolph County, the NC Zoo spans over 2,800 acres, making it the largest natural habitat zoo on the world. There are approximately 500 acres developed for public exhibits, while the remaining land is preserved for conservation. With over 1,700 animals representing over 250 species from Africa and North America, the zoo offers immersive, naturalistic habitats that provides visitors with an experience resembling the animal's native environment.

The zoo is undergoing a significant expansion with the addition of the new Asia region slated to open in 2026. Following the completion of the Asia region, plans will be underway for an exhibit representing Australia. It continues to be a leader in wildlife conservation and education.

# Equitable Funding

Equitable funding for state and local parks and recreation agencies is crucial to ensure all communities, regardless of their socioeconomic status or geographic location, have access to high-quality recreational opportunities. State and local parks are experiencing inadequate funding that affect who is served and which programs are administered. Adequate funding is necessary to maintain existing parks, expand access to nature, and develop programs that serve diverse communities. This means prioritizing investments that reduce barriers to entry, such as transportation to parks, fees, and helping to ensure that parks are accessible to all users.

North Carolina's state parks operate under the authority of state legislation, primarily outlined in the North Carolina General Statutes Chapter 143B, Article 2, Part 39, which establishes and directs the Division of Parks and Recreation within the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources. This legislation mandates the Division to acquire, develop, preserve, and maintain state parks, recreation areas, trails, and natural areas while protecting scenic, ecological, geological, and cultural resources. It also ensures the provision of accessible facilities and services that promote public enjoyment, education, and health. The Division sets and enforces operational rules and regulations and to collaborate with local governments, nonprofit organizations, and federal agencies to enhance recreation and conservation efforts. The legislative framework guarantees that North Carolina's state parks fulfill a dual purpose: protecting natural and cultural resources and providing a wide range of recreational opportunities for both residents and visitors.

Equitable funding policies take on a unique importance given the diverse needs of the state's urban, suburban, and rural communities. One approach to achieving more equitable funding could be through targeted state investments, including increasing the division budget for parks and recreation, with a focus on underserved regions. Additionally, partnerships with other state divisions, local governments, nonprofits, and community organizations can help to leverage additional funding and create more inclusive, community-driven initiatives. An example would be collaborative funding models that might enhance outdoor programming for all. By providing equitable opportunities and directing resources to areas with the greatest need, North Carolina can build a strong equitable system where all residents, regardless of income or background, can enjoy physical, mental, and social benefits of parks.

In the context of parks and recreation, equitable funding policies for dedicated funding might include the following:

- **Targeted Funding for Rural and Urban Disparities:** Allocating funding specifically to areas with limited access to parks, green spaces, or recreational services. This may involve prioritizing resources for urban areas or rural communities that face geographic, economic, or social barriers to access. It is important that the Division recognize the unique cultural and environmental contexts of the many regions across the state, from the Smoky and Appalachian Mountains to the coastline of the Outer Banks, to work to ensure funding supports projects that align with local needs and heritage.
- **Community-Centered Decision-Making:** Engaging residents of local communities in the planning and decision-making process to understand where and how funds are allocated. By engaging the community, it ensures that funding is directed toward projects and services that the community values and may address its most pressing needs.
- **Flexible Funding Structures:** Developing grant programs that are adaptable to the diverse needs of different regions and communities, including those that may not have the infrastructure or capacity to apply for larger or more rigid grants. This can include smaller grants, technical assistance, or simplifying application processes.
- **Data-Informed Distribution:** Using data to identify disparities with access to parks, recreation, and cultural resources can be helpful. When considering factors such as income levels, race and ethnicity, disability, or age to ensure underfunded areas receive the resources they may need.

- **Support for Capacity Building:** By working with organizations and agencies in underserved areas to build their organizational capacity, funding opportunities should be considered. Areas could include training, technical support, or seed funding to help design and implement effective projects that will meet the needs of their community.
- **Ensuring Long-Term Sustainability:** Developing equitable funding policies not only addresses immediate needs but also focuses on long-term sustainability, ensuring that communities can maintain and manage parks and recreation facilities for future generations and within underfunded areas.

When governments and organizations enact equitable funding policies, they can help bridge gaps in access to parks and recreational opportunities, fostering healthier, more inclusive communities. There are many opportunities to assist in closing the gaps and can begin with research and an analysis of sources to assist with funding and implementation. A complete list of federal, State, local, nonprofit, private, and other community resources can be found on the following pages. Please note that there may be other national, private, or nonprofit organizations that should be considered when seeking funding opportunities. This list was created as an overview, and when searching for funding, the organization should seek all opportunities available, which may entail additional research.

Departments across the state are well-positioned to take advantage of numerous grant opportunities that support a wide range of projects from constructing new facilities to enhancing access and conserving natural spaces. With dedicated land management staff leading grant writing efforts for acquisitions and initiatives, the Division is equipped to secure funding that will advance its mission and benefit the entire state.




**Rocky Knob Mountain Bike Park**

# Key Takeaways

North Carolina offers a wealth of opportunities for parks and recreation agencies to secure funding through a variety of grants aimed at enhancing public spaces, promoting conservation, and improving community well-being. From state-level programs like the PARTF to federal grants and private foundations, these funding sources can support everything from park development and infrastructure upgrades to environmental education and health initiatives.

To take full advantage of the grant opportunities, agencies should regularly monitor grant announcements, cultivate partnerships with local stakeholders, and align project proposals with the strategic goals of funding programs. As a next step, the Division will address the priority projects identified through SCORP and begin the application process for relevant grants and engage with state and federal grant administrators for guidance and support. By staying proactive and informed, North Carolina's parks and recreation agencies can unlock vital resources to create lasting benefits for communities across the state.




**Volunteers from North Carolina Friends of the Reserve**

# Funding & Partner Opportunities

| Funding Opportunities | Information/ Administered By | Health & Wellness | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Federal Funding & Partner Opportunities** | | | |
| America the Beautiful Challenge | Intended to streamline grant funding opportunities for new conservation and restoration projects around the U.S. The America the Beautiful Challenge consolidates funding from multiple federal agencies and the private sector. National Fish and Wildlife Foundation - Funding Amounts: Grants approximately $85 million Source: https://www.nfwf.org/programs/america-beautiful-challenge | Supports projects that improve access to nature that has been linked to better mental and physical health outcomes. Encourages active lifestyles and reduces stress-related activities. | P T p tl ir e |
| Community Facilities Direct Loan Grant Program | Administered By: USDA-RD Source: https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/community-facilities/community-facilities-direct-loan-grant-program | Potential Applicants Include: Health care facilities, public facilities, recreational spaces, community support services, public safety services, educational services, utility services, and local food systems. | T fu n ti p c o a c c m |
| Historic Preservation Fund Grants | Support the preservation of historic sites across the United States. Grant Programs: State Historic Preservation Office Grants, Tribal Historic Preservation Office grants, African American Civil Rights Grants, Disaster Recovery Grants, Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCUs) Grants, History of Equal Rights Grants, Paul Bruhn Historic Revitalization Grants Program, Save America's Treasures Grants, Tribal Heritage Grants, Underrepresented Community Grants Administered By: National Park Service Source: https://www.nps.gov/subjects/historicpreservation/fund.htm | Can restore historic spaces to vibrant community gathering places and cultural landmarks that promote social well-being and create a strong sense of identity. | S s e ra n |

| | Access & Equity | Environmental Resiliency | Economic Impact |
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| | Prioritizes funding for underserved and Tribal communities making sure all people, regardless of background can enjoy the benefits of the outdoors. Fosters inclusion and addresses disparities to environmental access. | Investments focus on habitat restoration, climate adaptation, and natural infrastructure to help strengthen ecosystems' resistance to climate impacts. The efforts also enhance biodiversity and long-term ecological health. | Enables applicants to conceive and develop large-scale projects that address shared funder priorities and span public and private lands. |
| | This program provides affordable funding to develop essential community facilities in rural areas. An essential community facility is a facility that provides an essential service to the local community for the orderly development of the community in a primarily rural area. Funds can be used to purchase, construct, and / or improve essential community facilities, purchase equipment and pay related project expenses. | Funding can support sustainable infrastructure improvements that enhance community resilience to environmental challenges, such as upgrading water and waste systems as well as energy-efficient buildings. | By financing critical facilities, the program supports job creation, can attract investment, and strengthen long-term economic growth in rural regions. Funds can be used to purchase, construct, and / or improve essential community facilities, purchase equipment and pay related project expenses. |
| | Supports the preservation efforts of stories and sites within underrepresented communities. Ensures that a diverse range of cultural heritages are recognized and value with accessibility to all. | Rehabilitating historic buildings and sites often includes sustainable practices. Reducing the need for reconstruction, funding can help promote reuse, which can help conserve resources and lower the environmental impact to a community. | Grants help to stimulate local economies through job creation, revitalization of downtowns and neighborhoods. This helps attract investment while maintaining community character. Preservation Technology and Training grants are available to undertake innovative research or determine ways to adapt existing technology with the goal of providing solutions to national needs in the field of historic preservation. |

| Funding Opportunities | Information/ Administered By | Health & Wellness | |
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| Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) | Grants are used to support the acquisition and development of public outdoor recreation areas and facilities at the federal, state, and local level. Administered by: DNCR through the Division in cooperation with the National Park Service<br><br>Source: https://www.nps.gov/subjects/lwcf/index.htm | Grant investments help to expand parks, trails, and recreational facilities that encourage physical activity, reduce stress, and promote overall mental and physical health. | G c p h a |
| Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Program (ORLP) | Matching grants used to revitalize parks and outdoor recreation spaces in underserved urban communities especially those lacking green spaces. Eligible projects include land acquisition, park development, and infrastructure improvements. Administered by: DNCR through the Division in cooperation with the National Park Service<br><br>Souce: https://www.ncparks.gov/about-us/grants/outdoor-recreationlegacy-partnership-program | ORLP funded projects offer safe, accessible spaces for physical activity and relaxation, contributing to reduced rates in obesity, heart disease, and stress-related illness. | T ju h re |
| Recreational Trails Program (RTP) | Funds provided to develop and maintain recreational trails and trail related facilities for both non-motorized and motorized recreational trail use. Funding goals are focused on safety, infrastructure, innovation, and accountability. Administered by: DNCR through the Division in cooperation with the US Department of Transportation and DOT<br><br>Source: https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/recreational_trails/ | RTP funded trails promote mental well-being and physical activity by providing safe and accessible outdoor spaces for exercise and relaxation. | R m c a t tu |
| Transportation Alternatives | Administered By: US Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)<br><br>Source: https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/transportation_alternatives/ | Provides funding for a variety of generally smaller-scale transportation projects such as pedestrian and bicycle facilities; recreational trails; and more | G tr q c p |

| | Access & Equity | Environmental Resiliency | Economic Impact |
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| | Grants help ensure all communities-including underserved and low-income populations have equitable access to high-quality outdoor spaces and recreational opportunities. | The fund supports the acquisition and development of public outdoor recreation areas and clean drinking water, protection of natural habitats, and preservation of unique natural and cultural resources for future generations. | LWCF supported parks and recreation areas help to drive economies through local tourism, outdoor recreation jobs, and increased property values, creating stability |
| | The focus promotes environmental justice and ensures that all communities have equitable opportunities for outdoor recreation. | ORLP investments support green infrastructure that mitigates environmental challenges such as urban heat islands and stormwater runoff. Projects can enhance biodiversity and contribute to the ecological health of urban environments. | Creates outdoor recreation spaces and reinvigorates existing parks in underserved communities. Enhancing recreational spaces can contribute to community revitalization and long-term economic growth. |
| | RTP programs emphasize the development of trails in underserved and low-income communities providing access and reducing barriers. The grants help to bridge gaps in recreational infrastructure. | Projects often incorporate sustainable design practices that minimize impacts on the environment such as habitat preservation and erosion control. The trail areas can also serve as an educational platform for conservation awareness and environmental stewardship. | Enhanced trail networks can lead to increased spending in nearby businesses and contribute to economic vitality within the local and surrounding communities. |
| | Grant suggests that States and regional transportation planning agencies use qualified youth service and conservation corps to perform appropriate related projects. | Small scale vegetation management, environmental mitigation related to stormwater and habitat connectivity. | Funding can be used for small-scale transportation projects such as pedestrian and bicycle facilities, overlooks, viewing areas, and historic preservation. |

| Funding Opportunities | Information/ Administered By | Health & Wellness | |
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| U.S. Forest Service Grants | Support projects aimed at conserving, restoring, and managing forests and grasslands on public and private lands. Grants fund opportunities such as wildfire prevention, reforestation, urban forestry, habitat restoration, and community education on forest stewardship, Administered By: The Forest Service is authorized under several laws to collaborate and work with partners to carry out projects. The three major pathways for receiving federal funding to help carry out projects are: 1) grants and cooperative agreements, 2) partnership agreements, and 3) contracts.<br><br>Source: https://www.fs.usda.gov/working-with-us/partnerships/funding | Funds help support the creation and maintenance of trails and green spaces that promote and encourage outdoor recreation, physical activity, and mental well-being. | G<br>g<br>u<br>s<br>a<br>T<br>ti |
| Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program (WSFR) | Administered By: The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation awards competitive grants through programs to protect and conserve the nation's fish, wildlife, plants and habitats. The Foundation works with public and private partners in all 50 states and U.S. territories to solve the most challenging conservation problems. Administered By: US Fish & Wildlife Service<br><br>Source: https://www.nfwf.org/programs?page=1 | Enhance public access to outdoor recreational activities such as fishing, hunting, and wildlife observation promoting mental health and physical activity. | Ir<br>fi<br>a<br>n<br>a |
| **State Funding Opportunities** | | | |
| Accessibility for Parks Grant | Administered by: Department of Natural and Cultural Resources -The Accessible Parks Grant Program provides matching grants for parks and recreation to benefit people living with disabilities in North Carolina. Local governments, including public authorities, are eligible to apply. This program is administered through the Division of Parks and Recreation and the North Carolina Parks and Recreation Trust Fund.<br><br>Source: https://www.ncparks.gov/about-us/grants/accessibility-parks-grant | Provides opportunities for those with disabilities to participate in recreational and sporting activities, regardless of their abilities. | T<br>tl<br>a<br>tl<br>d |

| | Access & Equity | Environmental Resiliency | Economic Impact |
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| | Grants help expand tree canopies and green infrastructure in underserved urban and rural communities. The results stimulate improved air quality and access to nature. Grants also support Tribal and community-driven conservation projects. | Funding supports wildfire mitigation, invasive species management, and forest restoration, all of which enhance an ecosystems' ability to withstand climate change and natural disasters. Contracts are best if the project primarily benefits a Forest Service purpose, and no cost-sharing is expected. | Jobs are created in conservation, forestry, and other recreation-related industries while supporting sustainable land management benefiting tourism, agriculture, and local economies. |
| – | Invests in infrastructure like boat ramps, fishing piers, and wildlife management areas providing access for diverse communities to experience these recreational opportunities. | Programs that distribute funding annually to state agencies and Tribes to manage fish, wildlife, and habitats, evaluate and enhance species of greatest conservation need, and provide recreational opportunities for fishing, hunting, shooting, and boating. Supports habitat restoration and conservation efforts for long-term sustainability of natural resources. | Investments stimulate local economies through job creation in conservation, increasing tourism and supports industries related to outdoor recreation. Programming funds ensure that those who participate in hunting and fishing contribute directly to the preservation and enhancement of those natural resources. |
| | | | |
| | The matching grants can be used for: the construction of special facilities, or adaptation of existing facilities that meet the unique needs of persons living with disabilities | With the primary focus on accessibility, the development and adaptation of parks through the AFP program can incorporate sustainable design practices. | The program may stimulate local economies by funding the construction and adaptation of recreational facilities, creating jobs, boosting tourism, and increasing park accessibility, which attracts a wider range of visitors and promotes inclusive community engagement. |

| Funding Opportunities | Information/ Administered By | Health & Wellness | |
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| Beach & Waterfront Access Program | Administered By: NCDEQ Division of Coastal Management - Provides matching grants to local governments for projects to improve pedestrian access to the state's beaches and waterways. Eligible applicants include local governments in the 20 coastal counties and their municipalities that have public trust waters (ocean, estuarine or riverine waters) within their jurisdictions. https://www.deq.nc.gov/about/divisions/coastalmanagement/coastal-management-beach-waterfront-accessprogram/beach-waterfront-access-grants.<br><br>Souce: https://www.deq.nc.gov/about/divisions/coastal-management/coastal-management-beach-waterfront-access-program/beach-waterfront-access-grants | Supports mental health, reduces stress, and promotes overall well-being for individuals and communities. | E c |
| IMD Feasibility Studies Program | Administered By: DOT - Feasibility studies for eligible project types including paved trails, greenways, shared-use paths, side paths, and sidewalks.<br><br>Source: https://connect.ncdot.gov/municipalities/PlanningGrants/Pages/IMD-Feasibility-Studies-Program.aspx | Supports the development of safe, multi-use paths that encourage physical activity and promote healthier lifestyles. | I s c e |
| NC Land and Water Fund | Administered by: North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources - supports projects that improve water quality and protect natural resources which can include parks and recreation areas.<br><br>Source: https://nclwf.nc.gov/ | Supports the creation and protection of parks trails, and green spaces that promote physical activity and mental well-being. Assists in improving water quality, reducing exposure to pollutants, and safeguards public health. | E u n b r |
| North Carolina Science Museums Grant Program | Administered By: Museum of Natural Science - A highly competitive grant program that supports and strengthens one of the nation's most diverse and extensive networks of science museums. Eligibility requirements can be found here:<br><br>Source: https://ncmuseumgrant.naturalsciences.org/eligibilityInformation | Provides science based exhibits promoting an understanding of health, nutrition, and wellness. Active learning and engagement supporting well-being through stimulating educational environments. | E e c S |

| | Access & Equity | Environmental Resiliency | Economic Impact |
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| | Expands safe and equitable access to coastal and waterfront areas. | Provides access to natural settings with carefully designed and environmental friendly options. | Boosts local economies through increased tourism, supporting businesses such as restaurants, shops, and lodging near access points, and creating jobs related to construction, maintenance, and recreation services. Access can also raise property values and stimulate long-term investment in surrounding communities. |
| | Identifies opportunities to create inclusive and accessible infrastructure that connects underserved communities to essential destinations. | Promotes green infrastructure and non-motorized transportation options that reduce carbon emissions and enhance environmental sustainability. | Lays the groundwork for trails and greenways that boost local economies through tourism, job creation, and increased property values. |
| | Enhances access to natural areas for underserved and marginalized communities. It works to ensure equitable distribution of environmental and recreational resources across NC. | Provides the opportunity to protect critical natural habitats, preserves biodiversity, and restores wetlands and waterways. The projects also assist in the mitigation of flooding, improve water quality, and strengthen resilience to climate change. | Through the conservation of natural areas, the fund can boost tourism, recreation, and local business opportunities. Protecting drinking water resources, can have an impact on long-term infrastructure and treatment costs. |
| | Expands access to high-quality science education for underserved and rural communities and reduces barriers to STEM learning. | Fosters community involvement in conservation initiatives and resilience-building activities. Also educates the public on environmental stewardship, climate change, and sustainability practices. | Attracts visitors and tourists, boosting local economies and creating workforce development opportunities in STEM careers. |

| Funding Opportunities | Information/ Administered By | Health & Wellness | |
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| Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Program (ORLP)* | Administered by: DNCR through the Division in cooperation with the National Park Service<br><br>Source: https://www.ncparks.gov/about-us/grants/outdoor-recreationlegacy-partnership-program | Expands access to parks and recreational spaces in urban areas, encouraging physical activity and healthier lifestyles. | P<br>p<br>u |
| Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) | Administered by: North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation - Provides funding for park acquisition and development, including improvements to existing facilities.<br><br>Source: https://www.ncparks.gov/about-us/grants/parks-and-recreation-trust-fund | Enhances public health by supporting the development of parks, trails, and recreation facilities that encourage active living and reduce stress. | P<br>a<br>d<br>c |
| State Arts Resources | Administered By: The North Carolina Arts Council - The grant opportunities enrich communities across the state by fostering vibrant environments through funding opportunities.<br><br>Source: https://www.ncarts.org/grants-resources/grants/grants-organizations | Supports programs that promote mental health, healing, and community well-being through creative expression and cultural engagement. | A<br>u<br>tl<br>re |
| Recreational Trails Program* | Administered by: DNCR through the Division in cooperation with the US Department of Transportation and DOT<br><br>Source: https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/recreational_trails/ | Funds provided to develop and maintain rec<br>ties for both non-motorized and motorized r<br>focused on safety, infrastructure, innovation | |
| Safe Routes to School Program | Administered By: Integrated Mobility Division DOT - Planning, development, and implementation of projects that enable and encourage children to walk to school. Sidewalks, shared use paths, and intersection improvements.<br><br>Source: https://www.ncdot.gov/divisions/integrated-mobility/safety/Documents/safe-routes-to-school-description.pdf | The program promotes health and wellness by increasing daily physical activity among children. It can also reduce the rate of obesity, related chronic diseases and can improve mental health and well-being by fostering safer and more active lifestyles. | F<br>a<br>a |

*Federal allocations sent to the state for distribution.

| | Access & Equity | Environmental Resiliency | Economic Impact |
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| – | Provides funding for creating or improving parks and recreation facilities in underserved communities. | Funded through the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund and all projects must be consistent with the purposes and requirements of LWCF. | Creates outdoor recreation spaces and reinvigorates existing parks in underserved communities. |
| | Provides recreational opportunities that are available and accessible to all residents including underserved and rural communities. | The grant assists in conserving natural landscapes and protecting water resources, supporting biodiversity, and environmental sustainability. | Provides local governments the opportunity to invest in park infrastructure stimulating tourism and local economies while increasing property values near improved recreational areas. |
| al – | Access to the arts can be expanded to underserved populations, and ensure that diverse voices and traditions are represented and celebrated. | Some funding can provide awareness about environmental issues through eco-art and public installations, fostering a culture of stewardship and sustainability. | Fuels the creative economy by supporting artists, cultural organizations, and events that drive tourism, create jobs, and stimulate local business growth. |
| n recreational trails and trail related facilized recreational trail use. Funding goals are ation, and accountability. | | Encourages non-motorized transportation, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promotes clean air. Preserves natural corridors and enhances access to green spaces and sustainable land use. | Stimulates local economies through tourism which in turn supports small businesses such as bike shops, restaurants, and lodging. Investing in trails creates jobs and can lead to long-term economic growth. |
| | Facilitates the planning, development and implementation of projects and activities to improve safety. | Provides the opportunity to reduce traffic, fuel consumption and air quality near K-12 schools. | Can boost local economies by increasing foot traffic to businesses and reducing transportation costs for families. Adds to workforce development through infrastructure improvements like sidewalks, crosswalks, and bike lanes. |

| Funding Opportunities | Information/ Administered By | Health & Wellness | |
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| Strategic Transportation Investments | Administered By: DOT (MPO/RPO) - Bicycle, pedestrian, and public transportation facilities that appear in a state, regional, or locally adopted transportation plan will be included in proposed roadway projects. First point of contact should be the Metropolitan or Rural Planning<br><br>Source: https://www.ncdot.gov/initiatives-policies/Transportation/stip/Pages/strategic-transportation-investments.aspx | Enhances public health by improving transportation infrastructure which facilitates safer and more efficient travel, reducing stress and promoting active lifestyles through improved access to walking and biking paths. | A s c e ti |
| Youth in Parks - Environmental Education (YIP-EE) Grant | Assists North Carolina public schools with transportation costs for field trips to state parks, promoting environmental education. The grant is managed by Friends of North Carolina State Parks.<br><br>Source: https://www.ncfsp.org/YIP-EE-Grant-Request | The grants encourage physical activity and time outdoors, supporting children's mental and physical well-being through nature-based learning experiences. | R tr e u |
| **Local & Regional Grants** | | | |
| NC Community Foundation Grants | Administered by NC Community Foundation and local community foundations - Provides grants for a wide range of projects, including parks and recreation improvements.<br><br>Source: https://www.nccommunityfoundation.org/affiliate-foundations | Supports initiatives that enhance community health, including programs focused on preventive care, wellness education, and access to nutritious food, promoting overall well-being. | E d m ti a li |
| Regional Planning Organizations | Administered by Regional Councils of Governments, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), Rural Planning Organizations (RPO)- Offer funding for regional parks and recreational projects that align with planning goals.<br><br>Source: https://ncarcog.org/ | Help design transportation and land use plans that promote active living through safer walking, biking, and recreational opportunities. | T a t ir a |
| Complete Trails Program (CTP) | Administered by East Coast Greenway Alliance - Seeks proposals for trail projects that can successfully apply CTP funding towards expanding the East Coast Greenway State Trail. It is for the purpose of planning, construction, promotion, and maintenance of component trails of the North Carolina Trails System.<br>Source: https://www.greenway.org/complete-the-trails-nc | CTP promotes physical activity such as walking, biking, and paddling, contributing to improved physical and mental health for North Carolinians | P c 2 n tl e o |

| | Access & Equity | Environmental Resiliency | Economic Impact |
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| | Aims to improve connectivity and reduce service gaps, particularly in underserved communities. Prioritizes projects that enhance access to employment, education, and essential services. | Investments can reduce greenhouse gas emissions and support environmental sustainability initiatives across the state. | Allocates transportation funds to projects that improve infrastructure, boosting job creation, facilitating the movement of goods, and enhancing the overall quality of life for residents and visitors. |
| | Reduces financial barriers by funding transportation, making environmental education in state parks accessible to underserved and rural schools. | Fosters early environmental awareness, cultivating future stewards of North Carolina's natural resources. | Field trips that are supported by the grant can stimulate local economies near state parks through increased visitation and educational programming. |
| | | | |
| | Emphasizes equitable grant funds are directed to underserved and rural communities, ensuring that diverse populations have access to essential services and opportunities that may be quality of life experiences. | NCCF funds projects through its affiliate foundations aimed at environmental conservation and education, supporting efforts to protect natural resources and promote sustainable practices. | Investing in community programs stimulates economic development and enhances the quality of life. |
| | The organizations work to ensure rural and underserved ares have fair access to transportation and infrastructure improvements, enhancing connectivity and inclusion. | Work to incorporate environmental considerations into planning, helping to protect natural resources and reduce environmental impacts from development and transportation. | By coordinating regional infrastructure and development projects the organizations support economic growth, attract investment, and improve job access across multiple counties. |
| | Provides funding specifically for small communities (populations under 25,000) to develop trails that connect to the state trail system. Ensures that underserved and rural areas have equitable access to outdoor recreation opportunities. | Supports land acquisitions and sustainable trail development, aiding in conservation of natural habitats and promoting environmental stewardship throughout the state. | Stimulates local economies by attracting tourism, increasing property values, and creating jobs. |

| Funding Opportunities | Information/ Administered By | Health & Wellness | |
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| **Private & Nonprofit Grants** | | | |
| Acres for America | National Fish and Wildlife Foundation-Walmart's Acres for America program stands today as the leading public-private land conservation partnership in the United States. The partnership began in 2005, when Walmart and NFWF joined forces to establish Acres for America as a groundbreaking effort to support and catalyze the conservation of lands and wildlife habitat of national significance, and to benefit local communities and local economies.<br><br>Source: www.nfwf.org/programs/acres-america | Supports preservation of natural areas that promote outdoor recreation, and improve access to green spaces. The program also encourages active lifestyles impacting and improving physical and mental health. | E<br>ir<br>c<br>t |
| The Conservation Fund | Offers grants for land conservation and park development.<br><br>Source: www.Conservationfund.org | Protects natural areas and creates green spaces that support outdoor recreation and overall community well-being. | F<br>t<br>s<br>e |
| Golden LEAF Foundation | Supports economic development projects in tobacco-dependent, economically distressed, and rural communities, which can include parks and recreation initiatives. Eligibility is focused on local governments, educational institutions, economic development organizations, and nonprofits.<br><br>Source: https://goldenleaf.org/ | Supports workforce development in healthcare and public health sectors, funding programs that train students and professionals in CPR and other certifications that enhance community health services and preparedness. | T<br>ly<br>p<br>d<br>tr<br>e |
| Hometown Grants Program | Administered by T-Mobile - support small towns across America by funding community projects. Program will help fund projects to build, rebuild, or refresh community spaces that help foster local connections in your town. For example, this might include the town square pavilion, a historic building, an outdoor park, a ball field, etc.<br><br>Source: https://www.t-mobile.com/brand/hometown-grants | Providing funding opportunities by enhancing health such as building inclusive playgrounds, and offering improvements to access and healthcare for schools. | T<br>a<br>s |
| National Forest Foundation Matching Awards Program (MAP) | Supports action-oriented projects that enhance outdoor experiences, forest, and ecosystem health, and engage local communities in caring for their public lands.<br><br>Source: https://www.nationalforests.org/grant-programs/map | Funding projects that restore and maintain trails, infrastructure, and outdoor activities like hiking and camping that contribute to physical fitness and mental well-being. | S<br>t<br>c |

| | Access & Equity | Environmental Resiliency | Economic Impact |
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| | Ensures that conservation efforts include land near underserved urban communities, providing equitable access to nature and recreational opportunities. | Protects critical habitats, wetlands, and watersheds. The program offers opportunities to strengthen ecosystems, enhance biodiversity, and supports natural solutions for climate change and other environmental challenges. | The grant programs contributes to local economies by preserving lands that support various components of outdoor recreation including tourism and land use while leveraging partnership that can multiply conservation funding and the creation of jobs. |
| n | Funding that increases public access to nature helping bridge gaps in underserved communities on environmental equity. | Conserving forests, wetlands, and other vital ecosystems, the fund protects biodiversity, safeguards water quality, and natural infrastructure. | Stimulates local areas through conservation-focused job creation, sustainable land management, and supports working forests, farms, and tourism. |
| | Through prioritization of economically distressed, rural and tobacco-dependent communities, grants reduce disparities in access to education, job training, and infrastructure, fostering equitable opportunities across the state. | Funds are used to support public infrastructure projects aimed at reducing the impact of future floods, helping to build the environmental resilience of those communities that may be vulnerable. | The Economic Catalyst and SITE program grants through Golden LEAF support job creation and economic investment by assisting projects that lead to full-time careers in tobacco-dependent or economically distressed areas. |
| e<br>s | Targets small towns and underserved areas enhancing equitable access to essential services and community spaces. | Environmental resiliency is not the primary focus of the grant, however items such as pollinator gardens and farmer's market spaces have received funding. | The grants stimulate local economies that support small businesses, attract visitors, and create jobs. Revitalization efforts such as transforming vacant lots into community parks and centers |
| al | Supports initiatives that enhance access to public lands ensuring that diverse communities can enjoy national forests. | Through investments in habitat restoration, reforestation, watershed protection, the program strengthens the health of forest ecosystems making them more resilient to climate change. | Creates jobs in conservation and recreation, attracting tourism, and supporting businesses that rely on healthy forest ecosystems. |

| Funding Opportunities | Information/ Administered By | Health & Wellness | |
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| North Carolina Schools Go Outside Grant (GO) | Outdoor Heritage NC - Created to address the main barrier to getting kids outside during the school day.<br><br>Source: https://www.outdoorheritage.nc.gov/grants/ | The GO Grant encourages physical activity and time in nature for students. | P<br>N<br>w<br>tl |
| PeopleForBikes Grant Program | PeopleForBikes - supports bicycle infrastructure projects and targeted initiatives that make it easier and safer for people of all ages and abilities to ride. PeopleForBikes accepts grant applications from nonprofit organizations with a focus on bicycling, active transportation or community development; from city or county agencies or departments and from state or federal agencies working locally.<br><br>Source: https://www.peopleforbikes.org/grant-guidelines | Funding for bike infrastructure, promotes cycling for physical activity, improving cardiovascular health and overall well-being. | Ir<br>w<br>n |
| Trails Capacity Program | American Trails - Funds trail maintenance, research, and stewardship training across the country, serving all types of trail users.<br><br>Source: https://www.americantrails.org/resources/apply-for-the-trails-capacity-program#overview | Development and maintenance of trail systems promoting outdoor activities leading to improved health. | P<br>a<br>h<br>o |
| Two for the Trails | Athletic Brewing Company - Provide grants to organizations helping to preserve the places we love to play. The goal is to bring together diverse communities to build, maintain, and expand access to trails for both mountain biking and power sports. 501(c)(3) Non-Profits eligible.<br><br>Source: https://athleticbrewing.com/pages/two-for-the-trails | Funding trail rehabilitation and development, the program strives to promote outdoor activities such as hiking and biking improving the health and well-being of community members. | S<br>h<br>ir |
| Trail Trust | Fox Factory - Provides grants to organizations helping to preserve the places we love to play. Goal to bring together diverse communities to build, maintain, and expand access to trails. https://athleticbrewing.com/pages/two-for-the-trails | Supports projects for trail development and maintenance for improved health and wellness. | S<br>b |
| Trust for Public Land | Provides support for land conservation and park projects. https://www.tpl.org/ | Supports the creations and improvements of parks and trails promoting overall community well-being. | P<br>a<br>t<br>a |

| | Access & Equity | Environmental Resiliency | Economic Impact |
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| | Provides equitable opportunities for all NC students. Can cover costs associated with field trips and outdoor learning for those | Hands-on environmental education, students develop a deeper understanding for conservation and ecological systems fostering a generation that is more informed and proactive about environmental stewardship. | Through educational efforts, the GO Grant can contribute to increased visitation to parks, nature centers, and other similar venues. |
| | Improves infrastructure and connectivity within diverse and low-income communities. | Promotes cycling over vehicle use reducing greenhouse gas emissions contributing to a more sustainable urban environment. | Increases foot traffic to businesses, creates jobs in construction and maintenance, and attracts tourism related to cycling. |
| | Provides connectivity in underserved areas, ensuring that diverse populations have opportunities to engage in the outdoors. | The program helps protect natural habitats and ecosystems, mitigating environmental degradation and promoting biodiversity. | Trail investments can stimulate local economies through tourism, jobs, and increasing support for local businesses. |
| | Supports projects that focused on enhancing accessibility to natural spaces, including ADA-compliant trails. | Protects natural habitats and ecosystems promoting outdoor experiences focused on biodiversity. | Expanding and improving trail systems increases tourism, employment opportunities and businesses. |
| | Supports projects that enhance accessibility such as ADA-compliant trails. | Protects natural habitats concentrating on ecosystems, environmental degradation and promotes biodiversity | Boosts tourism, funds trail development projects that attract tourism to small business and creates jobs. |
| | Prioritizes funding within underserved and marginalized communities for equitable and high quality green spaces for all. | Preserves natural landscapes through strategic land conservation and sustainable design. | Invests in parks and open spaces with benefits of stimulating the local economy, increase property values, jobs in planning, construction, and maintenance. |

| Additional Resources | Web Sites |
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| **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation:** Grant opportunities focusing on health, education, and poverty alleviation | www.gatesfoundation.org |
| **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA):** Grant opportunities for projects that focus on environmental protection, clean water, and sustainability. | www.epa.gov/grants |
| **Foundation Center (Candid):** A resource for identifying private and nonprofit funding opportunities. | https://candid.org/find-nonprofit-funding |
| **Grants.gov:** A centralized portal for finding and applying for federal grants. Topics include education, health, research, social services and many more opportunities. | www.grants.gov |
| **National Endowment for the Arts (NEA):** Grants that assist in funding the arts and includes visual arts, music, theater, and cultural heritage projects. | https://www.arts.gov/grants |
| **National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH):** Funding opportunities for humanities-related projects, including research, education, preservation, and public programs. | https://www.neh.gov/grants |
| **National Institute of Health (NIH)**: Grants for health-related projects and initiatives. | www.nih.gov/grants-funding |
| **National Science Foundation (NSF):** Funding for research and education in the fields of science and engineering. | www.nsf.gov |
| **NC Grant Opportunities:** Grant programs offered across NC state government agencies | https://www.nc.gov/your-government/all-nc-state-services/grant-opportunities; https://www.nc.gov/government/open-budget; https://www.dncr.nc.gov/programs-services/grants-opportunities |
| **Rockefeller Foundation:** Grant opportunities supporting initiatives in health, education, and economic development. | www.rockefellerfoundation.org |
| **USA.gov:** A general government portal that provides information on federal programs and grant opportunities. | www.usa.gov |
| **W.K. Kellogg Foundation:** Focus on children, families, and equitable communities. | www.wkkf.org |

| Partners/Potential Partners | |
|---|---|
| American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) Livable Communities | https://www.aarp.org/livable-communities |
| American Heart Association | https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/fighting-food-insecurity.org |
| BlueCross BlueShield of North Carolina Foundation | https://www.bcbsncfoundation.org |
| Boy Scouts of America-East Carolina Council | https://www.eccbsa.org *several councils across the state |
| Boys & Girls Clubs of North Carolina | https://ncclubs.org |
| Brenner FIT®- WakeHealth | https://www.wakehealth.edu/Specialty/b/Brenner-FIT |
| Bull City Fit | https://bullcityfit.org |
| Carteret Local Food Network (CLFN) | https://carteretlocalfoodnetwork.org |
| Center for Environmental Farming Systems | https://cefs.ncsu.edu/food-system-initiatives/local-food-economies/infrastructure-map |
| Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) | https://www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp |
| Child Care Services Association (CCSA) | https://www.childcareservices.org |
| Children Wellness Initiative Network (WIN) – Walk Cabarrus | https://walkcabarrus.com/our-mission |
| Children's Health Weight Research (CHWR) – UNC Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention | https://chwr.web.unc.edu |
| Communities in Partnership (CIP) | https://communitiesinpartnership.org |
| Community Food Strategies | https://communityfoodstrategies.org |
| Cooperative Christian Ministry | https://cooperativeministry.com |
| Crisis Assistance Ministry | https://crisisassistance.org |
| Duke Sanford World Food Policy Center | https://wfpc.sanford.duke.edu/research |
| Durham Parks & Recreation (DPR) | https://www.dprplaymore.org |
| Durham's Innovative Nutrition Education (DINE) – North Carolina State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) | https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/state-snap-ed-programs/north-carolina<br>https://www.dcopublichealth.org/services/nutrition/dine |
| Eat Smart Move More North Carolina | https://www.eatsmartmovemorenc.com |
| End Poverty Durham | https://endpovertydurham.org |
| Equity Before Birth | https://equitybeforebirth.com |
| Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) | https://www.nutritionnc.com/wic/fmarket.htm |
| Feast Down East | https://www.feastdowneast.org |
| Feeding the Carolinas | https://feedingthecarolinas.org |
| Girl Scouts – North Carolina Coastal Pines | https://www.nccoastalpines.org |
| Go NAPSACC (Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care) | https://gonapsacc.org |

| | |
|---|---|
| Green Rural Redevelopment Organization (GRRO) | https://conservationfund.org/projects/green-rural-redevelopment-organization |
| GreenLight Fund-Charlotte | https://greelightfund.org/sites/charlotte |
| Guilford College Mobile Oasis Farmers Market | https://guilfordmobileoasis.com |
| Inter-Faith Food Shuttle | https://www.foodshuttle.org |
| Kids in Parks – TRACK Trails | https://www.kidsnparks.com/blog-topics/track-trails |
| Latin America Coalition | https://latinamericancoalition.org |
| Lumber River Council Governments | https://lumberrivercog.org |
| Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation | https://mrbf.org |
| Meals on Wheels North Carolina | https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/about-membership/state-associations/north-carolina |
| NAACP | https://naacp.org |
| National Recreation and Park Association | https://nrpa.org |
| NC Coalition Against Domestic Violence | https://nccadv.org |
| NC Council of Churches | https://www.ncchurches.org |
| NC DHHS Office of Economic Opportunity | https://www.ncdhhs.gov/divisions/office-economic-opportunity |
| NC Early Childhood Foundation (NCECF) | https://buildthefoundation.org |
| NC State Cooperative Extension | https://www.ces.ncsu.edu/categories/agriculture-food/local-foods |
| NC State Design National Learning Initiative | https://naturalearning.org |
| NC State Extension – Faithful Families | https://ncstepstohealth.ces.ncsu.edu/faithful-families **FF is one program |
| NC State University Institute for Emerging Issues | https://iei.ncsu.gov |
| NCCARE360 | https://nccare360.org |
| North Carolina Alliance for Health (NCAH) | https://www.ncallianceforhealth.org/healthy-food-access |
| North Carolina Community Action Association | https://nccaa/net |
| North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services | http://www.ncagr.gov |




Mountains-to-Sea Trailhead

# 7.4 LAND ACQUISITION

Land acquisition is an important component of planning for North Carolina's parks, recreation areas, and open spaces. The 2025–2030 SCORP examines how land is acquired and distributed to address recreation needs, expand access to parks, and conserve natural resources. This assessment also explores how land acquisition supports broader goals, such as protecting environmentally sensitive areas, enhancing community resilience to environmental challenges, and promoting health and recreation for all by prioritizing areas where residents face barriers to recreational opportunities. These interconnected priorities are evaluated to develop a framework that guides the state's future land acquisition efforts.






Neighborhood Path in Raleigh, North Carolina

# Overview

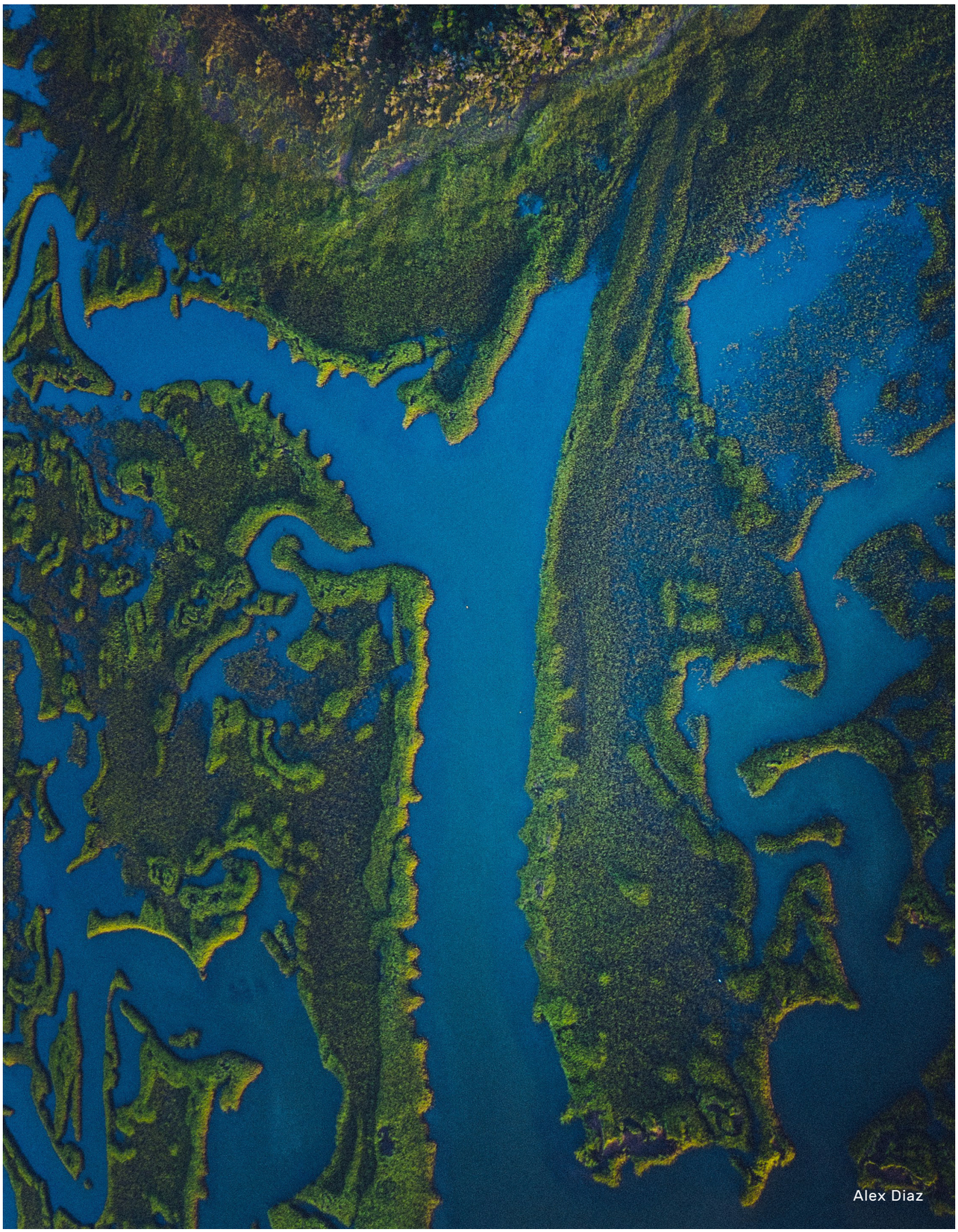
A key aspect of this effort is understanding the perspectives of both the public and recreation providers. Public attitudes reflect community priorities and support for funding efforts, while providers identify challenges such as funding constraints, limited land availability, and competing demands for land use. As North Carolina's population continues to grow, these competing interests further complicate efforts to secure land for parks and recreation. These insights inform strategies for acquiring land in areas with limited park access, ecological significance, or unmet recreation needs. The goal is to establish a park system that provides recreational opportunities for all residents, prepares a community to be more resilient to extreme weather, while also balancing environmental and recreational priorities.

As part of developing the current 2025–2030 SCORP, findings from the previous 2020–2025 SCORP provide valuable insights into ongoing priorities and emerging needs for land acquisition. Access to parks and open spaces provides a range of benefits, including supporting health and wellness, offering opportunities for physical activity, mental restoration, community connection, and environmental stewardship. By revisiting past the findings, this effort ensures that both state and local governments have the necessary knowledge to address gaps in park access, particularly in underserved areas where equitable access to recreation is limited.

Land acquisition also contributes to broader environmental goals, including the conservation of significant natural resources and the enhancement of community resilience to environmental challenges. Identifying areas where land can be preserved for its ecological value ensures that parks and open spaces support biodiversity, mitigate the effects of extreme weather, and protect vital natural systems. Reviewing these findings provides a foundation for informed strategies that align with both recreational and conservation priorities, ensuring that future efforts to acquire parkland reflect the diverse needs of residents and landscapes.

## 2020-2025 SCORP Land Acquisition Goals

- Encourage acquisition of inholdings within existing recreation areas.
- Encourage acquisition of unique natural areas and watersheds that are at risk of development.
- Explore state-sponsored short-term land-holding mechanisms for properties that could be then turned over to local governments for development and operation, especially for vital greenway and trail corridor development. Support state and local land use planning that bolsters conservation of important natural resources and landscapes, as well as opportunities for outdoor recreation.
- Seek partnerships with federal, state, and local governments, as well as nonprofits on coordinated goals for the continued protection, enhancement, and expansion of important natural resources and landscapes.
- Pursue land donations including easements, inheritance trusts, developer incentives, etc., to assist in acquiring and preserving important outdoor natural resources.




**Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina Aerial**

# General Attitudes Toward Land Acquisition for Public Parks & Open Space

The previous SCORP public opinion survey results show that satisfaction with park managers' efforts to acquire land (74 percent) is notably lower than satisfaction with their efforts to provide outdoor recreation (81 percent). This gap suggests that while existing recreation opportunities are valued, respondents recognize a need for greater focus on land acquisition to expand and enhance access to parks and recreational facilities. The survey further determined that nearly one quarter (24 percent) of respondents believe acquiring new parks and open spaces is a priority park management objective. Lastly, a significant portion of respondents (23 percent) indicated that a lack of available facilities limits their ability to visit parks and participate in recreation.

The findings from the 2025–2030 SCORP reinforce and expand upon the priorities identified in the previous SCORP, highlighting a consistent public interest in land acquisition for parks and open spaces. Both assessments emphasize the importance of acquiring land to address barriers to park visitation, such as the lack of facilities within a reasonable distance. In the 2025–2030 SCORP, 20% of respondents specifically cited the absence of nearby parks as a barrier to enjoying outdoor recreation, underscoring the continued need for expanding park access, particularly in underserved areas. Public sentiment remains strongly supportive of land acquisition, particularly for protecting natural resources and environmentally sensitive areas. Respondents noted that the top priority for park and recreation providers should be protecting natural resources, with 67 percent rating watershed protection as "very important." Similarly, 71 percent of respondents rated acquiring land for habitat preservation and historically or naturally significant features as "very important." These findings align with the previous SCORP's emphasis on land acquisition as a key strategy for addressing recreation needs and ensuring fair access to parks while supporting conservation goals.

The focus on alternative funding mechanisms has also remained a consistent theme across both SCORPs. While the previous SCORP highlighted public support for increasing taxes to fund land acquisition, the 2025–2030 findings indicate broader preferences for alternative




**Need-Based vs Strategic Support**

funding sources, such as donations (53 percent very supportive), concessions and sales (35 percent very supportive), and bond referendums (34 percent very supportive). These findings suggest that public willingness to support land acquisition extends beyond traditional tax increases, emphasizing the need for diversified funding approaches.

In terms of recreation priorities, the 2025–2030 SCORP findings reaffirm the public's interest in traditional recreation opportunities and park improvements. While these are not direct components of land acquisition, the need to develop parks that integrate well with ongoing improvements is clear. Additionally, the high ranking of land acquisition in the list of provider priorities demonstrates its continued relevance to both public and professional stakeholders

Taken together, these findings highlight the ongoing public and provider recognition of land acquisition as a critical tool for meeting recreation needs, conserving natural resources, and addressing barriers to park access. The 2025–2030 SCORP builds upon the foundation established by the previous plan by providing updated insights into funding mechanisms, evolving priorities, and the growing emphasis on environmental resilience and fair access to outdoor spaces.

# Recreation Providers' Perspectives on Acquiring Parkland

Alongside the public, recreation providers were surveyed as a component of the 2020-2025 SCORP recreation demand assessment. Their responses highlighted the significant challenges of land acquisition, with over half of the respondents identifying land acquisition as difficult or somewhat difficult due to funding limitations and competing priorities. Nearly 58 percent of respondents cited difficulty acquiring land for future recreation facilities and protecting significant natural resources, while 56 percent emphasized challenges in securing land to provide open space. Linear parks, such as greenways, were identified as a growing priority, with demand for these areas continuing to increase across the state. These findings underscored the importance of identifying new funding sources and innovative strategies to support land acquisition efforts.

The findings from the 2025–2030 SCORP reaffirm the challenges highlighted in the 2020–2025 SCORP, providing further insight into the priorities and barriers faced by recreation providers. In the 2020–2025 SCORP, over half of respondents cited funding limitations and competing priorities as barriers, with nearly 58 percent identifying difficulty in acquiring land for future recreation facilities and protecting natural resources.

Similarly, the 2025–2030 SCORP reveals that roughly 47 percent of respondents indicated that while acquisition is possible, funding for construction and development is insufficient, and 40 percent reported limited funding for land purchases. These findings suggest that funding remains a primary challenge, underscoring the need for targeted strategies to secure financial resources for both acquisition and development.

**In both assessments, funding constraints emerge as a significant obstacle to land acquisition.**




Urban development has also become an increasing concern for recreation providers. In the 2025–2030 SCORP, 32 percent of respondents noted that rising land prices due to urbanization have made acquisition more challenging. This aligns with the 2020–2025 SCORP's emphasis on the growing demand for linear parks which often require complex multi-parcel acquisitions and flexible funding mechanisms to navigate urban landscapes. Addressing these challenges will require proactive planning to prioritize acquisitions in areas facing development pressures while balancing the need to protect open spaces and natural resources.




**Aerial of Urban Development**

Both SCORPs highlight the importance of unpaved and paved trails, natural park areas, and open spaces as top priorities for recreation providers. The 2025–2030 SCORP places significant emphasis on these amenities, with trails and natural areas consistently ranked among the highest priorities over the next five years. This reinforces the findings from the previous SCORP, where recreation providers identified protecting significant natural resources and securing open spaces as essential objectives. These priorities highlight the importance of acquiring land that supports a variety of recreational opportunities while preserving North Carolina's natural landscapes. Finally, the 2025–2030 SCORP findings reveal additional barriers, including limited public support for land acquisition (14.3 percent) and the small percentage of providers (15 percent) who report having sufficient funds for both acquisition and development. These challenges reflect the continued need for innovative funding strategies and stronger advocacy efforts to build public and stakeholder support for land acquisition initiatives.

In summary, the perspectives of recreation providers in the 2025–2030 SCORP align closely with those expressed in the 2020–2025 SCORP. Both assessments highlight the critical need for funding, the challenges posed by urban development, and the prioritization of natural areas and trail systems. These findings provide a roadmap for addressing barriers and supporting the long-term goals of land acquisition and development across the state.

## Funding Land Acquisition: Maryland's Program Open Space

Maryland's Program Open Space (POS) demonstrates how innovative funding mechanisms can successfully support land acquisition for parks and open spaces.

Established to tie development directly to funding for recreational areas, the program collects a 0.5 percent state property transfer tax whenever land or a home is purchased. This ensures that growth and development contribute to preserving open space and enhancing community amenities.

Since its inception, POS has resulted in the protection of over 415,000 acres of land, with more than 50,000 acres acquired for local parks. The program has also awarded over 6,900 grants to local governments to establish amenities such as hiking trails, playgrounds, and greenways, ensuring that most Maryland residents live within 15 minutes of a public park or open space. Maryland's success highlights the potential of dedicated funding sources to expand recreational access and conserve natural resources for future generations.




# DID YOU KNOW?

These beautifully feathered water fowl are found in North Carolina's Coastal Plain during the winter and all throughout North Carolina during breeding season. As their name suggests, most Wood Ducks live in wooded swamps, beaver ponds, freshwater marshes, and along streams/rivers near forests.[1]

Wood Ducks are also referred to as "Carolina ducks" due to their association with the Carolina Region. They are the only ducks in North American to have a sharp claw that allows them to grip onto branches and perch in trees, so they may be above you on your next hike![2]

1 North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, "Wood Duck," North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, https://www.ncwildlife.gov/species/wood-duck.

2 "Wood Duck," Canvas of the Wild, https://www.canvasofthewild.com/species/wood-duck.

# Acquisition Strategies Based on Need, Health & Well-being, and Resiliency Assessments

One of the clearest connections between the previous and current SCORP plans is the prioritization of acquiring unique and time-sensitive properties. The previous SCORP identified the need to secure watersheds, protect natural areas at risk of development, and encourage donations and easements as key strategies for land preservation. These priorities remain relevant in the 2025–2030 SCORP, where protecting environmentally sensitive lands is a major focus. Both plans also emphasize partnerships with federal, state, and local agencies, as well as nonprofits, to achieve shared conservation and recreation goals. By aligning acquisition efforts across stakeholders, the state can achieve a more cohesive and impactful approach to preserving vital landscapes.

However, the 2025–2030 SCORP also integrates a stronger emphasis on recreation for all and individual health and wellbeing. Public input from the current plan highlights the need to address disparities in park access, particularly in the high Environmental Justice Index (EJI) communities as noted in the **Health Equity Assessment, Chapter 7.6**. These are areas where systemic inequities have resulted in reduced access to recreational opportunities and greater environmental burdens. By identifying park deserts in these areas and prioritizing land acquisition efforts to address them, the Division hopes to create a more equitable distribution of parks and open spaces. This approach aligns with the broader goal of health equity, which calls for fair and just opportunities for all residents to achieve their highest level of health. Acquiring parkland in areas with limited recreational access can provide opportunities for physical activity, mental well-being, and community connection, helping to eliminate preventable health disparities.

Resiliency is another area of increased focus in the 2025–2030 SCORP. Protecting environmentally sensitive lands is not only essential for recreation but also for supporting biodiversity and mitigating the impacts of climate change. The current plan showcases the need to prioritize acquisitions that safeguard watersheds, preserve ecological corridors, and bolster the state's resilience to extreme weather events. These efforts ensure that parks and open spaces contribute to both environmental health and community sustainability. The resiliency assessment also focused on identifying geographic areas within the state that are more vulnerable to natural disasters such as sea-level rise, wildfires, and landslides as well as microclimatic conditions like heat island effects that predominantly affect urbanized areas. Targeted land acquisitions in these disaster-prone and vulnerable urbanized areas are equally critical as preserving and protecting the existing natural environments. Growing urbanized areas will need reforestation efforts, increased tree canopy, and nature-based solutions through the acquisition of undevelopable and often deteriorated urban landscapes.

# Key Takeaways

The 2025–2030 SCORP builds upon the foundation established by the 2020–2025 SCORP, with both plans emphasizing the critical role of land acquisition in addressing recreation and conservation needs. While the earlier plan focused on recommendations such as acquiring inholdings, preserving unique natural areas, and forming partnerships, the current plan introduces an enhanced focus on recreation for all, health and wellbeing, and environmental resiliency. Together, these goals chart a path forward to ensure that land acquisition efforts serve the state's diverse population while preserving its natural heritage for future generations.

Despite these advancements, challenges do remain. Both plans identified funding as a persistent barrier to land acquisition and development, highlighting the need for alternative funding strategies. The previous SCORP's recommendation to explore state-sponsored short-term landholding mechanisms remains relevant as a way to secure critical properties before turning them over to local governments for development. Addressing barriers and leveraging opportunities can position North Carolina to create a more accessible, resilient, and sustainable network of parks and open spaces. These efforts will not only meet the recreational needs of a growing population but also preserve the state's natural heritage for future generations.




**Safeguarding Water at Falls Lake**

# 7.5 RECREATION FOR ALL



The Recreation For All assessment will take a high-level approach, focusing on statewide patterns and regional distinctions based on accessibility and inclusivity factors across North Carolina's eight Prosperity Zones.[1] This method acknowledges the statewide reach of parks, balancing Recreation For All goals with the unique needs of different regions.

This chapter will structure content around three main equity themes: Access and Connectivity, Inclusive and Welcoming Spaces, and Programming and Partnerships, rather than delving into highly localized indicators. In 2021, the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) published Equity in Parks and Recreation: A Historical Perspective[2], an interactive story map designed to help park and recreation professionals understand how historical and present-day policies impact park access. This resource, in addition to the research noted in the following pages, and the experiences shared throughout the engagement period has driven this chapter. Many at the state and local level can recognize and acknowledge the discriminatory practices within recreation that occurred in the past. Leading the comprehensive parks planning process across the state with inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility as guiding principles, the Division hopes that atonement and action are the next steps in making state and local parks a place for all.

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Source: "N.C. Prosperity Zones." North Carolina Department of Commerce n.d. https://www.commerce.nc.gov/about-us/nc-prosperity-zones.

Source: "Equity in Parks and Recreation A Historical Perspective." National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA), 2021. May 1. https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/5727e40084614c559bf-0440dc5a21f7f.




**Middle and high school students present the North Carolina State Parks team with a check from their community fundraising efforts.**

# The Division's Responsibility

As the premiere provider of outdoor recreation space, the Division supports and manages roughly 264,000 acres of forest, 682 miles of trails, 9.6 miles of beaches, four rivers, and 3119 campsites throughout the State Parks system. For millions of North Carolinians, the State Parks system is their "local park" and for millions of visitors, it is what draws them back to the state time and time again.

The Division has a responsibility and duty to ensure that every person, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, disability, economic status, and other diverse backgrounds can enjoy the great outdoors through intentional programming and accessible and welcoming facilities. The focus groups conducted as part of the 2025-2030 SCORP engagement process made it clear that there are areas for improvement in access and equity. For example, some community members and partnering outdoor recreation organizations mentioned that although the Division provides Spanish translation of some social media materials and documents, there are little to no Spanish signs in State Parks, there is not a staff member on-site at times to assist with language translation in person, and many of the program registrations for camping are online in English and can be confusing to navigate. At times, the Spanish-speaking population feels excluded because of the lack of materials available in Spanish. The focus group meetings also revealed that although there are numerous measures to create more accessible trails at a state and local level, there is a desire for other activities like accessible rock climbing and kayaking. Trails are among the most desired and readily funded recreational activities; however, focusing primarily on increasing accessible trails limits those with disabilities to one activity built with them in mind.

From an operational standpoint, the Division may also want to increase its training opportunities for staff to engage with diverse populations with a variety of needs. This can include adding language training, accessibility training, conflict resolution training, and other opportunities to create a more well-rounded staff. Lastly, the Division leads by example to local parks and recreation departments and other states how best practices around inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility are not a trend but a standard of service in North Carolina.



Appalachian Mountains - Sean Foster

# Recreation for All Themes for SCORP

## Access & Connectivity

Access to parks is essential for encouraging community health, recreation, and connection. However, true accessibility goes beyond just being able to reach a park, it also includes ensuring that all visitors can navigate and play once they arrive. While major highways and roads provide vehicle-based access to parks, not everyone has access to a car or has the ability to drive, creating a barrier for low-income families, seniors, and people with disabilities. Public transit services to parks are limited across the state, especially in rural areas, and few local parks or even State Parks are found off greenways or bikeways, limiting non-motorized access such as walking or biking. Expanding transit options and improving connectivity between parks and surrounding communities can help make outdoor spaces more accessible to all.

## Inclusive & Welcoming Spaces

Creating inclusive and welcoming spaces in state and local parks ensures that everyone, regardless of background or ability, feels valued and can fully enjoy the outdoors. Parks that prioritize inclusive design offer accessible facilities, pathways, playgrounds, and amenities that accommodate individuals of all abilities, from children to seniors. Many parks incorporate features such as accessible pathways and restrooms, and wheelchair-friendly picnic areas to improve physical access. Notable examples include parks where smooth, wide trails and accessible water features allow people with mobility challenges to fully engage in outdoor recreation. However, significant gaps still exist, particularly in older facilities and parks in remote areas. Uneven terrain, lack of accessible parking, and limited adaptive equipment continue to hinder full participation. Additionally, there is a need for more inclusive communication tools, such as braille signage, audio descriptions, and multilingual information to accommodate visitors with visual, auditory, or language barriers.

A helpful strategy in keeping all of these things in mind is to consider the default experience that a park provides and how each component of that experience is being translated to all members of the community whether they be non-English speakers or persons living with a disability or mobility challenge. Thinking about how welcoming




**Accessible Cabin at Cliffs of Neuse State Park**

**The Recreation Provider Survey noted access to transportation as a topmost barrier.**



**Catalyst Sports**

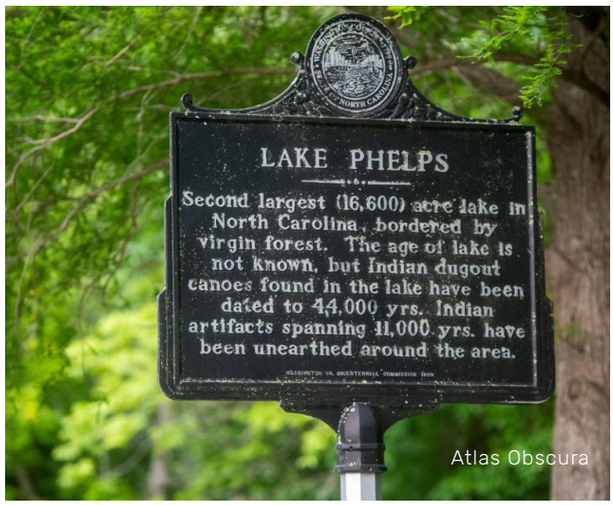
space is and the experience it is providing can allow for looking beyond just technical aspects of facility design to the core of the space and how it is experienced.

Parks should also serve as culturally welcoming environments, reflecting and honoring the diverse identities of the communities they serve. Some parks successfully integrate culturally relevant design and programming, such as multilingual educational signage, art installations celebrating local heritage, and events that honor the traditions of many North Carolina residents, especially those from Native American and Black communities as the original stewards of the land. For example, at Pettigrew State Park, there are two dugout canoes displayed at the visitor center as they were found at the base of Lake Phelps, some dating back 44,000 years, when the Algonquian people lived there. These efforts foster cultural awareness, inclusivity, and a sense of belonging for all visitors. However, in many parks, representation remains limited. Facilities often lack culturally significant gathering spaces, relevant signage, and programming designed in partnership with historically underserved populations. This absence can create a disconnect between park areas and those who need to feel welcomed most.

The Division should consider an audit of parks and facilities to determine where these gaps exist and develop a plan to create or install features that acknowledge the history of the park, the land, and the region. Often, agencies can partner with public institutions or nonprofits to aid in the conducting of historical research and the design of interpretive elements to feature in parks. Efforts such as these not only result in more welcoming spaces but also allow for all communities to engage in a process that acknowledges the long and often complex histories of our state's land.

## Programming & Partnerships

To ensure that everyone can benefit from the opportunities that parks offer, connecting underserved communities to outdoor recreation should be a priority at the state and local level of recreation providers. Effective programming and partnerships play a key role in this effort, especially through collaborations with community organizations, schools, healthcare providers and organizations, and local providers. These partnerships can help create outreach programs that offer targeted experiences, such as guided nature walks, environmental education, and outdoor skills workshops, all designed to meet the unique needs of underrepresented populations.




**A Lake Phelps State Placard**




**North Carolina State Parks Partners with Waypoint Adventure to Provide Adaptive Recreation Programs at Select Parks**

In addition to expanding outreach, supporting local providers is crucial to ensuring these programs are accessible and relevant. By providing funding, training, and resources, local parks and recreation departments can empower community organizations to reach more people and create programs that reflect the cultural and practical needs of their communities. The Division, as one of the largest funding sources for local governments, encourages increased partnerships for the sake of sharing resources to create a more robust programming effort. Strengthening these partnerships and expanding outreach efforts will help ensure that parks are inclusive spaces where everyone, regardless of income, background, or ability, can experience the benefits of outdoor recreation.

# Existing Conditions

## Workforce Equity

Workforce equity entails creating a fair, inclusive, and thriving workplace that reflects the diverse communities the Division serves. As part of the Division's ongoing commitment to improving recruitment and retention strategies, the organization is actively taking strides to ensure all employees have equal opportunities for growth, representation, and success. By aligning their efforts with the guidelines and best practices provided in the NRPA Equity Action Plan[1], the Division is fostering a workplace culture that prioritizes fairness, respect, and accountability. This commitment to equity also positively influences the experience of all users, as the diversity of the workforce allows the Division to better understand and meet the needs of the various individuals who benefit from their programs, funding, facilities, and services. By acknowledging past harms, addressing barriers to inclusion, enhancing recruitment and retention strategies, and creating pathways for underrepresented groups to thrive, the Division ensures that its workforce is a mirror of the millions of people who encounter its staff, recreation areas, and programs each year. A more equitable workforce not only strengthens the organization but also brings diverse perspectives that drive innovation and improve the Division's collective impact.

The NC State Parks system has a legal duty to ensure that all public park spaces are compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA requires that newly constructed and altered state and local government facilities, places of public accommodation, and commercial facilities be readily accessible to, and usable by, individuals living with disabilities. Recreational facilities, including play areas, are among the facilities required to comply with the ADA.[2] In collaboration with the ADA, the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board - often referred to as the "Access Board" developed accessibility guidelines for newly constructed and altered recreational facilities and play areas which were combined with original ADA guidelines in 2010 to create the ADA Standards for Accessible Design.

## Universal Design

The design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without adaptation or specialized design.

## Maximum Access

The site, facility, work environment, service or program is compliant and meets the accessibility standards as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and as required by law. Additionally, it has been designed with the intention of barrier removal to create usability by all people to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or modification. The design allows for seamless connectivity and usability between all features.

## Minimum Access

The site, facility, work environment, service or program is compliant. It meets accessibility standards as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and as required by law.

## No Access

The site, facility, work environment, service or program is not compliant. It does not meets accessibility standards as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and as required by law.

Commonly referenced in the recreation space is the term "universal design" or the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without adaptation or specialized design. Universally designed sites and facilities offer equal opportunity not only for persons with disabilities, but a variety of situations, such as: a parent pushing a stroller, a child on crutches, or a person with arthritic knees. The Principles of Universal Design[3] are a stark reminder of the simplicity that can be incorporated into parks and

1 "NRPA Equity Action Plan." National Recreation and Park Association n.d. https://www.nrpa.org/contentassets/39a68ad8bfc5433f81c5de414d16cd7c/2021nrpaactionplan-final.pdf.

2 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design." United State Department of Justice Civil Rights Division American with Disabilities Act, 2010. September 15. https://www.ada.gov/law-and-regs/design-standards/2010-stds/#1008-play-areas.

3 Connell, Bettye R, Mike Jones, Ron Mace, Jim Mueller, Abir Mullick, Elaine Ostroff, Jon Sanford, Ed Steinfield, Molly Story, and Gregg Vanderheiden. The Principle of Universal Design. Raleigh, NC: NC State University, Center for Universal Design, College of Design, 1997. https://design.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/principles-of-universal-design.pdf.

recreation projects to increase accessibility for all. Universal design is a valuable additional standard to ADA because it is, at its core, a philosophy that emphasizes providing equal access to experiences rather than just physical access.

## Accessibility Programs, Facilities & Initiatives

The Division manages the Accessible Parks (AP) Grant Program,[4] which seeks to invest millions in parks and recreation to include people living with disabilities. In 2024, the program provided $12.5 million in matching grants for the construction of special facilities or the adaptation of existing facilities that meet the unique needs of persons living with disabilities or enable them to take part in recreational and sporting activities, regardless of their abilities. Eligible applicants include NC counties, incorporated municipalities, and public authorities, as defined by NC General Statute 159-7[5], so long as they are authorized to develop recreational facilities for the general public. Applicants can request a maximum of $500,000 with each application and must match the grant with $1 of local funds for every $5 of grant funds. AP program applications are scored based on access: 1) no access to minimum access, 2) minimum access to maximum access, and 3) no access to maximum access. Funding opportunities such as the AP grant program are essential to the Division's mission to ensure that all people are able to enjoy the great outdoors through the construction of new facilities or the adaptation of existing facilities. As with all parks and trails grants, the Division provides technical assistance to local governments through a contract with the Recreation Resources Service (RRS). In the spirit of removing barriers, RRS is a technical assistance program jointly administered by the NC Division of Parks and Recreation and North Carolina State University's Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management. The program aims to lower barriers to local governments' ability to create successful grant applications and ensure that a technical learning curve does not stand in the way of a government entity applying to available funding opportunities.

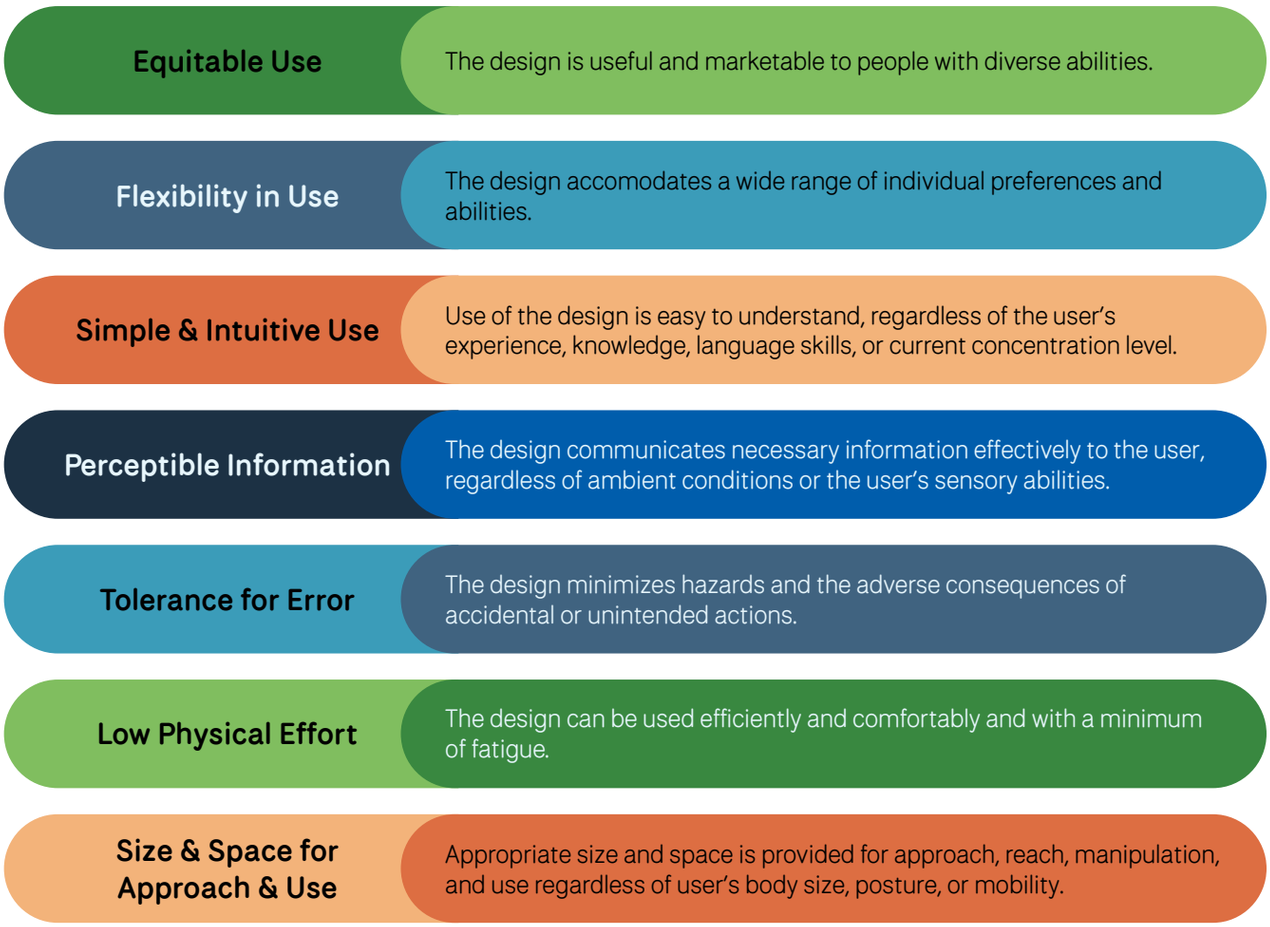
4 "Accessible Parks Grant." NC Division of Parks & Recreation n.d. https://www.ncparks.gov/about-us/grants/accessible-parks-grant.

5 "Article 3 - The Local Government Budget and Fiscal Control Act G.S. 159-7 Short Title; Definitions; Local Acts Superseded. ." NC General Assembly n.d. https://www.ncleg.gov/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/PDF/BySection/Chapter_159/GS_159-7.pdf.




**NC State Parks Supports Black Folks Camp Too**

At NC State Parks, the Division also offers several accessible programs and facilities throughout all regions and prosperity zones. Whether trying to view a glimpse of a Northern Cardinal while on the Mount Mitchell Observatory Deck or fishing on an accessible pier at Carolina Beach State Park, the Division staff is there and available to make residents and visitors feel welcome.[6]




**Principles of Universal Design**

6 "Description of Accessibility Features at NC State Parks." NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources n.d. https://www.dncr.nc.gov/about-us/diversity-equity-accessibility-and-inclusion/accessibility/accessibility-state-parks.

| Recreation Type | Location |
|---|---|
| **Special Activities** | **The Rockefeller House at Carvers Creek State Park**<br>▪ The park offers a shuttle on Tuesdays for visitors with limited mobility to enjoy the historic home, the observation deck over the pond, and the fishing area.<br>**The Sky Lounge at Chimney Rock State Park**<br>▪ The park offers an elevator that takes visitors with limited mobility to the Sky Lounge patio level with stunning views of Chimney Rock and Lake Lure.<br>**Exhibits at Fort Macon State Park**<br>▪ Lower portions of Fort Macon, with interpretive programs and exhibits, are wheelchair accessible. Some exhibits and videos at the visitor center and at the Fort also provide accessibility for those with hearing or vision loss.<br>**Beaches at Fort Macon and Fort Fisher State Recreation Area**<br>▪ Beach wheelchairs are free to rent at both parks, so visitors with limited mobility can enjoy the beach at Fort Macon and Fort Fisher.<br>**Bear Island at Hammocks Beach State Park**<br>▪ The passenger ferry at Hammocks Beach is wheelchair accessible and shuttles visitors to Bear Island, an unspoiled barrier island with camping and day-use facilities.<br>**Dune at Jockey's Ridge State Park**<br>▪ Residents and visitors may contact the park office at least 24 hours ahead of their visit to schedule a ride to the top of the dune at Jockey's Ridge in an all-terrain vehicle.<br>**Observation Deck at Mount Mitchell State Park**<br>▪ Residents and visitors may contact the park office at least seven days ahead of their visit to schedule a ride to the park's observation deck in an all-terrain vehicle. |
| **Camping** | **Accessible camp options are offered at the following parks:**<br>▪ Carolina Beach State Park<br>▪ Cliffs of the Neuse State Park<br>▪ Crowders Mountain State Park<br>▪ Falls Lake State Recreation Area<br>▪ Goose Creek State Park<br>▪ Gorges State Park<br>▪ Hanging Rock State Park<br>▪ Jones Lake State Park<br>▪ Jordan Lake State Recreation Area<br>▪ Kerr Lake State Recreation Area<br>▪ Lake James State Park<br>▪ Lake Norman State Park<br>▪ Lumber River State Park<br>▪ Medoc Mountain State Park<br>▪ Morrow Mountain State Park<br>▪ New River State Park<br>▪ Raven Rock State Park<br>▪ Singletary Lake State Park<br>▪ South Mountains State Park<br>▪ Stone Mountain State Park |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Fishing** | **Accessible fishing piers are offered at the following parks:**<br>▪ Carolina Beach State Park<br>▪ Falls Lake State Recreation Area<br>▪ Hanging Rock State Park<br>▪ Kerr Lake State Recreation Area<br>▪ Lake James State Park<br>▪ Lake Norman State Park<br>▪ Morrow Mountain State Park<br>▪ Pettigrew State Park<br>▪ Stone Mountain State Park |
| **Trails** | **Accessible trails can be found at:**<br>▪ Carolina Beach State Park (Fitness and Flytrap Trails)<br>▪ Dismal Swamp State Park (Swamp Boardwalk)<br>▪ Goose Creek State Park (Palmetto Boardwalk)<br>▪ Hanging Rock State Park (Rock Garden Trail)<br>▪ Lake Norman State Park (Dragonfly Trail)<br>▪ Merchants Millpond State Park (Cypress Point Loop Trail)<br>▪ New River State Park (Dogwood Trail)<br>▪ Pettigrew State Park (Lake Shore Trail)<br>▪ Raven Rock State Park (Longleaf Loop Trail) |
| **Swimming** | **Accessible swimming areas available at:**<br>▪ Falls Lake State Recreation Area<br>▪ Hanging Rock State Park<br>▪ Jordan Lake State Recreation Area<br>▪ Lake Norman State Park<br>▪ Morrow Mountain State Park |

## Assessment of Barriers to Access

During the engagement and outreach for this project, the primary barrier to accessing the outdoors varied depending upon the survey audience as noted in **Chapter 6: Engagement**. Both the Scientific Survey and the Public Opinion Survey findings displayed that the main barriers to access included overcrowding, no personal time to visit, and lack of facilities and services that meet the needs of the individual.

> **"I have a medical condition called POTS that requires me to sit/rest frequently, but many parks/recreation areas don't have enough benches available throughout the park."**

The Recreation Provider Survey findings noted that providers consider the lack of access to transportation, travel distance, and the lack of knowledge of available facilities as the greatest barriers to access. From the Tribal Community Survey, the lack of facilities and services to meet an individual's needs was overwhelmingly identified as a major barrier, followed by cost and fees, and no parks being within a reasonable distance.

When polling the community about their opinion regarding access to parks, there were essentially two prevailing sentiments: those speaking about access from an ADA/accessibility standpoint and those referring to transportation access to parks. Though different perspectives, both show key barriers effecting visitors. The Scientific Survey found that 47 percent of respondents travel at least 1 hour to enjoy outdoor recreation, while some go as far as 5+ hours away. There is an inherent economic privilege to being able to travel that far as well as an economic burden to have to sacrifice a desire to be outdoors due to lack of access and funds. There is also an added burden for those who need ADA-mandated facilities after driving at least an hour to only discover that restrooms, trails, or other facilities are not accessible enough for them.

The Division has a responsibility to look at access from all perspectives and avenues to ensure that programming, amenities, and facility efforts are aiming at helping to solve the problem.

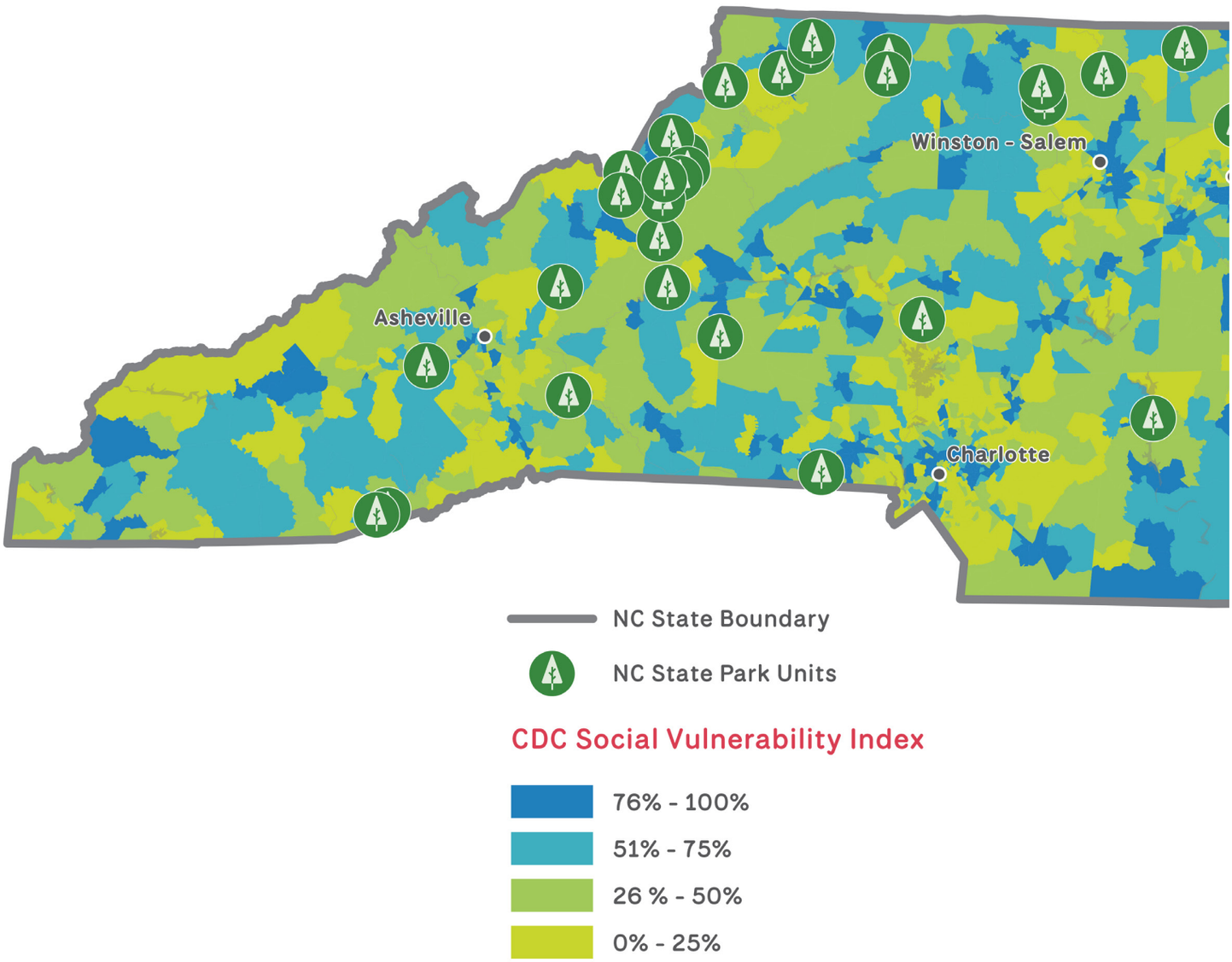



## Socially Vulnerable Areas

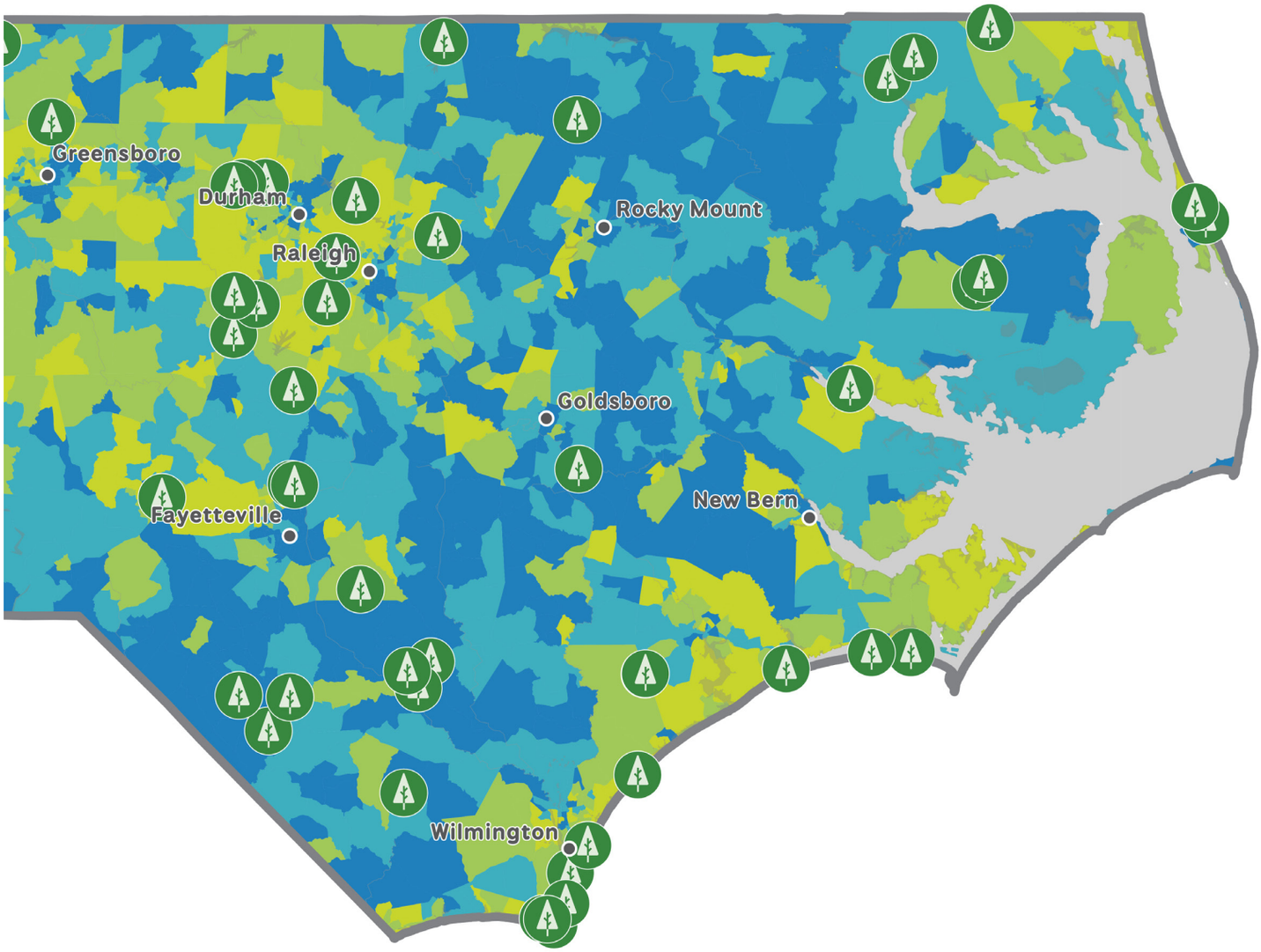
Mapping indicators of socially vulnerable areas against the location of parks, open spaces, and greenways within the State Parks system can reveal the equitable distribution of these resources. Government investment in parks should create benefits for the whole community. For example, providing places to exercise along trails creates an individual benefit for those who use the space and an expanded benefit to the community by improving health outcomes and minimizing healthcare costs that individuals with sedentary lifestyle habits tend to incur. In areas with higher social vulnerability, a park may provide a valuable resource to an individual who may not otherwise have access to these resources. From a financial standpoint, the Division and the NC General Assembly should be commended for supporting local, public parks and facilities for recreational activities and providing funding to increase access, which improves the entire state's overall health and well-being.

## The Division's Role

The Division serves not only as a provider of state parks but also as a funding source for local governments through programs like the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF), the Accessible Parks (AP) Grant Program,




Social Vulnerability Mapped at the Census Tract Level for the State of North Carolina


Greensboro
Durham
Raleigh
Rocky Mount
Goldsboro
Fayetteville
New Bern
Wilmington

the Recreational Trails Program, the Great Trails State Program, federal opportunities like the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Program, and the Land Water Conservation Fund grants that required this very plan. Although this plan will not delve into the socially vulnerable areas associated with each individual park system, the assessment provided within this chapter will serve as a broader view of the vulnerability areas across the state, providing key information to regional perspectives that local governments may find valuable in their own parks and recreational comprehensive planning process.

This report uses two indicators of vulnerability, both provided by the United States Centers for Disease Control (CDC): The Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) and the Environmental Justice Index (EJI). The SVI combines demographic characteristics commonly used as indicators for areas considered at risk of experiencing negative social or health outcomes. Social vulnerability includes an analysis of socioeconomic status, household composition and disability, minority status and language, and housing and transportation to determine the area's vulnerability. The EJI combines data related to socioeconomic status, environmental burden, and health vulnerability to show areas that are at the highest risk of facing adverse outcomes due to their environment. The dataset for this analysis was created by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention to aid communities after a natural disaster. This data set also has applications for community planning because it allows for the visualization and analysis of the spatial distribution of vulnerable neighborhoods within a community. Park planning can also aid in figuring out which parts of the community are most in need of future expansion or improvement of the system through land acquisition and improvements to resiliency, recreation for all, health and well-being, and economic impact for gateway communities from local and state parks.

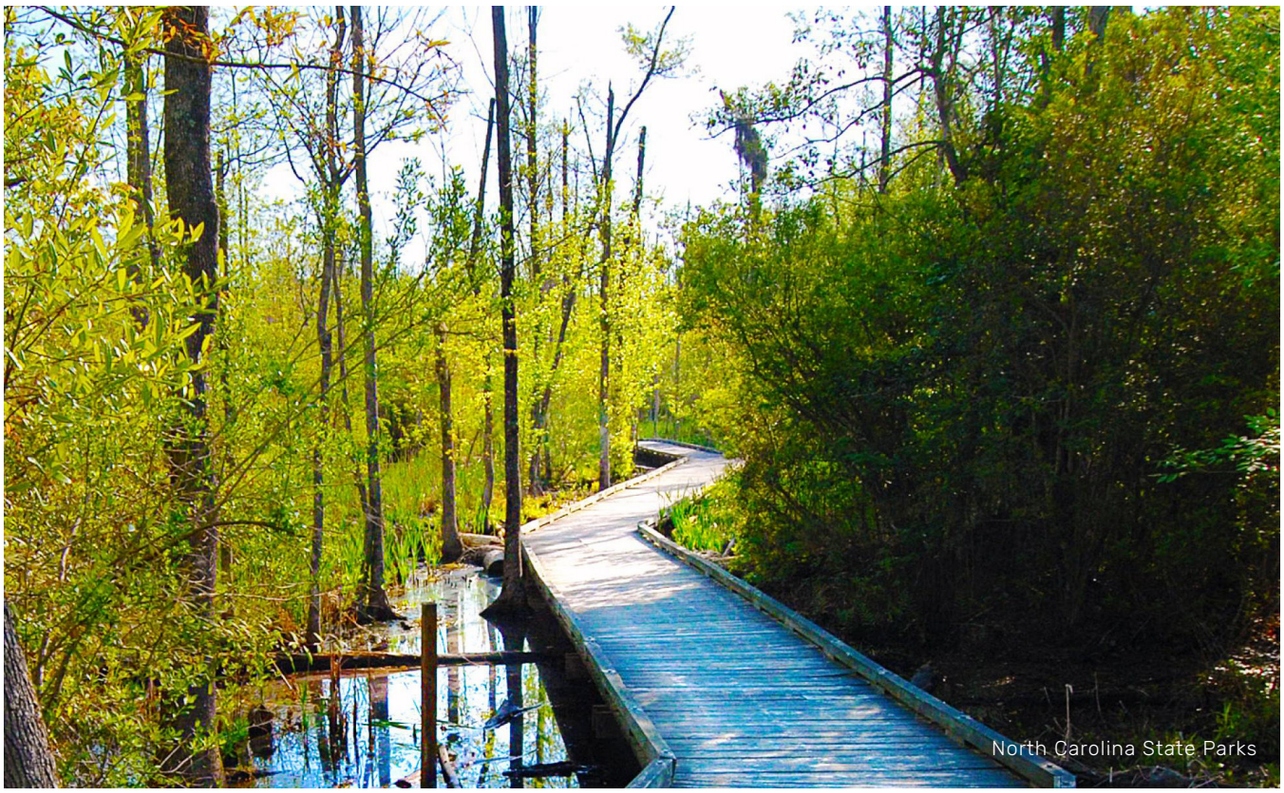
This SVI analysis is shown in the map above. It ranks each census tract within a certain percentile which expresses how vulnerable that tract is compared to the rest of the country. For example, if a tract is in the 26 percent to 50 percent range in the maps above, the subject census tract is as vulnerable or more vulnerable than 26 to 50 percent of all other census tracts in the United States.

## Targeted Funding Investments in Socially Vulnerable Areas of NC

A useful application of the SVI dataset is to overlay certain funding systems with the SVI data. This can show where funding is going as it relates to SVI and reveal if there are areas of the state with high vulnerability that are lagging in funding. It's important to remember that funding will almost always tend to skew higher for urban areas because of associated costs of land and professional services and construction. It is also important to recognize that in NC, as is seen across the country, urban areas often serve higher percentages of the population who are more socially vulnerable than others. For the




**Wheelchair Accessible Ferry at Hammocks Beach State Park**



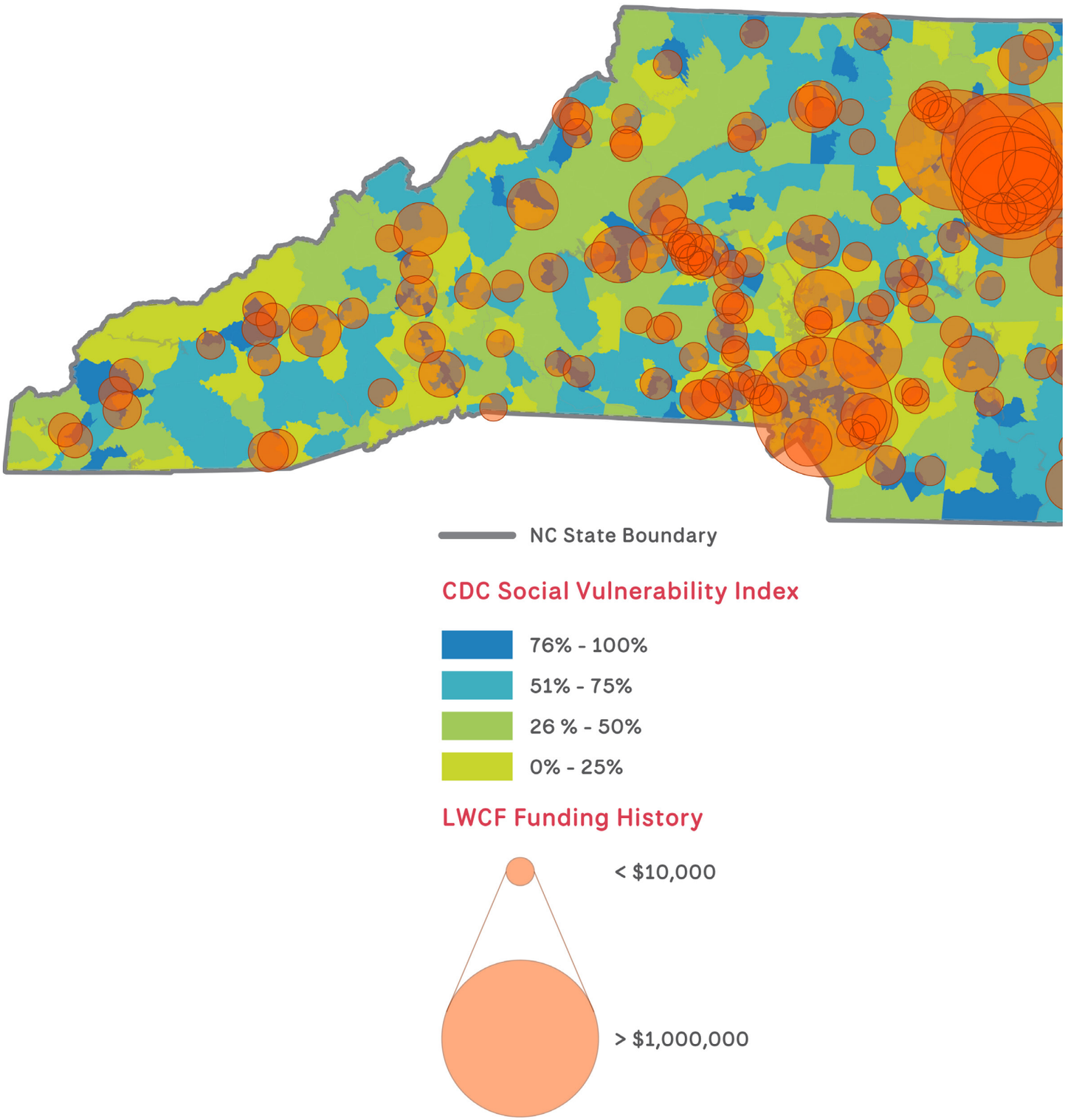

**Wheelchair Accessible Ferry at Hammocks Beach State Park**



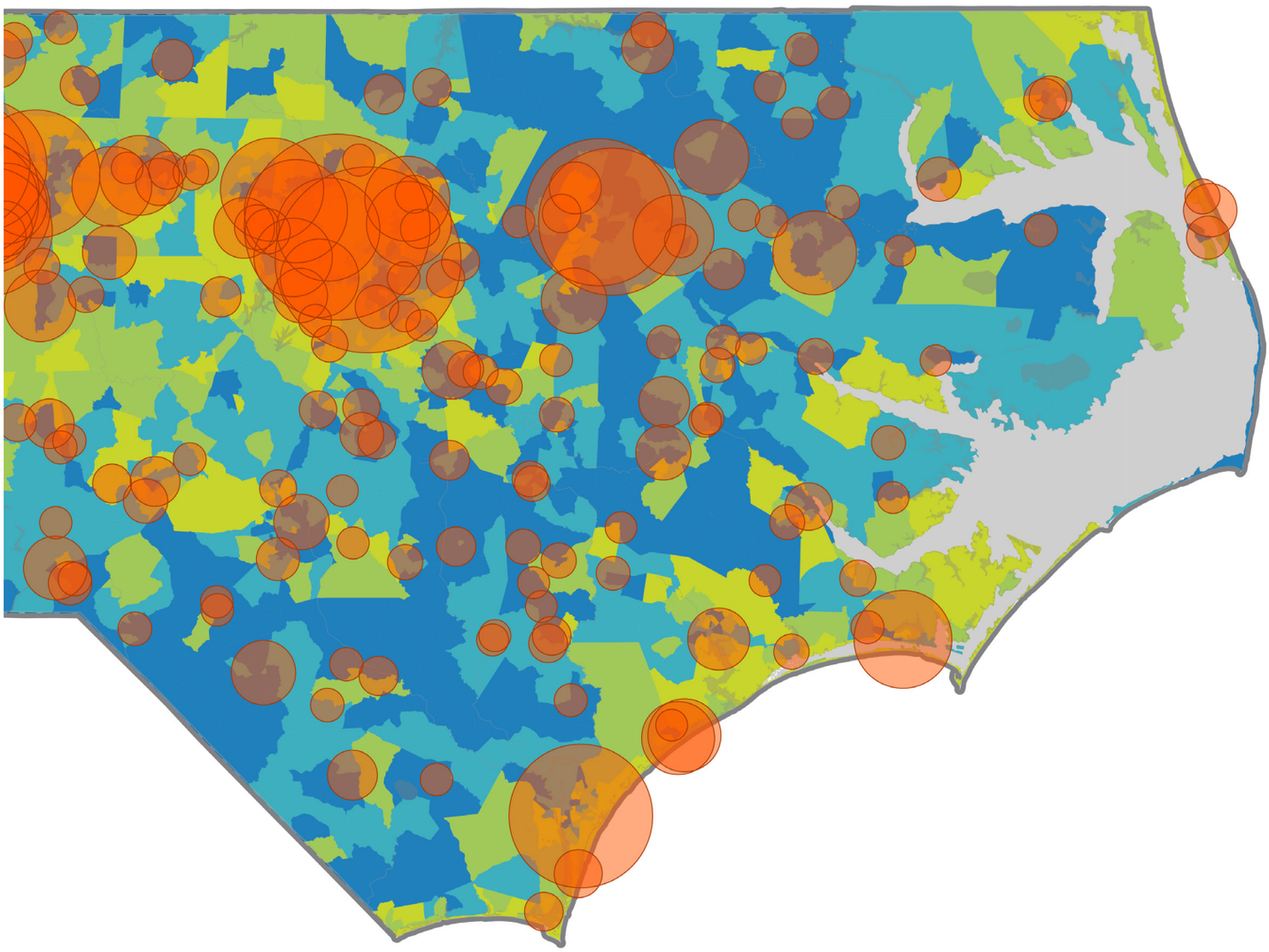

# DID YOU KNOW?

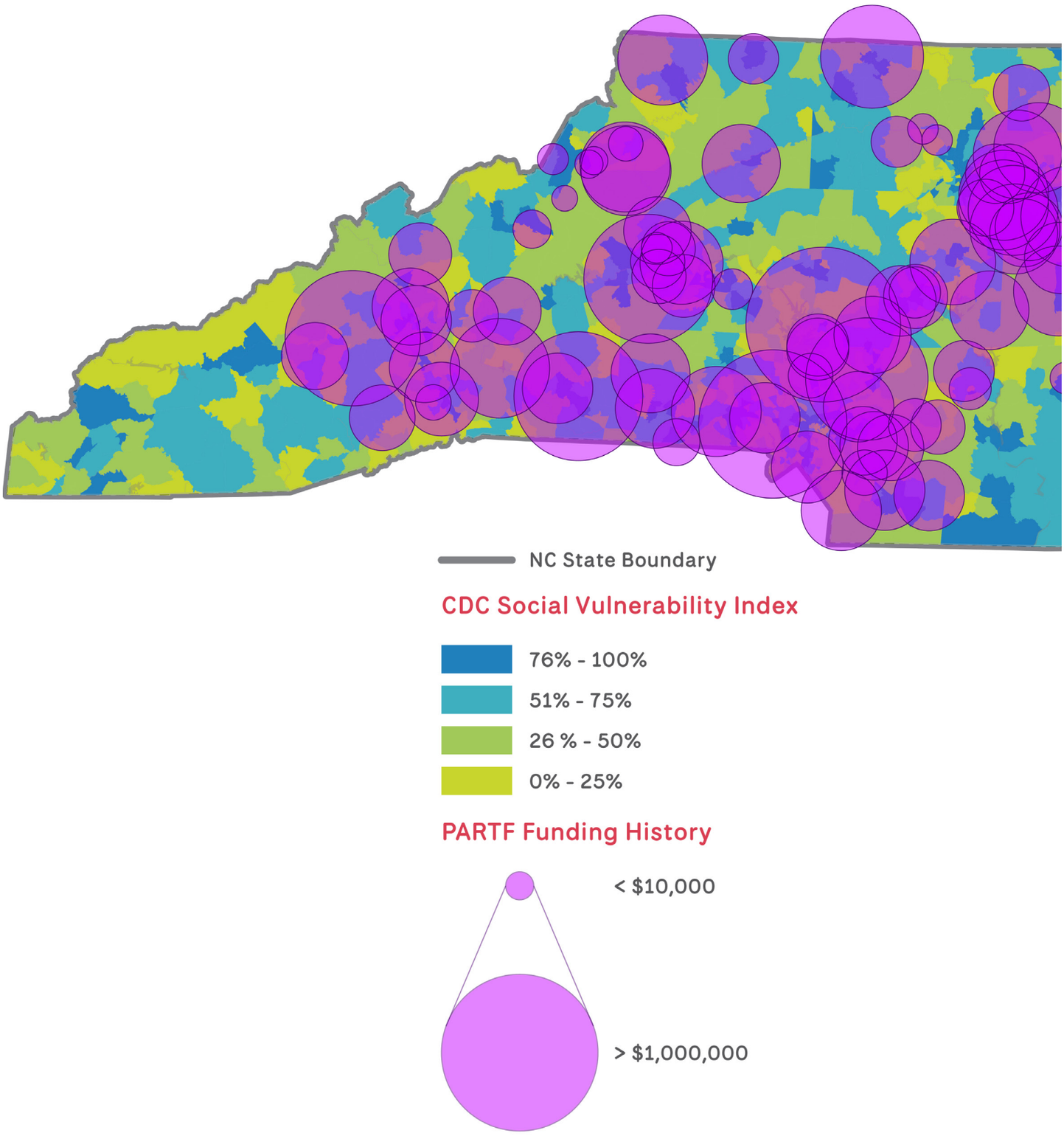
Our state is home to one of the coolest light shows nature has to offer! Synchronous Fireflies (Photinus carolinus) are a unique type of beetle capable of illuminating their abdomens using bioluminescence. Fireflies do this in order to attract a mate, with the males flying around searching for the females who are also flashing from the forest floor below. Most fireflies mate in this manner, but male Synchronous Fireflies exhibit the unique ability to synchronize their flashing during mating rituals. Scientists have investigated the reasons behind this behavior, but the behavior is still not fully understood. These mysterious displays can be seen every year in the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina.[1]

1 National Park Service, "Fireflies," Great Smoky Mountains National Park, https://www.nps.gov/grsm/learn/nature/fireflies.htm.

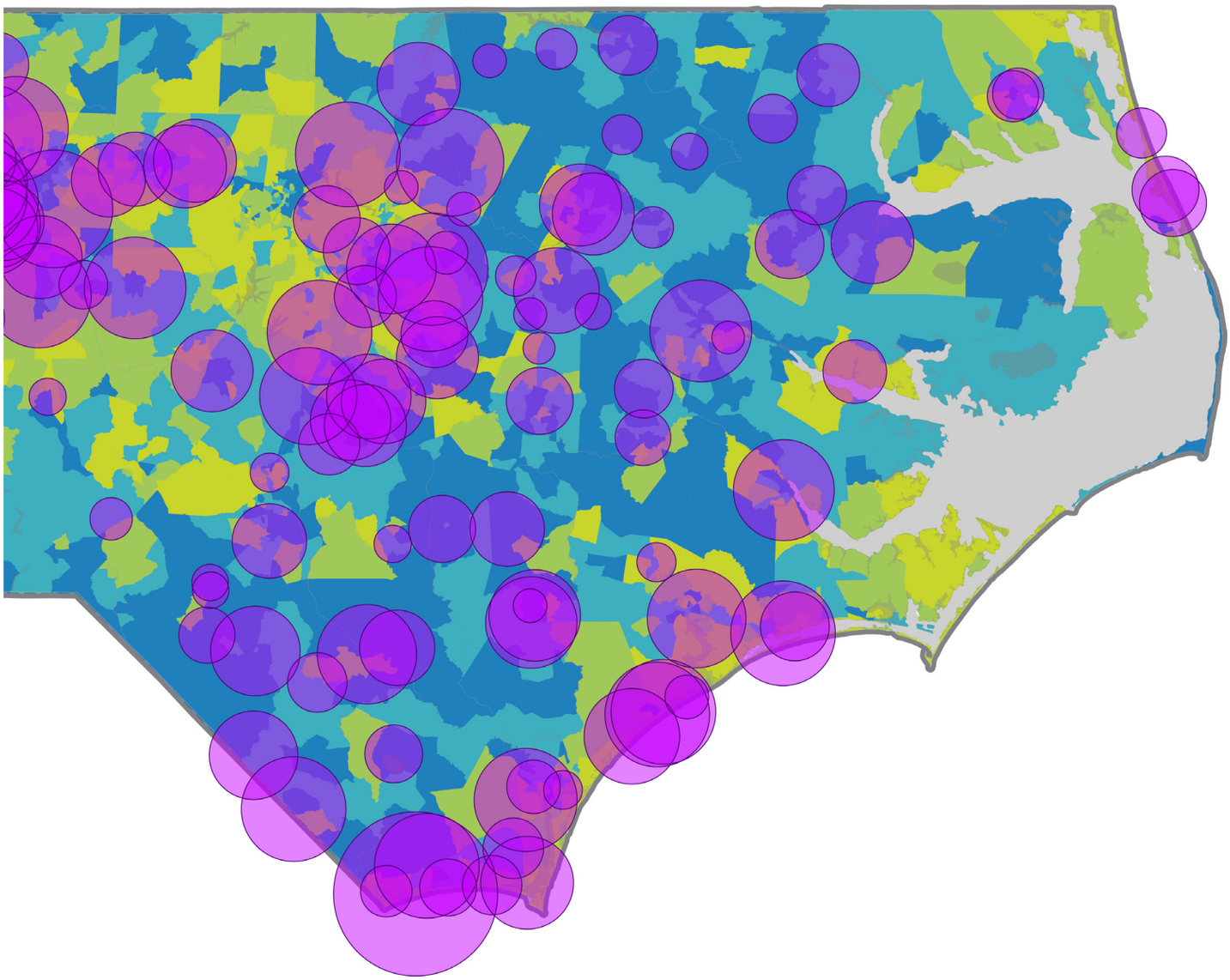



**Social Vulnerability Mapped at the Census Tract Level Compared to LWCF Funding Awards for the State of North Carolina**






**Social Vulnerability Mapped at the Census Tract Level Compared to PARTF Funding Awards for the State of North Carolina**



Recreation for All assessment, both LWCF and PARTF Funding was overlayed with SVI data. The maps for both can be seen on the following pages. Detailed maps of vulnerability at the prosperity zone level can be found in the **Appendix**.

Broadly speaking, PARTF funding is better distributed both spatially and in magnitude than LWCF funding. Looking for gaps, the Funding and Vulnerability analysis revealed that for both PARTF and LWCF awards, there is a general decrease in the volume of funding for Eastern NC although the decrease is more pronounced in LWCF. In addition to the geographic trend, these are areas of the state that, as seen in the maps, are the most socially vulnerable. While this certainly warrants attention, it is important to note that these communities are smaller in size than many communities in the Piedmont and Mountain regions of the State. As such these communities also tend to operate smaller park systems and may have less capacity to secure acquisitions and long-term maintenance. There is still, however, a need based on this analysis to work closely with partners in our most vulnerable areas of the state to make sure that their needs are being met adequately and to offer assistance in preparing competitive funding applications if the need exists. These are communities that are often the most impacted by hurricanes and freshwater flooding, looking to combine new or improved parks with environmental design that can mitigate these impacts could potentially make them more competitive in funding cycles.

## Cultural Programming & Interpretation

Intentional cultural programming plays a critical role in fostering connection, celebrating diversity, and addressing historical exclusion. Programs that highlight the traditions, histories, and experiences of Native American, Latin, and Black communities create spaces where these voices are honored and uplifted. By centering communities that were historically excluded, this programming promotes cultural understanding and ensures that services reflect the rich diversity of the populations being served. Such efforts provide opportunities for learning, dialogue, and meaningful engagement, allowing individuals from all backgrounds to feel seen and included. Beyond celebration, intentional cultural programming contributes to equity, healing, and the development of stronger, more inclusive communities.

The impact of intentional cultural programming extends to fostering understanding, reducing barriers, and encouraging appreciation for diversity. By creating opportunities to engage with and celebrate diverse cultures, these programs amplify underrepresented voices and promote meaningful dialogue. They play a vital role in strengthening community bonds by highlighting the richness of varied perspectives and experiences. Additionally, intentional cultural programming ensures that spaces and services are responsive to the values, traditions, and needs of diverse populations, creating environments where everyone feels respected and welcomed. This fair approach drives positive social change by building stronger, more resilient communities. Programs that address historical exclusion contribute to a more just and equitable society while honoring the stories, traditions, and contributions of marginalized communities.




**Visitors gather in the bathhouse at Hammocks Beach State Park in 1968**




**Dorothea Dix Park Inter-Tribal Pow Wow**

# Key Takeaways

## Access & Connectivity

- Barriers include limited public transit, lack of non-motorized access, and economic challenges.
- Expanding transit options and connectivity can improve accessibility.

## Inclusive & Welcoming Spaces

- Parks should prioritize accessible design, culturally relevant programming, and multilingual communication tools.
- Older facilities and remote parks may have less relevant amenities to the communities and visitors they serve.

## Programming & Partnerships

- Collaboration with community organizations and schools can create targeted outreach programs.
- Funding and training for local providers are essential for inclusive programming.

## Workforce Equity

- The Division is committed to fostering a diverse and inclusive workplace to better serve the community.
- Aligns efforts with NRPA Equity Action Plan and ADA standards.

## Accessibility Initiatives

- Accessible Parks Program provides funding for facilities catering to individuals with disabilities.
- Universal design principles emphasize equal access to experiences, not just physical access.

## Barriers to Access

- Common barriers include overcrowding, lack of transportation, insufficient facilities, and economic challenges.
- ADA compliance and transportation access are critical issues.

## Socially Vulnerable Areas

- Parks in socially vulnerable areas provide essential resources for underserved communities.
- Funding analysis shows Eastern NC receives less funding despite higher vulnerability, highlighting the need for targeted investments.

## Cultural Programming

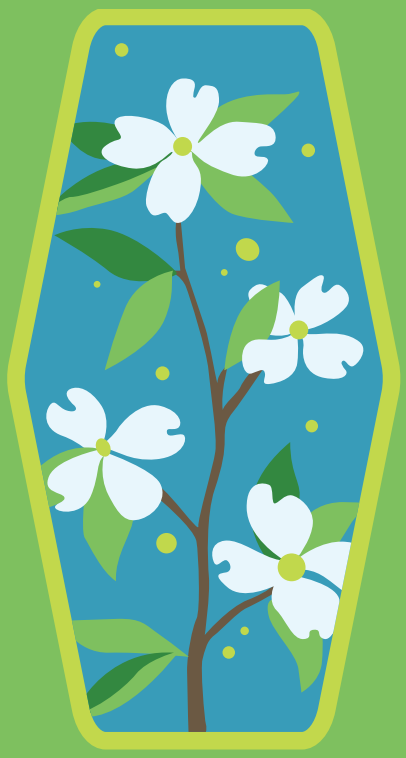
- Intentional programming celebrates diversity and addresses historical exclusion.
- Promotes equity, healing, and stronger community bonds by honoring marginalized voices.

## Accessible Recreation Examples

- Accessible trails, fishing piers, swimming areas, and special activities are available across various parks.
- Programs like wheelchair-accessible ferries and adaptive recreation initiatives enhance inclusivity.

These efforts collectively aim to make North Carolina's parks and trails more accessible to everyone.

# 7.6 HEALTH ASSESSMENT



Health equity and the Social Determinants of Health (SDOH)[1] are critical concepts for understanding and addressing disparities in health outcomes across different populations and communities. Health equity refers to the attainment of the highest level of health for all people. The concept emphasizes the importance of eliminating avoidable health disparities caused by systemic barriers such as poverty, racism, and unequal access to resources, like parks and outdoor recreation opportunities. SDOH plays a pivotal role in shaping individual and community health and can include factors like education, housing, income, and access to healthcare. These determinants are deeply intertwined with social, economic, and environmental conditions, often reflecting broader inequities in society.

Source: "Why Is Addressing SDOH Important? Social Determinants of Health (SDOH)." Center for Disease Control, 2025. January 17. https://www.cdc.gov/about/priorities/why-is-addressing-sdoh-important.html.




**Asheville Wellness Tours**

# Introduction

Even though the Division is focused on conservation, recreation, and education, the value of access to parks, trails, and other outdoor recreation opportunities contributes to one's quality of life. By acknowledging the root causes of health inequities, the Division can identify opportunities to create more equitable health outcomes as well as identify local, state, and regional partners to work together to promote well-being in every community across the state.

# A Renewed Focus on Health Equity

Many recognize that in the wake of the pandemic, the role of parks and recreation shifted around the world. Previously, many thought of things like afterschool programming and pick-up basketball games when thinking of parks and recreation. The coronavirus pandemic ushered in a new era where parks became places to enjoy fresh air, safely commune with others at a distance, as well as a set destination where one could gather information and resources about things going on within the community. They became community wellness hubs where someone experiencing social isolation may find a safe community to converse with. Community wellness hubs are where a walking group may come together at a park to walk around a 0.5-mile loop or watch a healthy cooking class in the community kitchen, where they can have an opportunity to be in fellowship with others living with chronic health diseases. To meet the emerging health and wellness needs of the public, more parks and recreation spaces are evolving into community wellness hubs. These wellness hubs are trusted gathering places that allow every member of a community to connect with essential programs, services, and spaces that advance health equity, improve health outcomes, and enhance quality of life.[1] By serving as community wellness hubs, parks and recreation are in a prime position to address systemic barriers to the SDOH and integrate more holistic health and wellness services into agency facilities and programming.

1 Korth, Amy, Amy Meinen, Jon Morgan, Jordan Bingham, Allison Colman, and Maureen Neumann. "Community Wellness Hubs A Toolkit for Advancing Community Health and Well-Being Through Parks and Recreation." National Recreation and Park Association, 2022. June 2. https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/53045b41ea204719a6aace92481f99ee.

## Health Equity

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) defines **health equity** as fair and just opportunities that are afforded to everyone, so that all people can attain their highest level of health; valuing everyone equally with sustained efforts and resources heavily focused on addressing unjust, unfair and avoidable historical, social and political injustices, and eliminating health disparities.

## Health Inequity

The National Recreation and Park Association defines **health inequity** as systemic differences in health status or the distribution of health resources between different populations arising from the social conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age. They are unfair, avoidable, and have significant social and economic costs to both individuals and societies.

## Social Determinants of Health

Defined by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), **Social Determinants of Health** are the nonmedical factors that influence health outcomes. They are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, worship, and age. These conditions include a wide set of forces and systems that shape daily life such as economic policies and systems, development agendas, social norms, social policies, and political systems.

Nine in ten park and recreation agencies are taking specific actions to ensure that their health and wellness programs and services promote health equity.

93% recognize that evaluating the health and wellness of park and recreation spaces, programs, and services in their communities is among their most important functions in advancing health and well-being in their communities.

70% report that their agencies make training staff on diversity, equity and inclusion a priority.

More than half (52%) of all park and recreation agencies have specific initiatives in place to support community engagement to build trust and ensure equitable representation.

95% of park and recreation agencies provide health and well-being training and professional development opportunities to staff members.

99% noted that providing equitable access to high-quality parks, green spaces, trails and other built environment features is a priority.

**NRPA Parks and Recreation: Advancing Community Health and Well-Being Findings, 2021**

In February of 2021, the NRPA surveyed parks and recreation professionals across the nation[2] to further understand how they were addressing the growing list of needs and wants from their communities around health and well-being. Key takeaways from the survey are noted below with the primary takeaway for this chapter being that on a national scale, nine in ten park and recreation agencies are taking specific actions to ensure that their health and wellness programs and services promote health equity.

Focusing on improving health fairly for all North Carolinians at the state level, the NC Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) manages the delivery of health and human-related services for all North Carolinians, especially in program resource areas for social security, disability insurance, food and nutrition services and Medicare. The department believes that "everyone has

2 "Parks and Recreation: Advancing Community Health and Well-Being." National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA)n.d. https://www.nrpa.org/contentassets/df807077b2ee43f084810f5bb4a7b-de1/2021healthwellness.pdf.

> **"Everyone has a role in the process of achieving equity."**

a role in the process of achieving fairness" and operates with a partnership-driven approach. Within the 2024 NC Health Disparities Report,[3] the OHE identifies six key categories in health disparities: social drivers of health, access to health care, chronic disease, communicable disease, mental health, substance use, suicide and violence prevention, and health across the lifespan. These six categories then drive the recommendations for the report and the partnerships that the OHE seeks out to increase health fairness. The OHE also acts as a data resource to departments and agencies by providing population and location specific health related data which can be used for funding opportunities and program structuring by parks and recreation providers.

The primary initiative that the state has taken to address the SDOH is by focusing on providing resources through the Medicaid program.[4] The DHHS and the OHE have developed a large-scale, comprehensive approach to addressing unmet nonmedical needs, including food, housing, and transportation insecurity, through Medicaid. Using a Section 1115 Waiver, the state has undertaken a major effort to put Medicaid dollars toward evidence-based interventions to target social determinants of health: the Healthy Opportunities Pilots program.

At the local level, Mecklenburg County also has an Office of Health Equity.[5] The department collaborates with partners across various sectors to advance public health practices by reducing health-related disparities in targeted priority populations through four core programs: Community Engagement, the Community Health Worker Initiative, Improving Community Outcomes for Maternal and Child Health (ICO4MCH) and Triple P (Positive Parenting Program), and Village HeartBEAT. The Village HeartBEAT has been around for 12 years and is a chronic disease risk reduction and prevention program that operates through collaborative partnerships with faith-based organizations, health care systems, County agencies and other community partners throughout Mecklenburg County to advance health fairness. The program aims to reduce chronic disease risk factors through the promotion of healthy lifestyles and environments, regular exercise, and education. Access to the sidewalks, trails, and outdoor recreation is a large part of the program as proximity to opportunities for a healthier lifestyle directly correlates to increasing health parity.

Within the missions and initiatives of these respective agencies, we can see how the importance of health can be addressed at various levels. Whether through a national organization like NRPA or a local organization like Mecklenburg County, programs and measures are being taken to prioritize health and overall well-being for all.

## Resources Provided by the OHE

- An interactive statewide map of SDOH indicators that can be used to guide community investment and prioritize resources.
- A set of standardized screening questions to identify and assist patients with unmet health-related resource needs.
- A statewide resource platform to connect those with an identified need to community resources.
- The incorporation of the SDOH strategies throughout the Medicaid 1115 waiver.
- The development of Healthy Opportunities Pilots to test and evaluate the impact of providing select evidence-based, non-medical interventions related to housing, food, transportation and interpersonal safety to high-needs Medicaid enrollees.
- Built an infrastructure to develop and support a Community Health Worker Initiative.
- Created better ways to streamline cross-enrollment in existing key benefit programs.

3 "2024 NC Health Disparities Report." NC Department of Health and Human Services Office of Health Equityn.d. https://www.ncdhhs.gov/2024-health-disparities-analysis-report/download?attachment.

4 Rapfogel, Nicole, and Jill Rosenthal. "Fact Sheet: How North Carolina Is Addressing Social Determinants of Health Through Medicaid." Center for American Progress, 2022. February 3. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/fact-sheet-how-north-carolina-is-addressing-social-determinants-of-health-through-medicaid/.

5 "Office of Health Equity." Mecklenburg County Public Healthn.d. https://health.mecknc.gov/population-health/office-health-equity.

# Parks & Health

The health equity assessment examines the vital role parks play in improving the physical, mental, and social health of residents across the state. Through shared resources and research, it highlights how parks provide spaces for passive and active recreation, access to natural environments, a sense of place and belonging, and opportunities for health-focused educational programs.

Health disparities are often the result of system barriers and inequities from generations past. For example, the concept of redlining is understood as the nationwide discriminatory practice of banks and local ordinances limiting where Black and brown residents were allowed to live and purchase homes within cities. The concept of **digital redlining**[6] looks at the location of civic infrastructure, like broadband, and how some groups may have been isolated from the internet and access to information.

Civic infrastructure varies significantly across U.S. counties, with healthier counties, measured by length and quality of life, tend to have well-resourced civic infrastructure. These counties feature greater access to local news, broadband, and public libraries with free Wi-Fi, fostering a more accessible information environment. They also provide increased social and economic opportunities, including lower child poverty rates, reduced income inequality, lower uninsured rates, higher high school completion rates, and better-funded schools.[7] Additionally, healthier counties with robust civic infrastructure show higher levels of civic participation, such as voter turnout, contributing to improved overall community well-being. Like how gentrification-based displacement exacerbates historically redlined communities, the pandemic exacerbated the digital redlining crisis. Approximately 45 percent of lower income households (< $25,000) and around 36 percent of rural households do not have access to broadband internet. During the pandemic, these communities relied on mobile device data for internet-based services including schooling, work, and virtual health visits. Disparities related to access to quality education, employment, and health care seen pre-pandemic were worsened by no or limited access to broadband internet.

So, what do concepts like digital redlining have to do with outdoor recreation? Parks and recreation agencies could create equity around internet access by having Wi-Fi available in parks, or providing free Wi-Fi and computers within recreation centers, or creating robust social media campaigns within parks and recreation departments to share out public health information and resources from other agencies. Inequities do not happen in a vacuum or amongst a singular issue and therefore even parks and recreation have a role to play in creating a more balanced world.

This chapter examines existing conditions to better understand health equity challenges and opportunities throughout the state. Key areas of focus include identifying health-vulnerable areas based on Center for Disease Control (CDC) indicators and reviewing historic funding investments in socially vulnerable areas (SVI), with a particular emphasis on trails and public health-related programs.

# Assessment Approach

Guided by the Division's mission areas of conservation, recreation, and education, this assessment explores how parks contribute to public health and address health disparities. It should be noted that health equity as a research topic, grant funding justification, and overall concept may be difficult to understand or put into visual practices. For this, NRPA notes within their framework[8] to "lead with race." There are many forms of discrimination, sexism, racism, ableism, and homophobia, which are all important. Centering on race is an accepted practice[9] when adopting equity measures as racism has had the most detrimental and expansive effect on land use, people's perceptions, and feelings of inclusion in park spaces, and the quality and distribution of outdoor recreation spaces.

Research by KangJae "Jerry" Lee, Assistant Professor of the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism

6 McCall, Terika, Kammarauche Asuzu, Carol R Oladele, Tiffany I Leung, and Karen H Wang. "A Socio-Ecological Approach to Addressing Digital Redlining in the United States: A Call to Action for Health Equity." Frontier in Digital Health 4, 2022. doi:10.3389/fdgth.2022.897250.

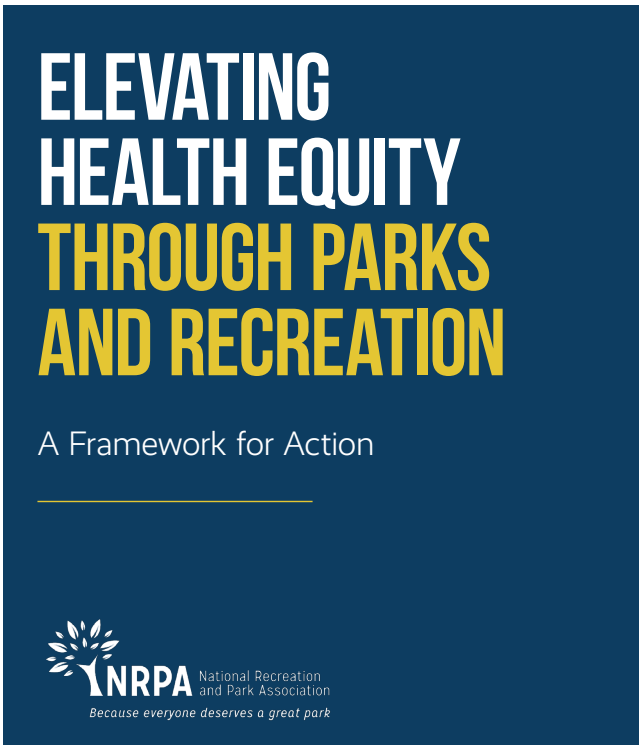
7 "2024 National Findings Report Creating Thriving Communities Through Civic Participation." University of Wisconsin Population and Health Institute School of Medicine and Public Health, 2024. March 1.

8 Elevating Health Equity Through Parks and Recreation: A Framework for Action." National Recreation and Park Association n.d. https://www.nrpa.org/contentassets/fb504056fcdd49a483936175230a2077/nrpa_framework_2021.pdf.

9 "Why Lead with Race? Challenging Institutional Racism to Create an Equitable Society for All." City of Seattle and the Seattle Office for Civil Rights n.d. https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/RSJI/why-lead-with-race.pdf.

Management at North Carolina State University, found that the impact of racially discriminatory policies from the Jim Crow era is still evident today. According to Lee, African Americans raised by parents who experienced discriminatory Jim Crow laws that prevented or discouraged them from visiting public parks "do not go to parks because their parents and grandparents could not take their children [and that] many African Americans' lack of interest in parks or outdoor recreation is a cultural disposition shaped by centuries of racial oppression."

Leading with race provides a focused approach to addressing systemic inequities, benefiting all communities. Prioritizing an anti-racist strategy supports the creation of a more equitable society for everyone. This approach does not establish a hierarchy of oppressions or imply that racism is more significant than other forms of injustice. Instead, it recognizes that racism is often used as a divisive force, hindering communities from uniting to drive meaningful change. While the framework begins with race, it acknowledges that all forms of oppression are interconnected, influenced by the interplay of institutions, individuals, and cultural systems within a historical context. Achieving liberation for all people and communities requires a comprehensive transformation of society that addresses all dimensions of bias.




**NRPA Health Equity Framework**


C. Peek - North Carolina State Parks

# Existing Conditions

## Health Vulnerable Areas

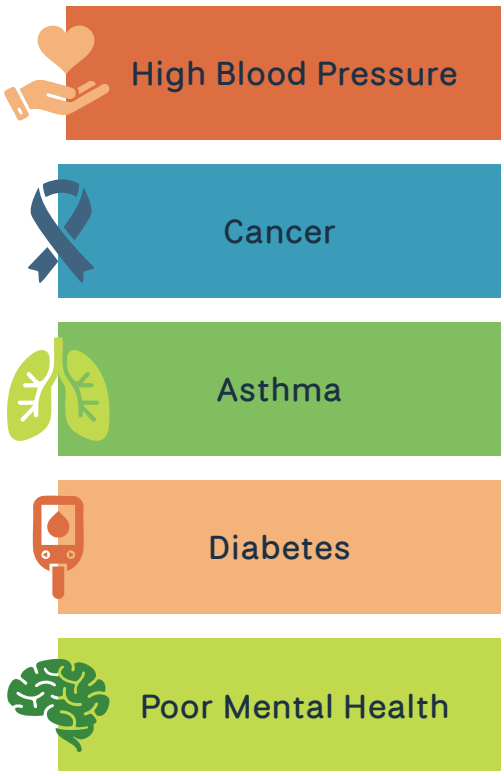
The equitable distribution of parks, open spaces, and greenways can be analyzed through indicators of health-vulnerable areas of the State mapped against the location of parks within the State Parks system. Government investment in parks aims to create benefits for the whole community, as well as the environment. For example, consider a neighborhood parklet with a few benches and trees, and a 0.3-mile trail loop around it. Though small, it can serve the community by providing a green area for reflection and passive forms of recreation like walking. The two benches can become a social focus point for connection and fellowship for people, for a person with mobility issues to sit down and rest, or for a parent to tie their child's shoe. It is also helping the community's environment by providing shade, assisting with cooling residents off on a scorching summer day as well as having trees that help aid in cleaning air pollution[10] from within the community. In areas with higher health vulnerability, a park may provide a valuable resource to an individual or an entire community who may not otherwise have access to these resources.

## What Role Does the Division Play?

The Division not only provides state parks but also serves as a funding source for local governments through programs such as the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF), the Accessible Parks Grant Program, the Recreational Trails Grant Program, the Great Trails State Program and the Land and Water Conservation Fund grants that underpin this plan. While this plan does not analyze health vulnerability areas for each park system, the assessment in this chapter offers a broader perspective on areas across the state and funding levels within those areas. This information can be a valuable resource for local governments in their regional planning efforts and the development of comprehensive parks and recreation plans.

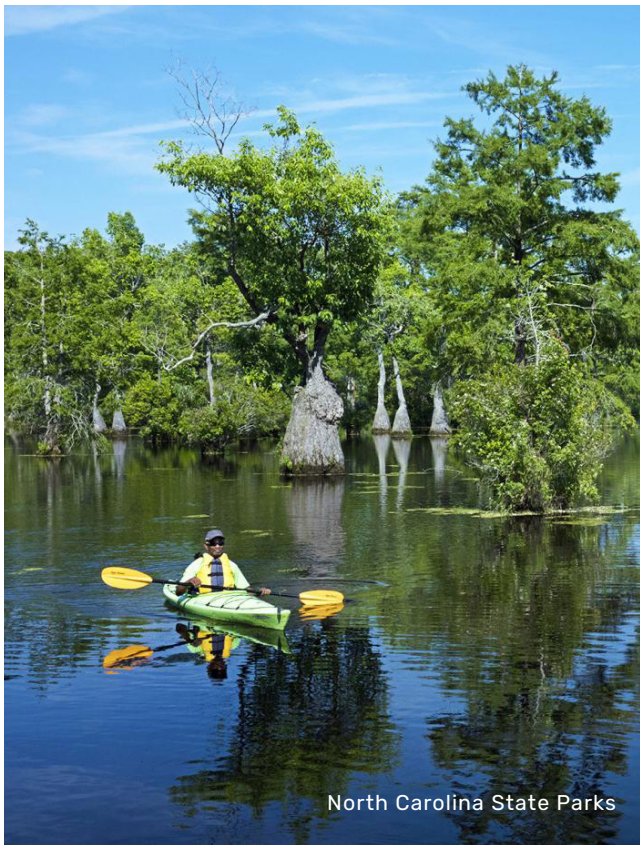
The Health Vulnerability portion of the Environmental Justice Index (EJI) analysis was isolated from other CDC indicators to get a better understanding of the distribution of parks compared to health vulnerability. The Health Vulnerability Index assesses how many of the five most common chronic health conditions the population within the Census Tract has. For a census tract to "qualify" for an indicator, the prevalence of the condition must be higher than 66.66 percent of all other census tracts. The five chronic health conditions are asthma, cancer, high blood pressure, diabetes, and poor mental health. When comparing parkland distribution to health vulnerability, there is significant room for strategic growth of the State Park system and local systems to provide parks or recreation facilities in areas with high health vulnerability. It is also notable that for health concerns in particular, improvements to existing facilities that allow for diversification of program offerings centered around health and wellness can also provide significant benefits to the community.

As seen in the map of the Health Vulnerability Module below, urbanized areas of the state generally show a lower health vulnerability than more rural parts of the state. While the rural areas may have less health impacts due to intensity of development, they are further away from job centers and more advanced regional health centers which likely factors into an increase in their health vulnerability.




**Five Chronic Health Conditions of the CDC Health Vulnerability Module (HVM)**

10 Nowak, David J., Satoshi Hirabayashi, Allison Bodine, and Eric Greenfield. "Tree and Forest Effects on Air Quality and Human Health in the United States." Environmental Pollution 193, 2014: 119–29. doi:10.1016/j.envpol.2014.05.028.




**Kayaker paddling on the millpond at Merchants Millpond State Park**




**Hikers on the suspension bridge along the Cox Mountain Trail at Eno River State Park**

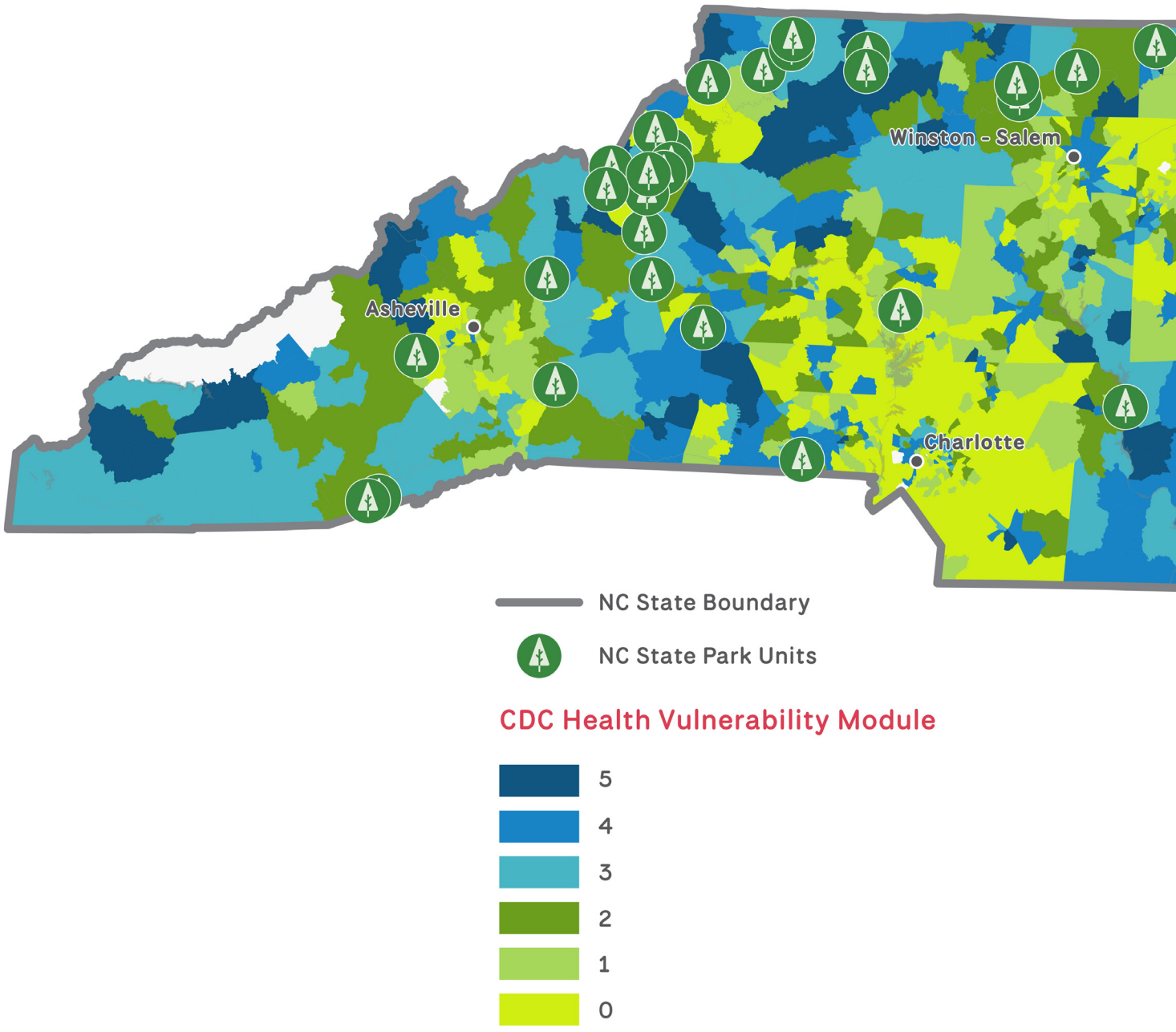



# DID YOU KNOW?

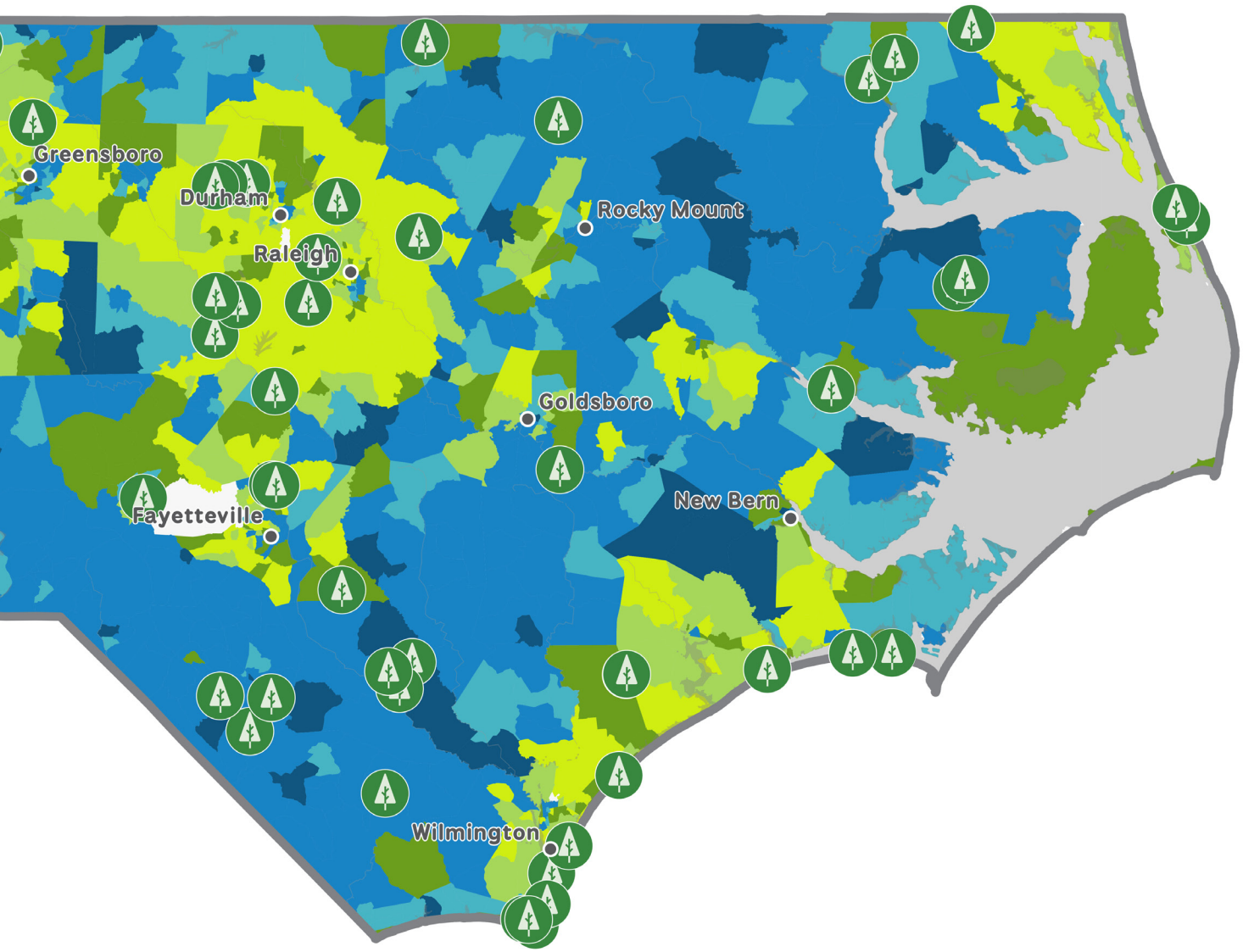
The Southern Bog Turtle is the smallest turtle species of North America. Growing only up to 4.5 inches long, these mini friends inhabit North Carolina's shallow wetland habitats. Despite their small size, these turtles are also known to have one of the longest life spans, with some living longer than 60 years in the wild!

The Southern Bog Turtle is only one half of the Bog Turtle Population. With a 250 mile gap between them, the Northern and Southern Bog Turtle populations are both located in the Eastern half of the United States. The Northern Bog Turtle can be found in Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Massachussetts, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania, whereas the Southern Bog Turtle lives in Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Due to their similar characteristics, both the Northern and Souther Bog Turtles are listed as "threatened" populations.[1]

1 U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, "Bog Turtle (Glyptemys muhlenbergii)," U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, https://www.fws.gov/species/bog-turtle-glyptemys-muhlenbergii.




Health Vulnerability Mapped at the Census Tract Level for the State of North Carolina


Greensboro
Durham
Raleigh
Rocky Mount
Goldsboro
Fayetteville
New Bern
Wilmington

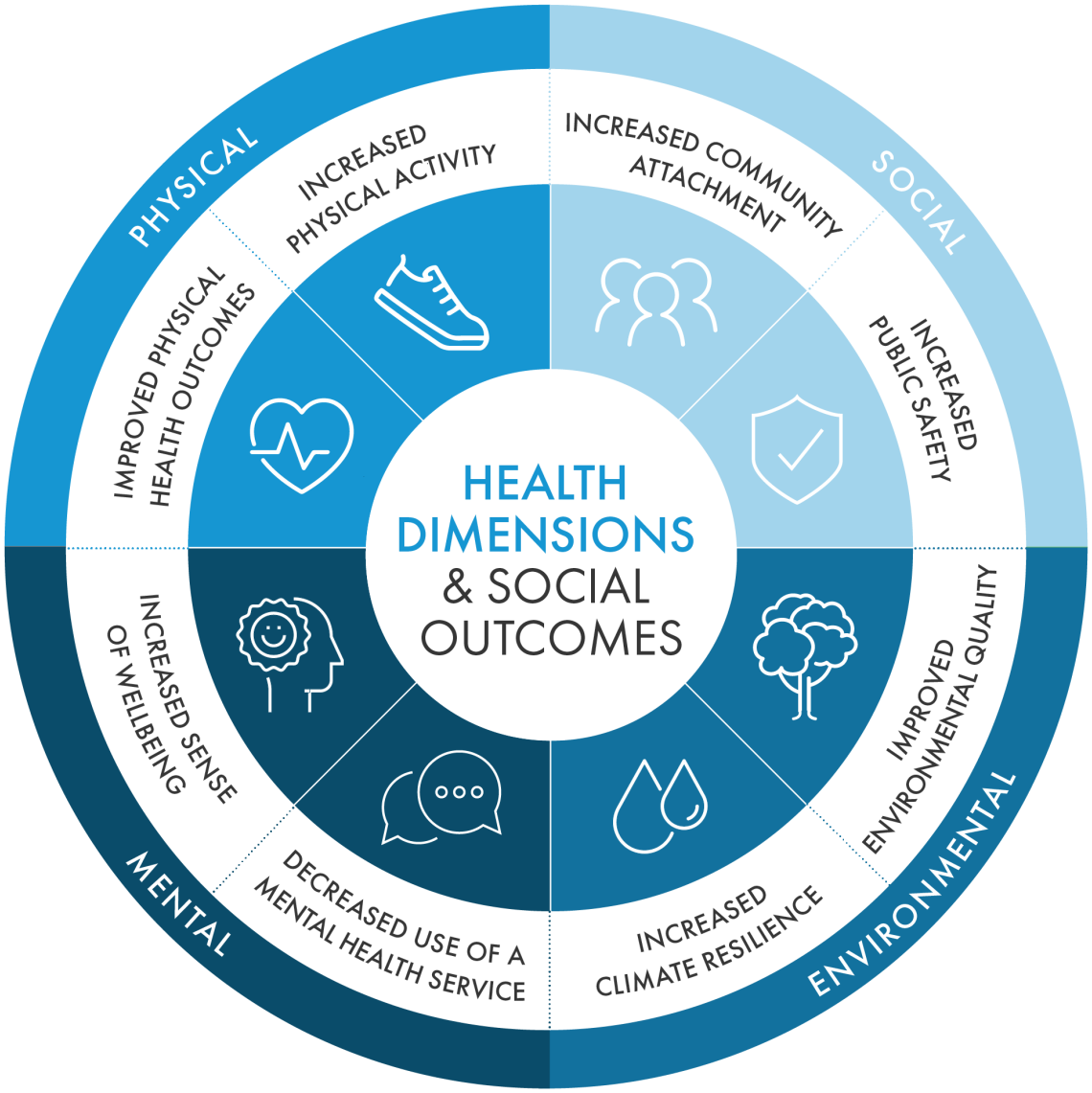
## The Four Dimensions of Health

Within the Urban Institute Framework for Assessing Equitable Health Outcomes of Parks,[11] park practitioners and local leaders are guided to examine the four dimensions of health: physical, mental, social, and environmental.[12] For each dimension, there is an associated outcome for individuals who use a park system. Backed by data and robust evidence from recent, relevant literature, the report concludes that each outcome selected demonstrates core drivers of estimating a park system's contribution to health with the goal of supporting local leaders, park professionals, advocates, and others in advancing health equity in parks.

For the SCORP plan, the Division looks at the four dimensions of health to highlight both the importance of outdoor recreation but also the importance of collaboration and partnership. Partnerships with healthcare providers and organizations can transform and change programming efforts at the state and local levels.

11 Burrowes, Kimberly, Mark Treskon, and Jessica Shakespeare. A Framework for Assessing Equitable Health Outcomes of Parks: Guidance for Parks Practitioners and Local Leaders. Urban Institute, 2022.

12 This information is also addressed in the **Resilience Chapter** included in **Chapter 7.7** of this plan.



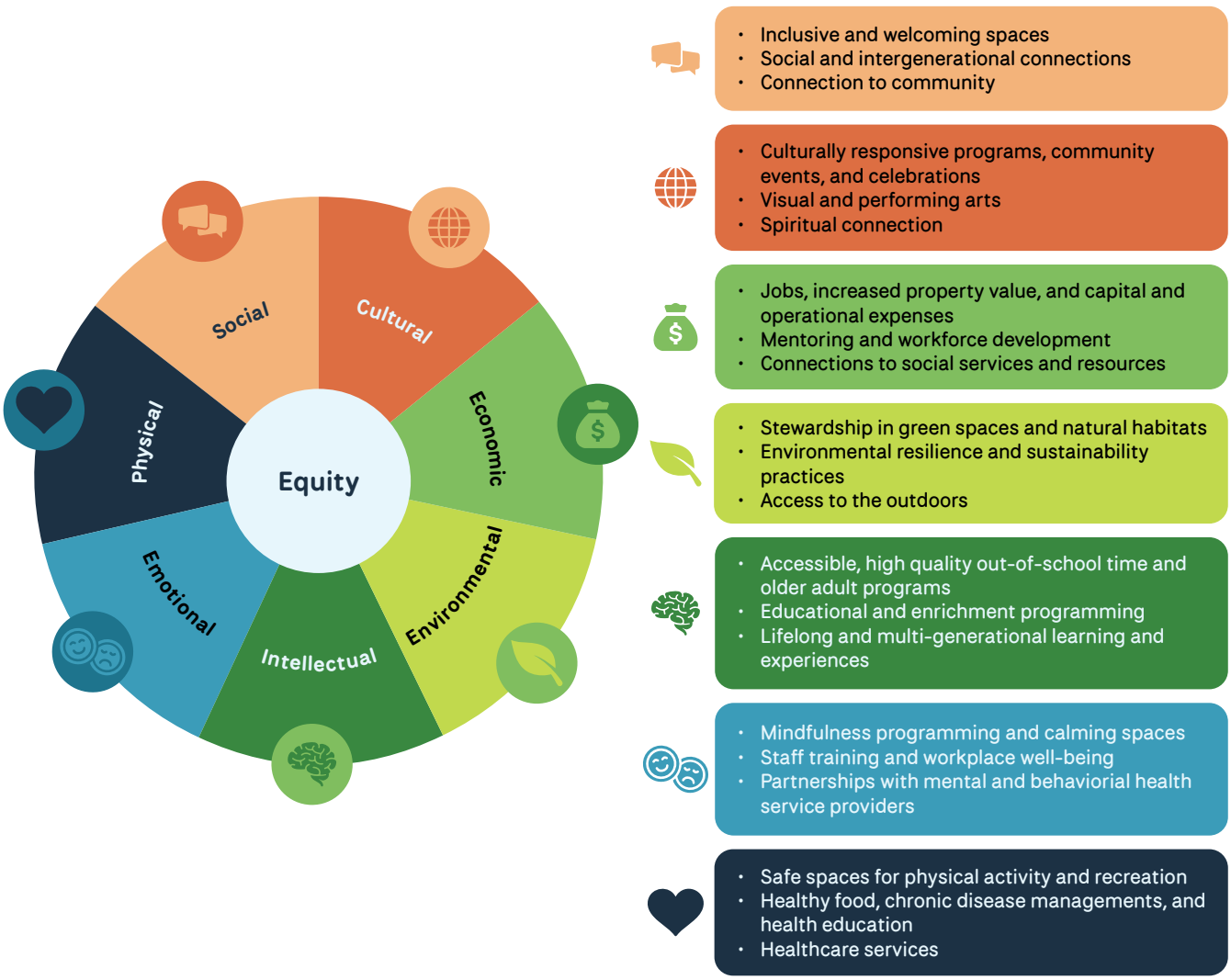

**Health Dimension and Associated Outcomes. Burrowes et. al. 2022**

## Seven Dimensions of Well-Being

The NRPA has developed its Seven Dimensions of Well-Being[13] by drawing upon various evidence-based frameworks and aligning them with the unique strengths, resources, and opportunities within parks and recreation. The seven dimensions are: Cultural, Economic, Environmental, Intellectual, Emotional, Physical, and Social. At the core of these dimensions lies equity, highlighting parks and recreations commitment to addressing and repairing inequities, and injustices, particularly those rooted in or sustained by park and recreation systems. This focus on equity and fixing past harms ensures that the benefits of parks and recreation are accessible and inclusive for everyone in the community.

For the SCORP plan, the Division looks at the seven dimensions of well-being to display how parks and recreation and access to outdoor recreation can provide value to various facets of life. The seven dimensions also continue to underscore the importance of partnerships across state and local agencies, especially as it relates to shared resources and funding opportunities. With support from other agencies with like missions and visions, the Division works to ensure that all residents and visitors to this great state are afforded the opportunity to the highest capacity of health and well-being.

13 Korth, Amy, Amy Meinen, Jon Morgan, Jordan Bingham, Allison Colman, and Maureen Neumann. "Community Wellness Hubs A Toolkit for Advancing Community Health and Well-Being Through Parks and Recreation." National Recreation and Park Association, 2022. June 2. https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/53045b41ea204719a6aace92481f99ee.




**Seven Dimensions of Well-Being, NRPA. Credit to authors as noted.**

# Health Equity Themes for SCORP

## Conservation & Environmental Health

The Division's efforts to acquire and conserve land provide benefits beyond conservation alone. North Carolina's public lands, parks, recreation areas, and natural areas provide spaces that support human health and well-being. Greenspaces encourage physical and mental wellness through both passive and active time spent in natural settings.

There are additional ecological benefits associated with park conservation efforts and environmental health. In 2020, the Trust for Public Land (TPL) released The Heat is On, a special report that looked at the adverse effects of a hotter climate throughout the nation. TPL found through the analysis of 14,000 cities and towns nationwide, that areas within a 10-minute walk of a park are as much as six degrees cooler than areas beyond that range.[14] Research within the report also found that nationwide, parks in majority non-white neighborhoods are half as large and serve nearly five times more people than parks in majority white neighborhoods. It also found that parks serving majority low-income households were on average, four times smaller and serving nearly four times more people than parks that serve majority high-income households.

Released in the summer of 2020 during the COVID-19 lockdown, which required social isolation and distance, the report and research revealed what locals already knew: parks are a vital source of joy, recreation, and safe socialization. Low-income communities and communities of color did not have an outdoor space to "isolate" or for their families to "stretch their legs," not without risk of becoming sick themselves. Due to harmful practices like redlining,[15] many low-income neighborhoods and communities of color are located within "park deserts," where shaded areas and play areas are far and few between. The primary focus of the report was heat and the consistently record-breaking summers that have been happening each summer over the past 20 years. Tree-filled parks serve as local, natural cooling centers. Across the nation, parks tend to have the highest percent tree cover of all land uses[16] in cities, except for residential areas in desert regions. On a local level, this furthers the Division's mission of conservation. The Division provides a vital resource, in the form of internal land acquisition for parks and the allocation of funding to local recreation providers for land acquisition to ensure that North Carolina residents are near to green spaces and breathing cleaner air.

Land acquisition and conservation efforts are also important as all regions are experiencing the negative side effect of development and the loss of natural flora and fauna. The western part of the state just experienced its most devastating storm with Hurricane Helene damaging roadways, whole towns, and several state parks located within the area. Recovery is a slow but concerted effort to rebuild the natural and built environment and is observable on a national and local scale. The Piedmont area within the center of the state is experiencing rapid growth and development. Within Wake County alone, over 20,000 acres of farmland and forest areas has been developed into single-family homes within the past 10 years. The rate in which this conversion is not sustainable and has resulted increases in heat within the center of the state. The Crystal Coast of North Carolina has seen several hurricanes and storms over the years. With growth happening in urbanized areas like Wilmington, more people are subjected to adverse weather events and flooding. The **Resilience Assessment in Chapter 7.7** will further address this concept but as it relates to this health equity theme: the protection of natural resources and the planet as whole is vital for human health benefits in the present and future.

14 "The Heat Is On: A Special Report." Trust for Public Land, 2020. August 5. https://e7jecw7o93n.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/The-Heat-is-on_A-Trust-for-Public-Land_special-report.pdf.

15 Hoffman, Jeremy S., Vivek Shandas, and Nicholas Pendleton. "The Effects of Historical Housing Policies on Resident Exposure to Intra-Urban Heat: A Study of 108 US Urban Areas." Climate: Survivability under Overheating - The Impact of Regional and Global Climate Change on Vulnerable and Low Income Population, 2020, 15. doi:10.3390/cli8010012.

16 Nowak, David J., and Gordon M. Heisler. "Air Quality Effects of Urban Trees and Parks." National Recreation and Park Association, 2010. October 1. https://www.nrpa.org/globalassets/research/nowak-heisler-research-paper.pdf.

Conservation efforts play a vital role in enhancing both environmental and public health by improving quality of life through better air quality and health. Equitable access to green spaces, especially in urban areas where nature is less accessible, is crucial for addressing physical health challenges like the five chronic health conditions. Additionally, natural spaces provide significant mental health benefits, such as reducing stress and supporting emotional well-being. Together, these outcomes highlight the essential link between conservation, environmental health, and overall health.

## Recreation & Mental Health

The built environment plays a crucial role as a social determinant of health. Nature-based programs and initiatives provide recreation and healthcare providers with a cost-effective approach to promoting health through preventive strategies.[17] A simple activity such as walking in a park can provide opportunities for mindfulness, social connection, and a break from daily stressors, all of which contribute to better mental health.[18] Recent studies revealed that mental health is significantly related to residential distance from parks, with the highest mental health rating among residents within short walking distance from the park (a quarter of a mile) and decreasing significantly over the next distances. A nearby urban park is associated with the same mental health benefits as decreasing local unemployment rates by two percentage points, suggesting at least the potential of environmental interventions to improve mental health. The number of visits and physical activity minutes are significantly related to distance. Furthermore, engaging in recreation encourages individuals to form healthier habits, creating a positive feedback loop that benefits both mental and physical health. Accessible recreational opportunities empower people of all ages and abilities to participate in activities that align with preventative health measures.

The 2023 North Carolina State Health Improvement Plan (NC SHIP)[19] adopted by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NC DHHS) operationalizes the priorities identified in the 2019 State Health Assessment and Healthy North Carolina and the 2030: A Path Toward Health (HNC 2030). The plan incorporates the principles of results-based accountability using a population health framework. Of the health indicators identified within the NC SHIP, Health Indicator #7 focuses on access to exercise opportunities. NC DHHS further states that recreation and exercise is essential for physical, social, and mental well-being. Several factors, including income, race and ethnicity, geography, and disabilities influence access to exercise opportunities. Low-income communities often have fewer parks and recreational facilities compared to more affluent areas, limiting opportunities for physical activity. Similarly, people of color are less likely to live near parks, contributing to disparities access to outdoor spaces. Geographic location also plays a significant role, as residents of rural areas face additional barriers to activity opportunities, such as fewer facilities and greater distances to reach them, compared to those in metropolitan regions. Additionally, parks and recreational facilities often lack proper accommodations for individuals with physical disabilities, rendering these spaces inaccessible to some members of the population. Addressing these factors is critical to NC DHHS, and many partner organizations, reaching the desired goal of "All people in North Carolina have equitable and adaptive/adaptable access to physical activity opportunities across the lifespan."

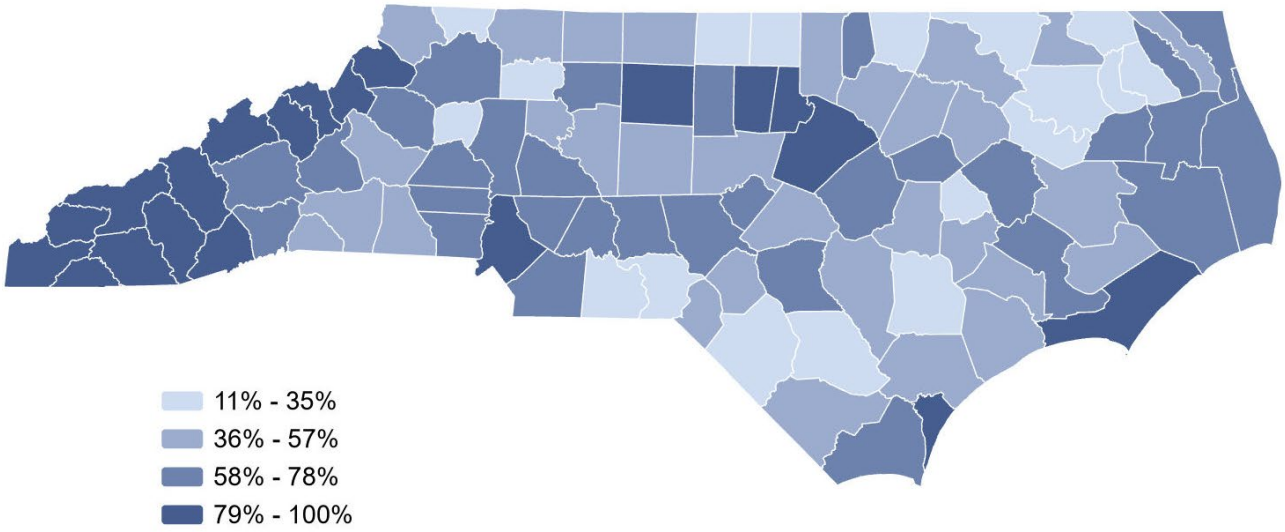


**Celebrating National Womens Health Week - North Carolina State Health Plan**

17 Larson, Lincoln R., and J. Aaron Hipp. "Nature-Based Pathways to Health Promotion: The Value of Parks and Greenspace." North Carolina Medical Journal 83 (2), 2022: 99–102. doi:10.18043/ncm.83.2.99.

18 Sturm R, Cohen D. "Proximity to Urban Parks and Mental Health." J Ment Health Policy Econ. 2014 Mar;17(1):19-24. PMID: 24864118; PMCID: PMC4049158.

19 "2023 North Carolina State Health Improvement Plan (NC SHIP)." North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, 2023. October 5. https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/units/ldas/docs/NCSHIP-2023-101723.pdf.




**Percent of People with Access to Exercise Opportunities in North Carolina (2022)**
**Source: 2023 NC State Health Improvement Plan**

In addition to providing spaces for recreation, the Division collaborates with its parent organization, the NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (DNCR) on programs like "Parks and Trails for Health" or NC PATH, which aim at building upon the increased trail and park usage seen during the COVID-19 pandemic by introducing people to addition trail and recreational opportunities through an online campaign. DNCR is focused on adding and improving trails and other outdoor facilities at state-owned sites and in partnership with the Division and local governments, DNCR aims to provide outdoor educational opportunities for all North Carolina children, investing in maintenance and staffing at state parks and trails to ensure a high-quality visitor experience, and supporting the outdoor recreation industry. By fostering, and funding, equitable access to recreation, the Division and local recreation providers can reduce health disparities and increase the quality of life of North Carolina residents and visitors.

## Education & Community Wellness

Education and community wellness are intricately linked, with parks playing a vital role in promoting health. Access to well-maintained parks and green spaces presents opportunities for outdoor learning, physical activity, and social engagement, all of which contribute to healthier communities. In addition to serving as spaces for recreation, local and state parks often host educational programs that raise awareness about healthy lifestyles, environmental stewardship, and physical fitness. These initiatives can be supported through partnerships with local organizations, schools, and health providers.

The Division itself hosts several educational programming initiatives within state parks, sometimes partnering with other organizations to maximize reach and share resources:

### TRACK Trails

Kids in Parks TRACK Trails are self-guided hiking trails especially for kids. Each family-friendly trail has brochures designated to turn an ordinary hike into a fun-filled, discovery-packed adventure. The guides encourage children to identify trees and birds, view the forest from the perspective of animals, and search for natural features, among other fun activities

### Junior Ranger

The Junior Ranger program gives kids the opportunity to learn about and explore North Carolina's beautiful state parks with their families or scout, school, and homeschool groups through self-led educational activities and programs. Junior Rangers may also have the opportunity to help park staff protect the health of the park through short community service projects.

### Schools in Parks

Created in partnership with the University of North Carolina Institute for the Environment, this is a year long professional development program aimed at increased confidence among 3rd to 5th-grade teachers in using outdoor science learning approaches in state parks to support their curriculums. The statewide initiative aims to ensure that every student has a meaningful learning experience in a state park before they graduate.

### Field Trip Request

Educators can use a premade field trip program, catered to NC Public School Curriculum, or can reach out to park staff to create a custom program for their class.

### Field Trip Funding Assistance

The North Carolina Friends of State Parks offers the Youth in Parks – Environmental Education (YIP-EE) program that aims to get students outside the classroom into our state parks.

### NC Culture Kids & Nature at Home

Online videos and programs created to showcase biodiversity in flora and fauna at parks. The videos are often led by a Park Ranger, showcasing how staff care for their respective park areas.

### Passport Program

The Passport booklet allows visitors to keep track of their state park adventures across the state. Within the booklet, there are interesting facts about each state park and an area to collect a stamp for each park.

Collaborations and partnerships are the core of education and community wellness. Most of the previous programs are a result of sharing the financial and workforce burden across partnering organizations with similar missions and visions around outdoor recreation. By pooling resources such as workforce, funding, and expertise, these partnerships can help maximize the impact of wellness programs and efforts, ensuring they reach a wide audience. Collaborative efforts also allow for a more comprehensive approach, addressing both the immediate needs of the community and long-term health outcomes. Local parks and recreational departments often serve as central hubs for these partnerships, offering a shared space for diverse groups to come together and create meaningful change. Through these partnerships, parks can become even more integral to community wellness, providing lasting benefits that improve the overall health and quality of life for residents.

# Key Takeaways

## Education & Community Wellness

- The Division, as a recognized statewide resource, should continue to share information, reports, and studies with the general public and partnership organizations as it relates to federal and state opportunities, the latest recreation research studies, and other resources that support outdoor recreation and open spaces.
- The Division should increase educational programming in state parks and encourage local agencies to build amenities that support educational programming to promote, mental, and social well-being.
- The Division should consider working with tribal communities to ensure that the history of outdoor spaces and parks is represented in a respectful manner.
- The Division should create partnerships with local public-school systems to fund and encourage field trips to parks.

## Recreation & Mental Health

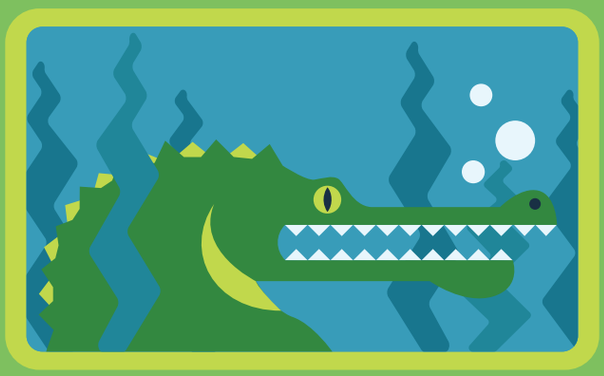
- The Division should continue to support cities, counties, towns, and recognized tribes to identify and improve access to outdoor recreation. Interagency communication is vital to make sure that all agencies are working together to achieve the same goal.
- The Division should work to fill any staffing vacancies to ensure that the community is well supported.
- The Division should support municipalities in their work to identify the disparities in how people access your park system and champion efforts to combat inequities using CDC SVI and EJI data to identify health vulnerable areas within your community.
- The Division should conduct a system-wide audit of all parks, greenways, and trails in relation to socially vulnerable areas.
- The Division and other recreational providers should liaise with local hospitals and health care organizations as they conduct their community health needs assessment.
- The Division should make Parks as health-promoting as possible by including amenities within the park areas that encourage visitors to engage in physical activity. This could include signage or placards noting the benefits of exercise. (i.e. Three full walks around this park is equivalent to 15 minutes of structured exercise needed by most adults.)
- The Division should consider engaging with AllTrails through the Land Manager Program to ensure that the correct information is being put out to the general public.

## Conservation & Environmental Health

- The Division should support the acquisition of public park land in areas with health vulnerability.
- The Division should strategically expand parks and recreational spaces in areas with limited access to health-promoting natural environments.
- The Division should work to establish interagency communication and cooperation throughout the review process for recreational projects.
- The Division should continue to work with other agencies and organizations to ensure that information and messaging, specifically around conservation, environmental stewardship, and littering, are consistent across all state organizations. (i.e. Work in Outdoor NC's "Leave No Trace" into messaging at visitor centers.)
- The Division should support an increase in the number of trees throughout the state, especially in health vulnerable areas.

# 7.7 RESILIENCY ASSESSMENT

This section of the needs assessment chapter focused on the impacts of climate change on North Carolina's state and local parks, highlighting their role in environmental resilience and disaster mitigation. This assessment focuses on four key dimensions of resilience: Habitat and biodiversity, natural disasters, water, and air.






**Hurricane Helene Relief Efforts**

# Introduction

"One of the best investments we can make is in stewarding the lands and waters that sustain us and the generations to come." – Deb Haaland, 54th United States Secretary of the Interior.

Our state and local parks provide an invaluable benefit to North Carolinians in their day-to-day lives. They also provide numerous benefits to the environment as they contain complex ecological systems that maintain a high-quality and functioning environment. A 2024 Greenhouse Gas Inventory found that 34 percent of all carbon emitted in North Carolina is sequestered by forests and wetlands in the state, many of these forests and wetlands are part of a state parks, local parks, and conservation areas. They are, however, facing a growing threat in the form of climate emergencies.

The impacts of climate change are affecting nearly all aspects of life on the planet. North Carolinian's health and well-being are impacted by deteriorated environmental quality. Our wildlife and ecosystems are also increasingly impacted by a warming planet.

According to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the past 8 years have been the hottest recorded in history and 2024 will be recorded as the warmest year on record. Globally and nationwide, the long-term negative impacts of climate emergencies have also continued to increase in frequency and intensity over the last decade. Record temperatures, rising sea levels, increased periods of drought, and longer and more intense hurricane seasons are all occurring at alarming rates.

In North Carolina specifically, there are many troublesome climate crises the state is already experiencing and there will be more to come. A 2020 report, the North Carolina Climate Science Report,[1] completed by the North Carolina Institute for Climate at NC State University highlights many impacts, summarized below.

## Temperature

The Climate Science Report (Report) found that while the average annual temperature has only increased by about 1 degree Fahrenheit since 1895, the period of study (2009 – 2018) represented the warmest 10-year period on record for North Carolina, averaging about 0.6 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than the warmest decade of the 20th century. This means that the increase in temperature has occurred more rapidly and intensely in the past couple of decades. The Report also found that while fluctuations in temperature due to season change will continue to occur, it is very likely that temperatures in NC will increase substantially in all seasons.

## Precipitation

The report found that there is no long-term trend in total annual precipitation, but, there was an upward trend in heavy rainfall events (3 inches or more). This means that while volume remains relatively stable, that volume is coming increasingly from intense events rather than more evenly distributed low-intensity events. Heavy rainfall events have much greater impact on urban infrastructure, and on coastal communities and low-lying areas. The Report found it likely that annual total precipitation will increase in the future and very likely that the frequency and intensity of extreme precipitation events will increase.

## Sea Level

The Report found that sea level rise along the northeastern coast of NC is occurring about twice as quickly as along the southeastern coast. Researchers found virtual certainty that the sea level along the entirety of the NC coast will continue to rise due to expansion of ocean water related to melting of ice on land. High tide flooding, defined as water levels of 1.6 – 2.1 feet above Mean Higher High Water, will become a nearly daily occurrence by 2100 under both the lower and higher scenarios.

## Hurricanes

The Report found that on a global scale, there is high confidence that the intensity of the strongest hurricanes is likely to increase. Whether that will consistently hold true for NC the confidence was tanked at medium but there is no known reason that North Carolina would be an exception to the global trend. Heavy precipitation accompanying hurricanes is very likely to increase.

## Storms

The Report found it likely that the frequency of severe thunderstorms in NC will continue to increase. On the other hand, total snowfall and number of heavy snowstorms will continue to decrease due to rising winter temperatures.

1 Kenneth Kunkel et al., North Carolina Climate Science Report, September 2020, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://ncics.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/NC_Climate_Science_Report_FullReport_Final_revised_September2020.pdf.

## Floods, Droughts & Wildfires

The Report found it virtually certain that there will be an increase in storm surge flooding in coastal NC, due to the numerous reasons highlighted above. It is also likely that inland flooding will also increase. Simultaneously, severe droughts will be more frequent and intense meaning that the frequency of ideal conditions for wildfires will also increase.

While the impacts are numerous and serious in nature. There are many bright spots in the search for climate solutions. Parks and public lands can be integral parts of the climate solution by providing cooling, especially in urban areas impacted by urban heat islands, mitigating flood impacts, improving water quality, and cleaning the air.

This assessment is broken down into four dimensions: Habitat and Biodiversity, Natural Disasters, Water, and Air Quality. These dimensions of environmental resilience are the spaces where state and local parks have the most opportunity to provide positive impacts and improve the environmental resilience of their system and the state.

# Dimension I: Habitat & Biodiversity

A core component of achieving more sustainable outdoor recreation is balancing the protection of natural and cultural resources while also creating memorable and satisfying outdoor recreation experiences. North Carolina is well known for its public lands and scenic landscapes, both of which are often cited as motivators for people moving into the state from elsewhere. Growing population, urbanization, and increased use inevitably has impacts on the land, habitat, and sensitive plant and wildlife populations. Parks can play a vital role in protecting habitat and increasing biodiversity throughout the state.

The rate and intensity of human development across the state have resulted in habitat loss, smaller and highly fragmented patches of undisturbed land and habitat, and threats to habitat quality. Threats from other sources such as natural disasters also pose a threat to habitat within the state. Hurricanes often upend our coastal ecosystems with high winds and intense storm surge and flooding. Inland storm events of increasing intensity cause rising amounts of freshwater flooding, especially in urbanized areas where riparian corridors are already under strain. Increasing periods of drought in the state have also caused the risk of wildfires to increase which threatens larger areas of forested land including state and local parks . A primary concern for park professionals is how to mitigate these risks while developing and maintaining infrastructure to support outdoor recreation.

State and local parks are a key tools in mitigating the impacts of climate change by preserving critical habitats and ecosystems through the protection of valuable land. By preserving these lands, an essential refuge for countless plant and animal species is provided. These parks protect ecosystems that might otherwise be threatened by urban development, agriculture, and industrialization. By safeguarding large tracts of land, state parks help maintain the integrity of habitats. Without such protected spaces, many species would face increased risks of extinction due to habitat loss and fragmentation.

Biodiversity is the foundation of a healthy planet, vital to ecosystem health and resiliency and is essential for human survival. Parks contribute to this diversity by creating havens for native species, many of which may be rare or endangered. The preservation of these species not only ensures the survival of individual organisms but also helps maintain ecological processes such as pollination, seed dispersal, and soil health. These processes are essential for the functioning of ecosystems, providing services that benefit both wildlife and humans, such as clean water, air, and food.

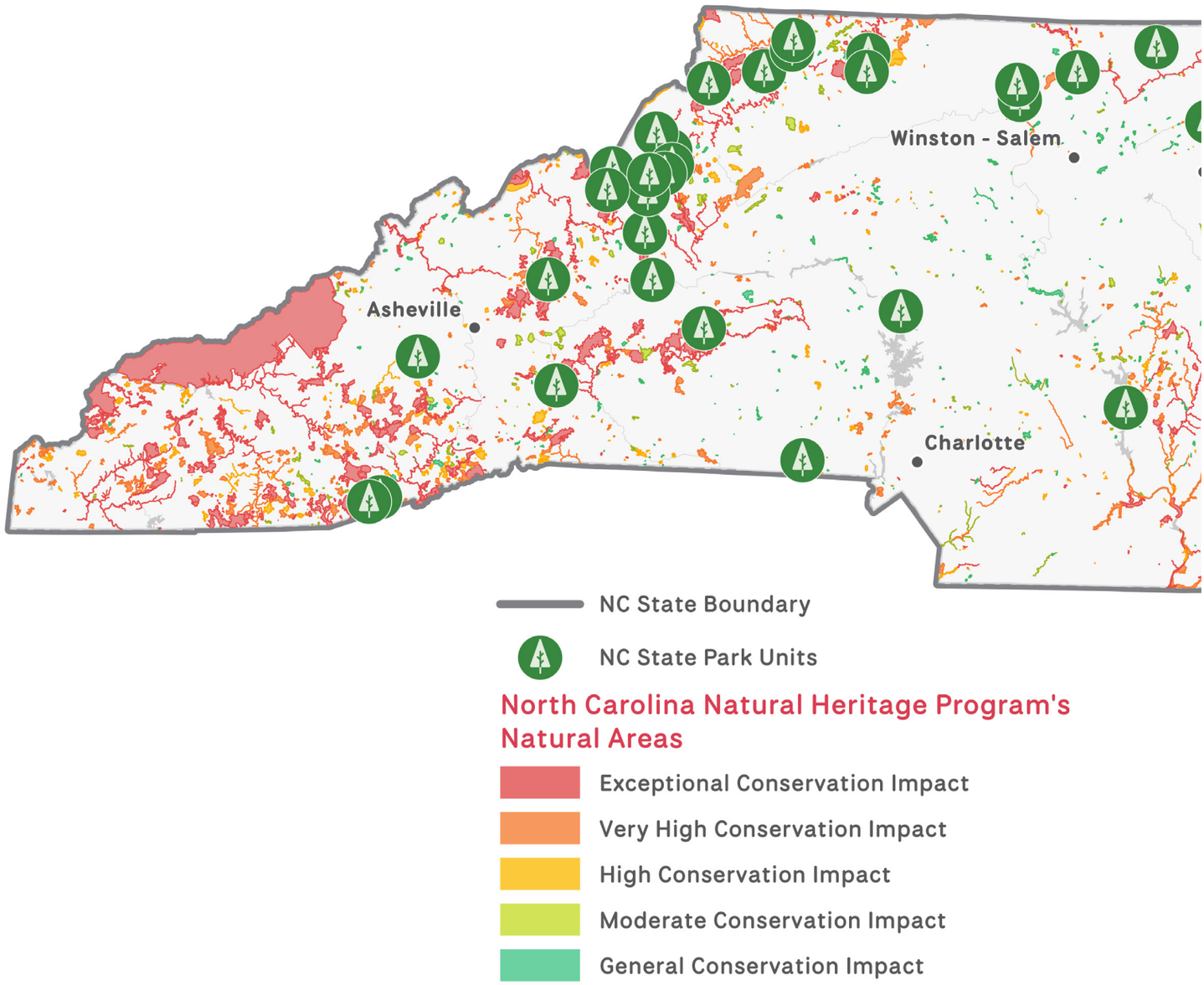
In addition to protecting species and ecosystems, state parks serve as living laboratories for scientific research. Researchers study these areas to understand how ecosystems function, how species interact, and how they adapt to changes in their environment. This knowledge is critical for informing conservation efforts and managing the impacts of climate change, invasive species, and other threats to biodiversity. The preservation of state parks is therefore not just about protecting nature for its own sake; it is an investment in understanding and preserving the delicate balance of life that sustains the planet.

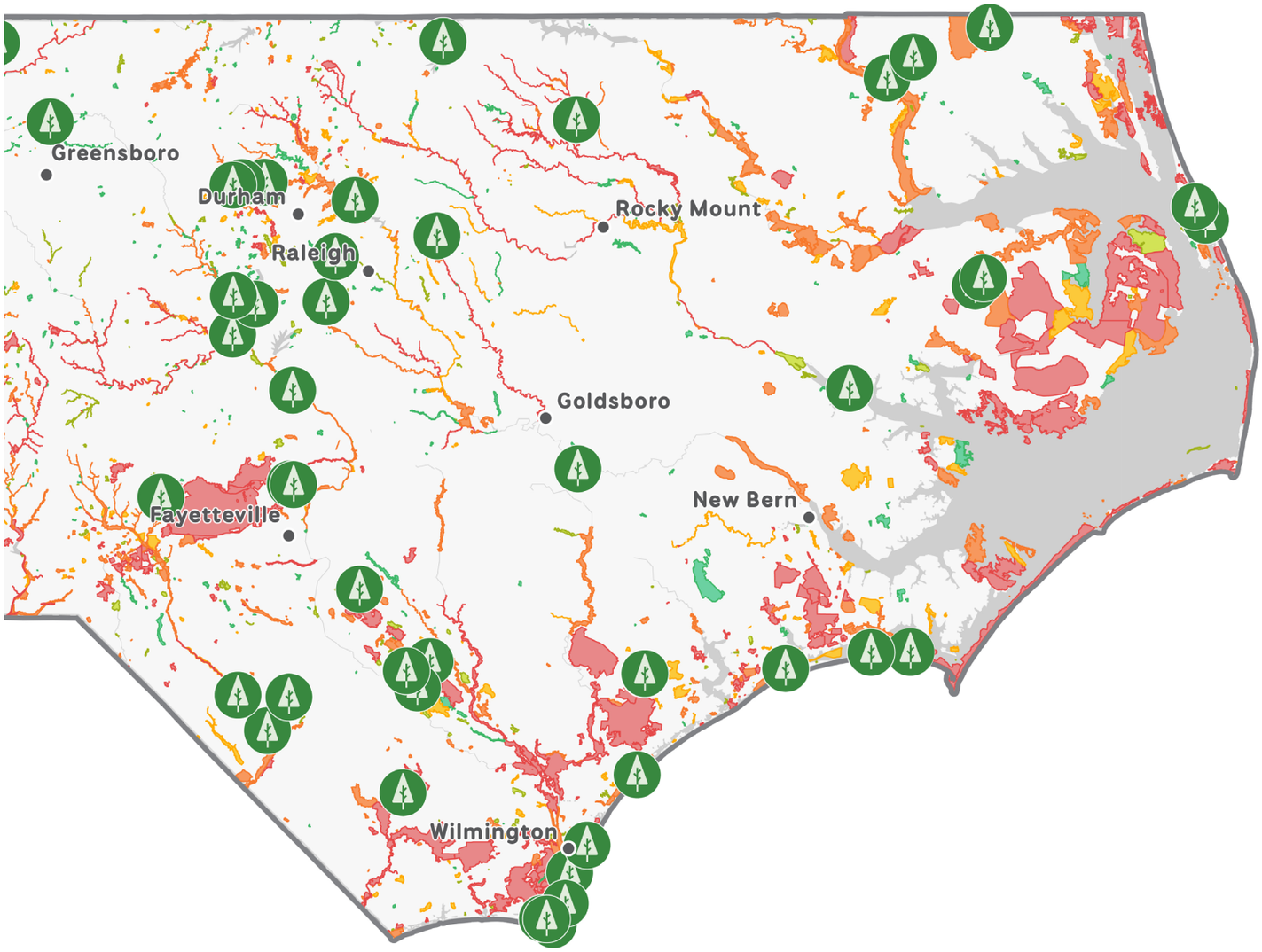



**Gorges State Park**

## Conservation Priority Areas

The map below shows impactful conservation areas statewide define by the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program. As seen in the map, there are already a multitude of State Park Units in or nearby Exceptional or Very High Impact areas. This means those parks are already having a positive impact on the natural environment of the state. The map also shows some larger areas in the Outer Banks as well as along the Intercoastal Waterway, where there are more areas where future expansion of State and local parks could also provide a large positive benefit. There are also stretches of the Tar River that are prime locations for parks with conservation focus.




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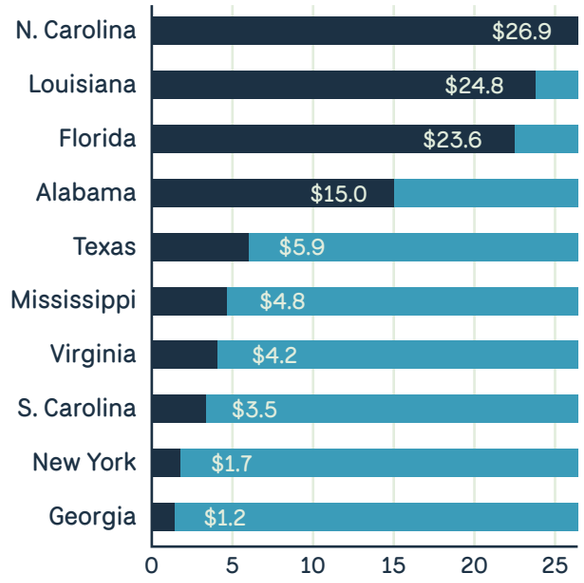
# Dimension II: Natural Disasters

Parks play a significant role in mitigating the impacts of natural disasters by preserving and restoring critical ecosystems that act as natural buffers against extreme weather events. Forests, wetlands, and coastal areas, often found within parks, provide essential services that reduce the severity of floods, wildfires, hurricanes, and other natural disasters. For example, wetlands act as sponges, absorbing excess rainwater and preventing flooding, while riparian forests along rivers and streams stabilize soil, reducing erosion and limiting the damage from floodwaters.

Hurricanes are a particular concern for North Carolina. While hurricane season has typically been a concern for the eastern and central parts of the state, Hurricane Helene showed that these storms can be a massive threat to the entire state. Helene severely impacted much of Western North Carolina through the fall and winter seasons of 2024 damaging homes, roadways, and other vital infrastructure.

Conservation, particularly along coastal areas, play an essential role in mitigating the impacts of hurricanes, which are becoming more frequent and intense due to climate change. Coastal ecosystems within parks, such as mangrove forests, salt marshes, and dune systems, act as natural barriers that protect inland areas from the devastating effects of storm surges, high winds, and flooding. Mangroves, for example, with their dense root systems, are highly effective at absorbing the energy from waves, reducing the force of storm surges that can flood coastal communities. Similarly, salt marshes trap sediment and water, acting as sponges that reduce the impact of floodwaters. Sand dunes and living shorelines, especially those found in state parks , provide a physical barrier against the direct onslaught of storm surges, helping prevent coastal erosion and the loss of habitat.

Beyond the direct physical protection these ecosystems provide, parks also play a role in reducing the vulnerability of coastal infrastructure and human communities to hurricanes. By preserving these natural buffers, parks reduce the need for costly man-made defenses like seawalls or flood barriers, which can be expensive to build, and maintain, and may not be as effective in the long term. Additionally, parks can serve as evacuation routes or safe zones for both people and wildlife in the event of a hurricane. The intact natural landscapes within these parks can absorb and disperse water, reducing the intensity of flooding in surrounding areas and helping protect both human lives and critical infrastructure.




**Average Cost of Hurricane Damage by State (In Billions U.S. Dollars)**
**Source: NCEI, NOAA, 2024**

Moreover, the protection of these vital coastal ecosystems contributes to the resilience of local communities in the face of future storms. Healthy, well-maintained parks help maintain biodiversity by offering refuges for wildlife, which in turn supports ecological processes that keep ecosystems functioning. In the aftermath of hurricanes, these protected areas also provide crucial habitats for species that may be displaced by a storm, aiding in their recovery.

In addition to their role in flood and storm mitigation, parks play a critical role in mitigating the impacts of wildfires by serving as both natural firebreaks and managed landscapes that help reduce the spread of wildfires to surrounding communities. Forested areas within parks, especially those with a mix of native vegetation and properly maintained ecosystems, can act as buffers that can slow or even stop the progression of wildfires. Through responsible land management practices, such as controlled burns and the removal of excess vegetation, parks can reduce the buildup of flammable underbrush, which in turn minimizes the risk of large, uncontrolled fires. These fire management practices not only pro-

tect the park's biodiversity but also safeguard nearby communities and homes, preventing fires from rapidly escalating. Moreover, healthy forests with diverse species are generally more resilient to higher intensity wildfires, as the varied plant life can help break up the continuity of a fire's path, slowing its advance.

In addition to acting as firebreaks, parks contribute to wildfire prevention and post-fire recovery. Some parks nationwide, particularly those in fire-prone regions, prioritize forest thinning, the creation of defensible space, and the use of fire-resistant plant species in their restoration efforts. These practices not only reduce fire risk but also improve the overall health and biodiversity of the ecosystem. After a wildfire, parks also play an important role in ecological recovery. They provide critical habitats for wildlife displaced by the fire, and the management of these areas can speed up the regeneration of plant life, stabilizing the soil and reducing erosion. By investing in fire management and restoration practices, parks help maintain the balance between wildfire prevention, ecosystem health, and community safety, demonstrating that well-preserved natural landscapes are essential for long-term resilience in fire-prone regions.




**State Parks Prescribed Burner of the Year Awarded to Ranger Anderson, Carolina Beach State Park Staff**

## Dimension III: Water

Parks play a vital role in maintaining and improving water quality by protecting the natural ecosystems that filter, regulate, and purify water before it reaches rivers, lakes, and coastal areas. Forests, wetlands, and riparian zones within parks act as natural filtration systems, capturing pollutants such as sediment, nutrients, and toxins that would otherwise flow into waterways. For instance, wetlands in parks help absorb excess nutrients, like nitrogen and phosphorus, that can lead to harmful algal blooms and water eutrophication. These ecosystems also trap sediment, preventing it from washing into streams and lakes where it can cloud the water and damage aquatic habitats. Similarly, riparian buffers—strips of vegetation along rivers and streams—filter runoff from surrounding areas, removing contaminants before they reach the water. This natural filtration is far more cost-effective and sustainable than man-made water treatment systems.

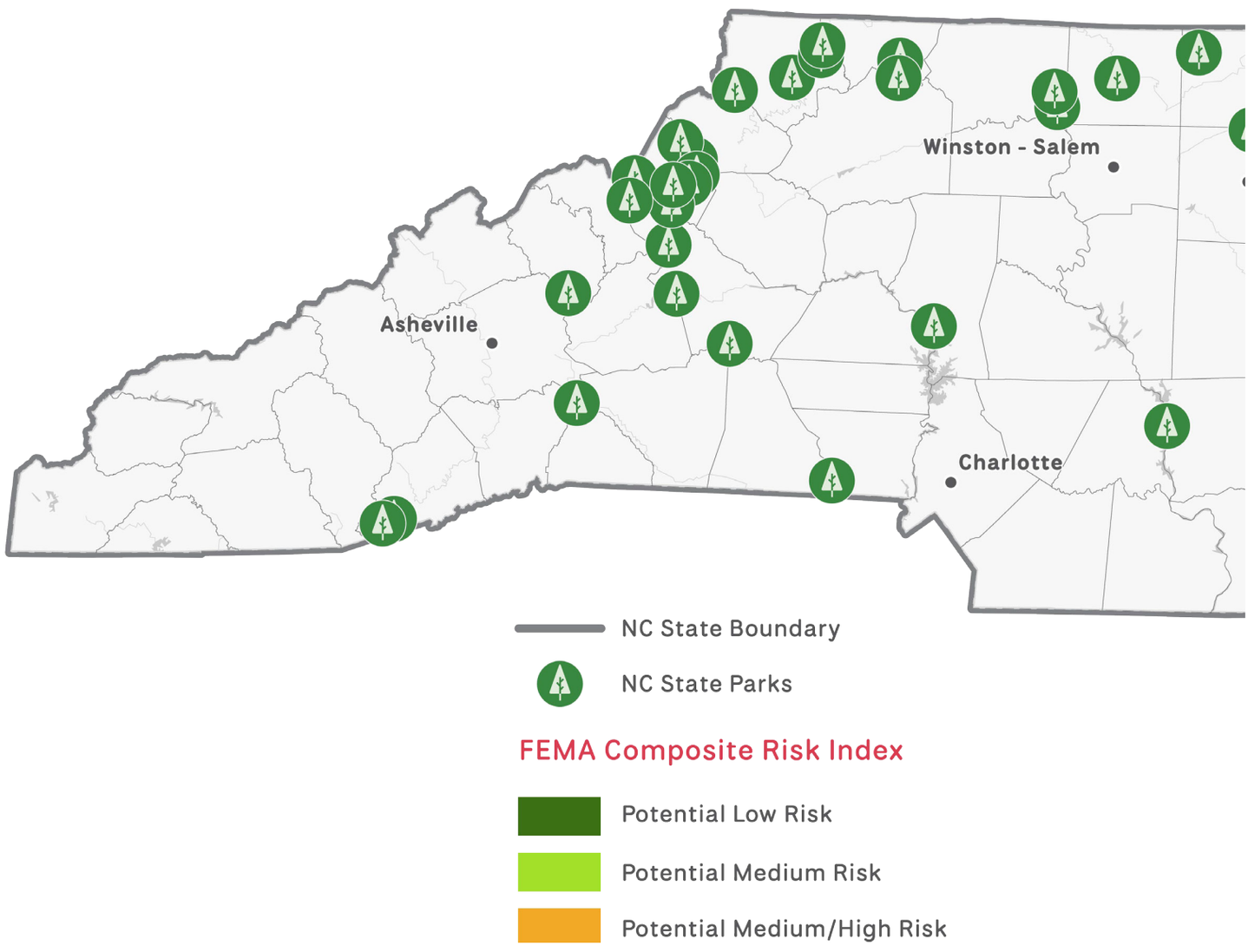
In addition to their role in filtering water, parks help maintain the integrity of watersheds by conserving land that has impacts on the flow of water across the landscape. Healthy forests and wetlands in parks absorb and slowly release rainwater, reducing the risk of both flooding and drought. During heavy rains, these ecosystems can absorb and store large amounts of water, preventing runoff and minimizing the strain on downstream water systems. This not only helps improve water quality by preventing erosion and sedimentation but also ensures that water is available during dry periods, supporting both human and ecological needs. The preservation of these lands also ensures the continued viability of groundwater recharge areas, which are critical for maintaining clean drinking water supplies in many regions.

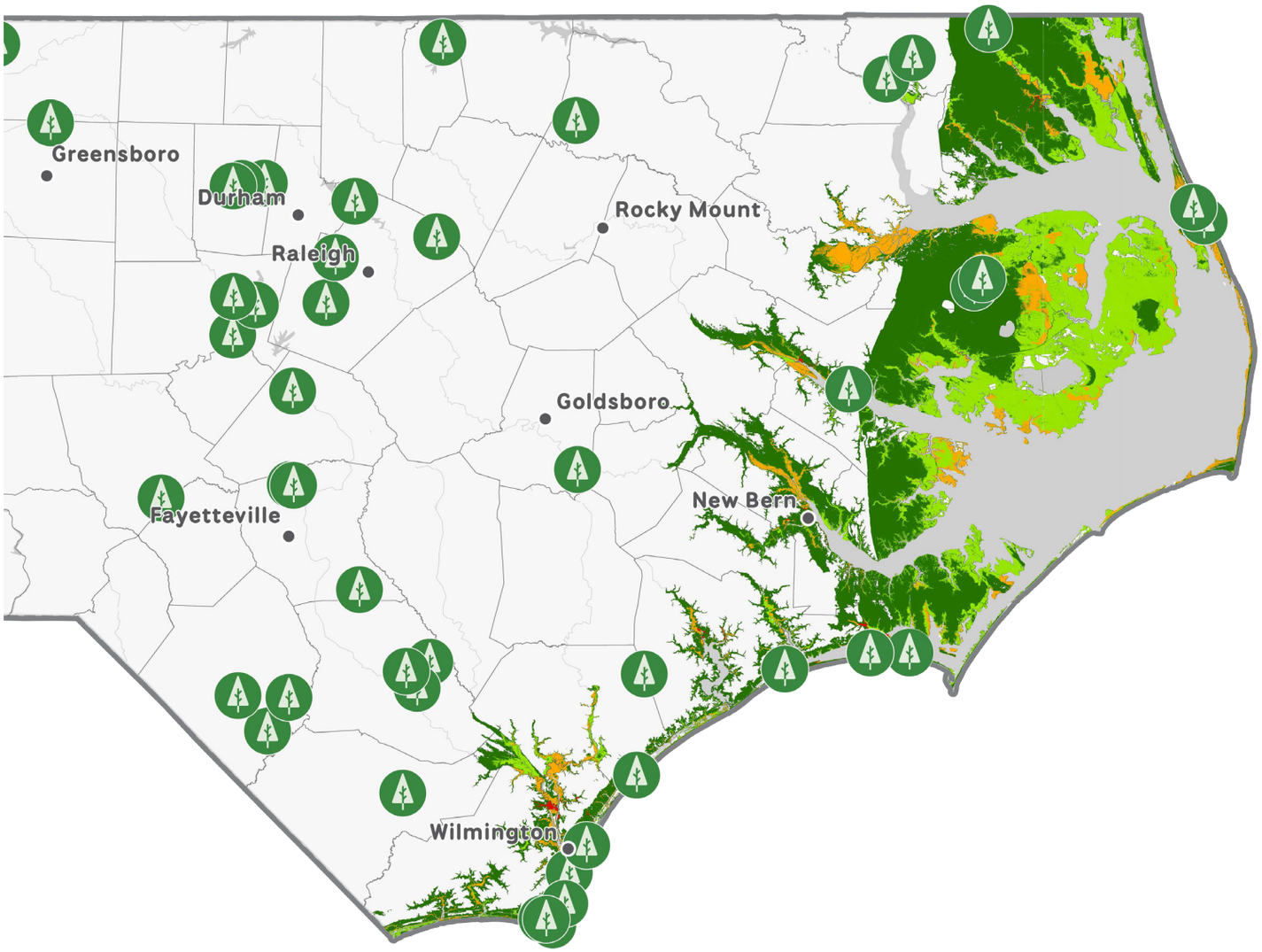
Additionally, parks provide an important space for research and monitoring of water quality, allowing scientists to study the health of aquatic ecosystems and track changes over time. This data can inform water management strategies, conservation efforts, and restoration projects across larger landscapes. Many parks, including North Carolina State Parks, partner with local, state, and federal agencies to monitor the quality of rivers, lakes, and streams, ensuring that water resources are protected for future generations. By preserving these key ecosystems and promoting sustainable land-use practices within park boundaries, they contribute significantly to the long-term health of watersheds and the quality of water that communities depend on for drinking, recreation, and wildlife habitats.

## FEMA Composite Risk Index

The map below shows the FEMA Composite Risk Index (CRI) for the state. The CRI is an Index of Risk for 18 hazard types where the more hazards a location is susceptible to, the higher overall risk as recognized by FEMA. The hazards included in the index are: Avalanche, Coastal Flooding, Cold Wave, Drought, Earthquake, Hail, Heat Wave, Hurricane, Ice Storm, Landslide, Lighting, Riverine Flooding, Strong Wind, Tornado, Tsunami, Volcanic Activity, Wildfire, and Winter Weather.

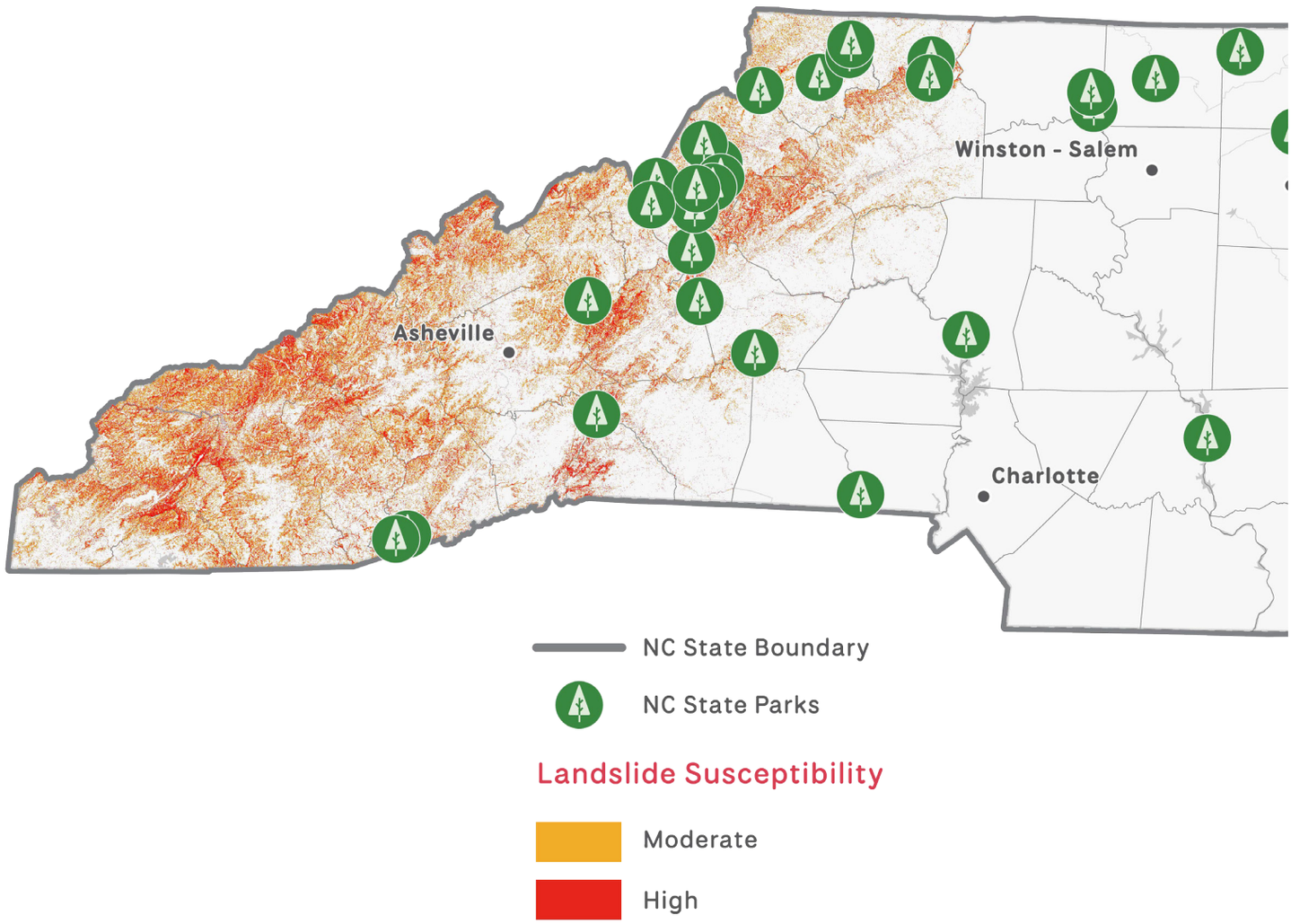
As seen in the map, the primary areas at risk in the state are along the Outer Banks and the inner coastline with the highest risk being along land immediately adjacent to the ocean and in communities adjacent to riverine systems.

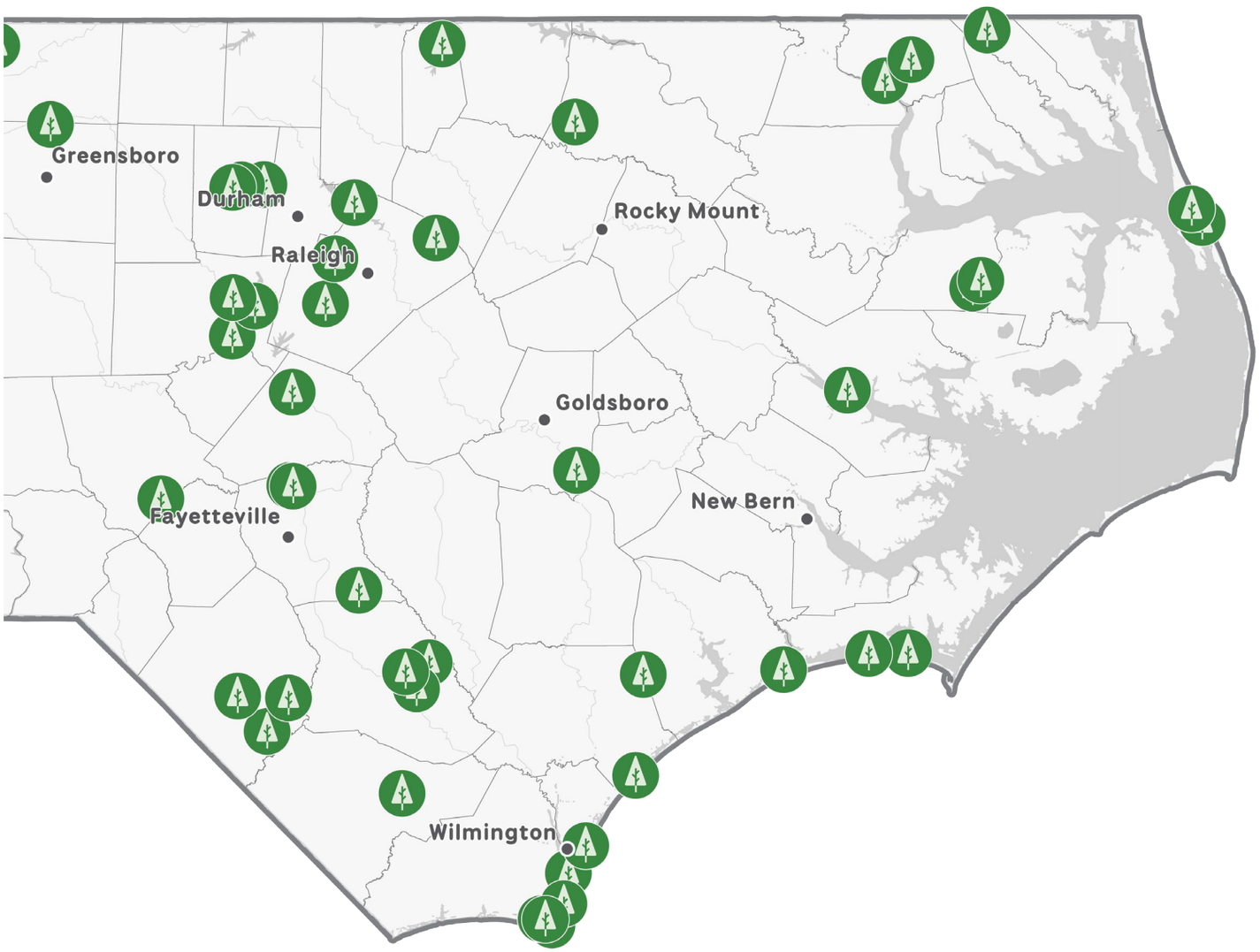



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## Landslide Susceptibility

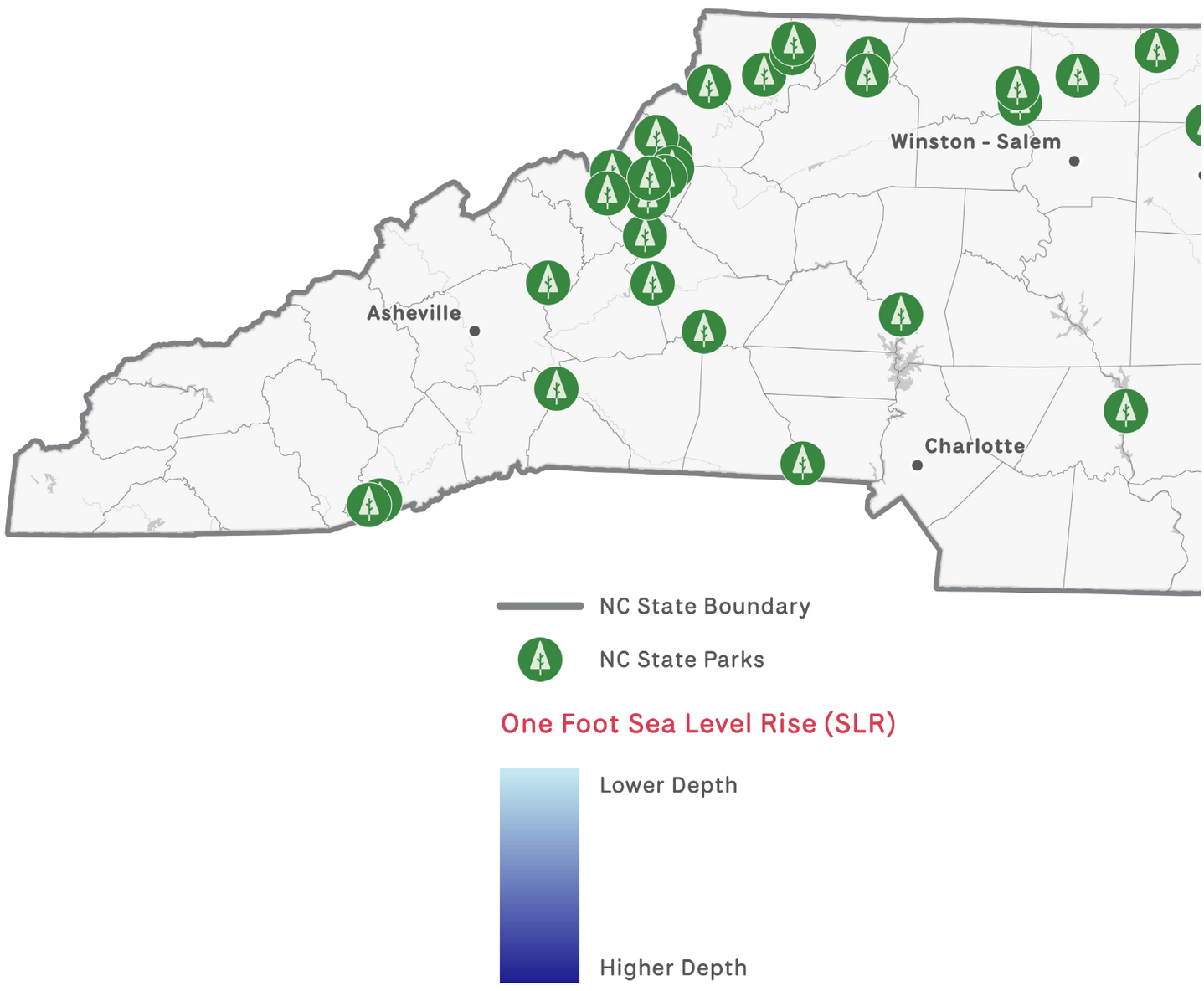
The map below highlights susceptibility to landslides across the state. This index assesses the overall risk to communities from landslide activity. While this map is not meant to be predictive of future landslide events, it is intended to show where the greatest vulnerability is. Landslides are most common in North Carolina's mountains due to steep slopes but also occur in the Piedmont and Coastal Plain, often from human activity like steep road cuts. Triggers include heavy rain, hurricanes, freeze-thaw cycles, and construction.

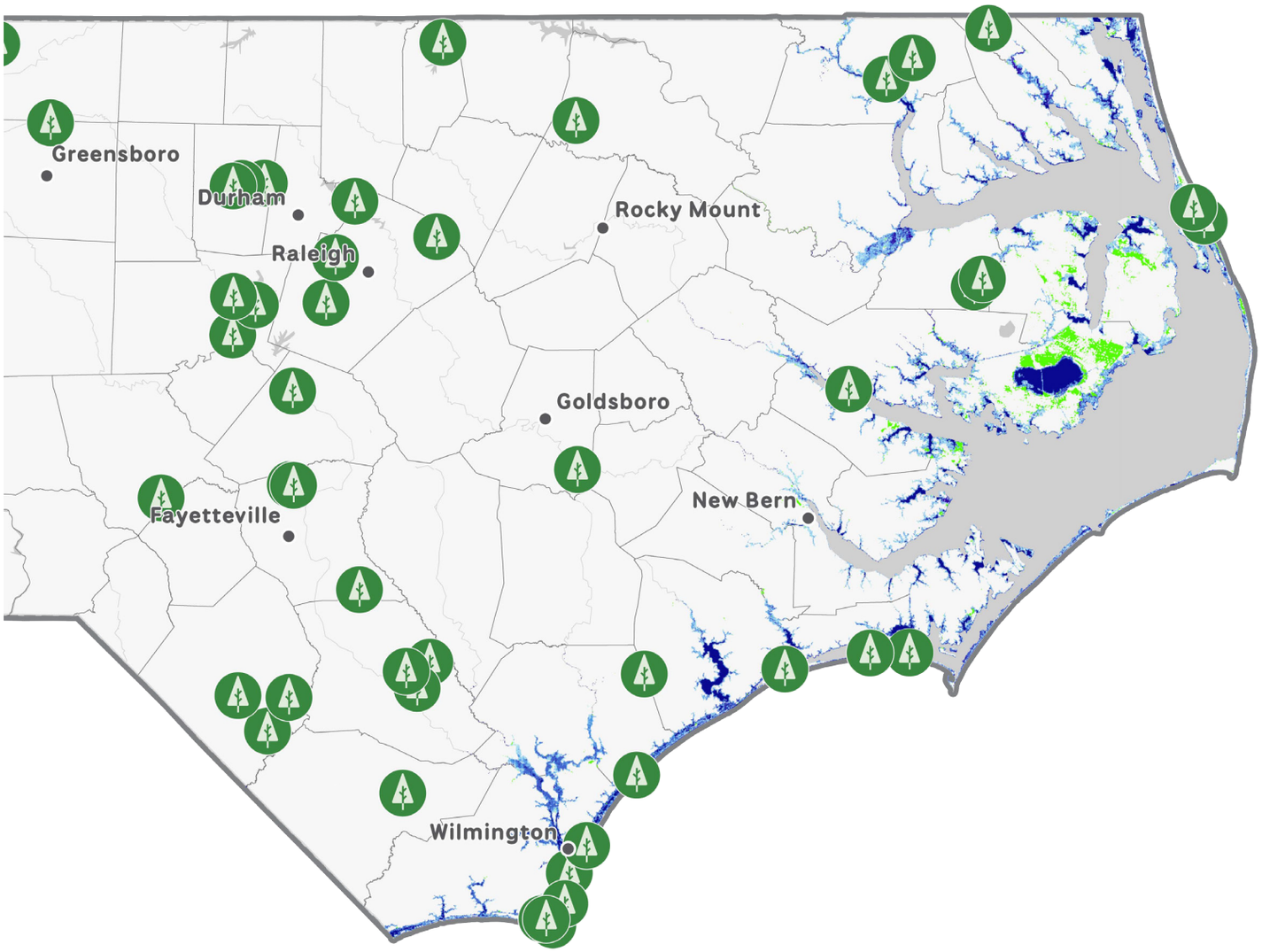



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## One Foot Sea Level Rise

The map below highlights the impacts of one foot of sea level rise. The immediate impact of such a level of sea level rise would be felt primarily by the state's coastal communities. As seen in the map, areas that are low lying and adjacent to water features including the ocean, rivers, and lakes would be impacted the most.

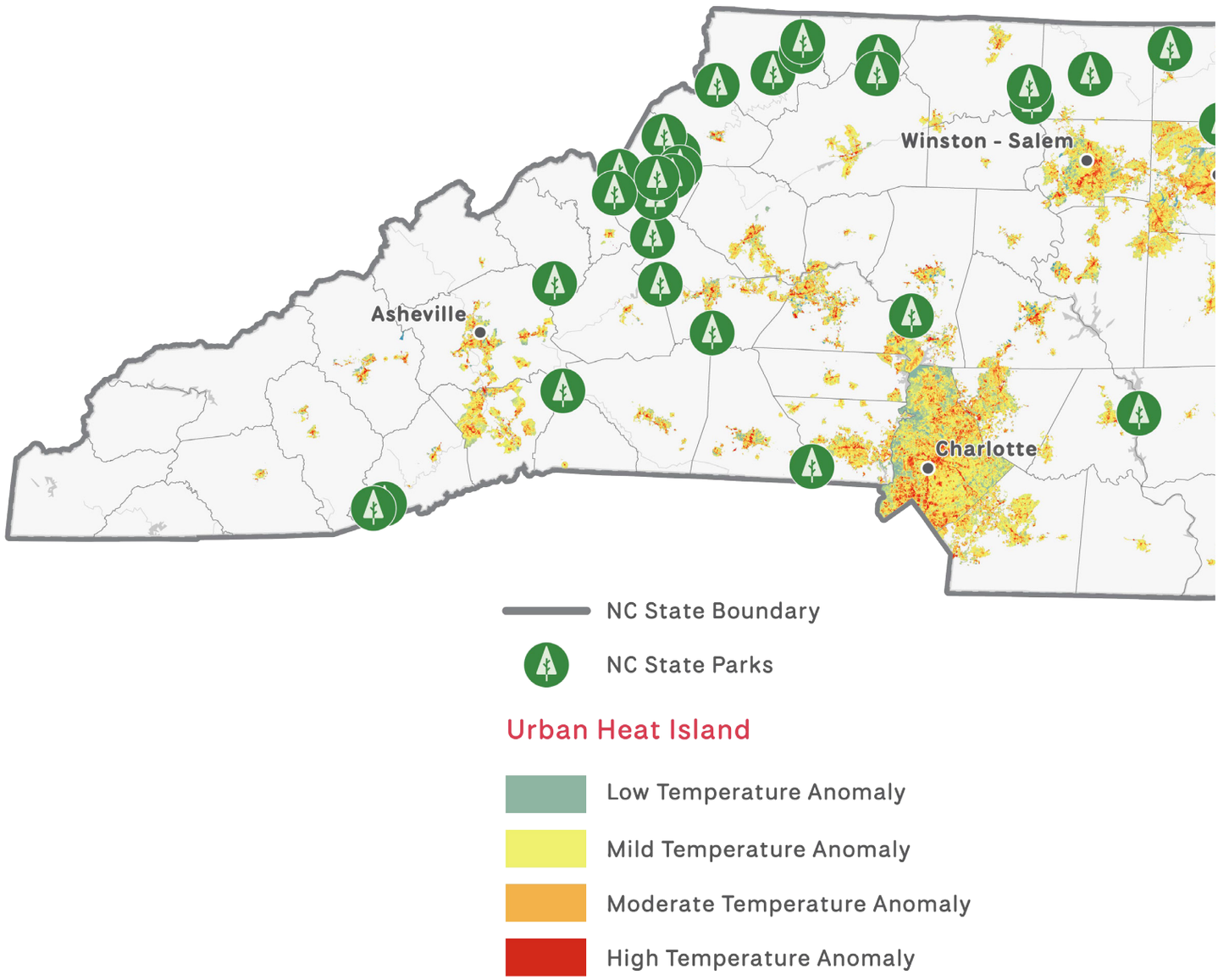


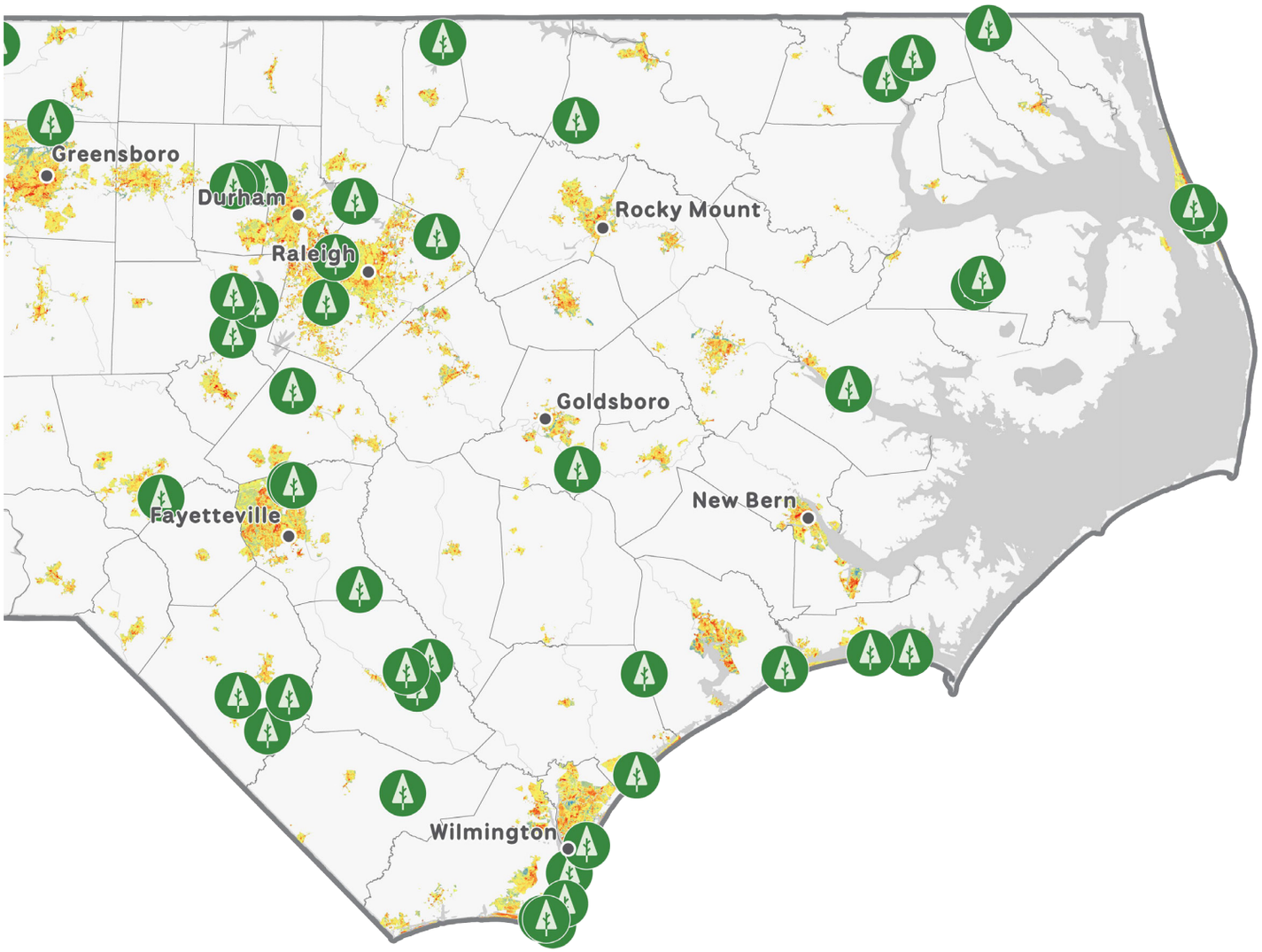

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## Urban Heat Island

An urban heat island is a phenomenon where cities become significantly warmer than surrounding rural areas due to human activities and built surfaces like asphalt and concrete that absorb and retain heat. This effect can increase energy use, worsen air quality, and impact public health.

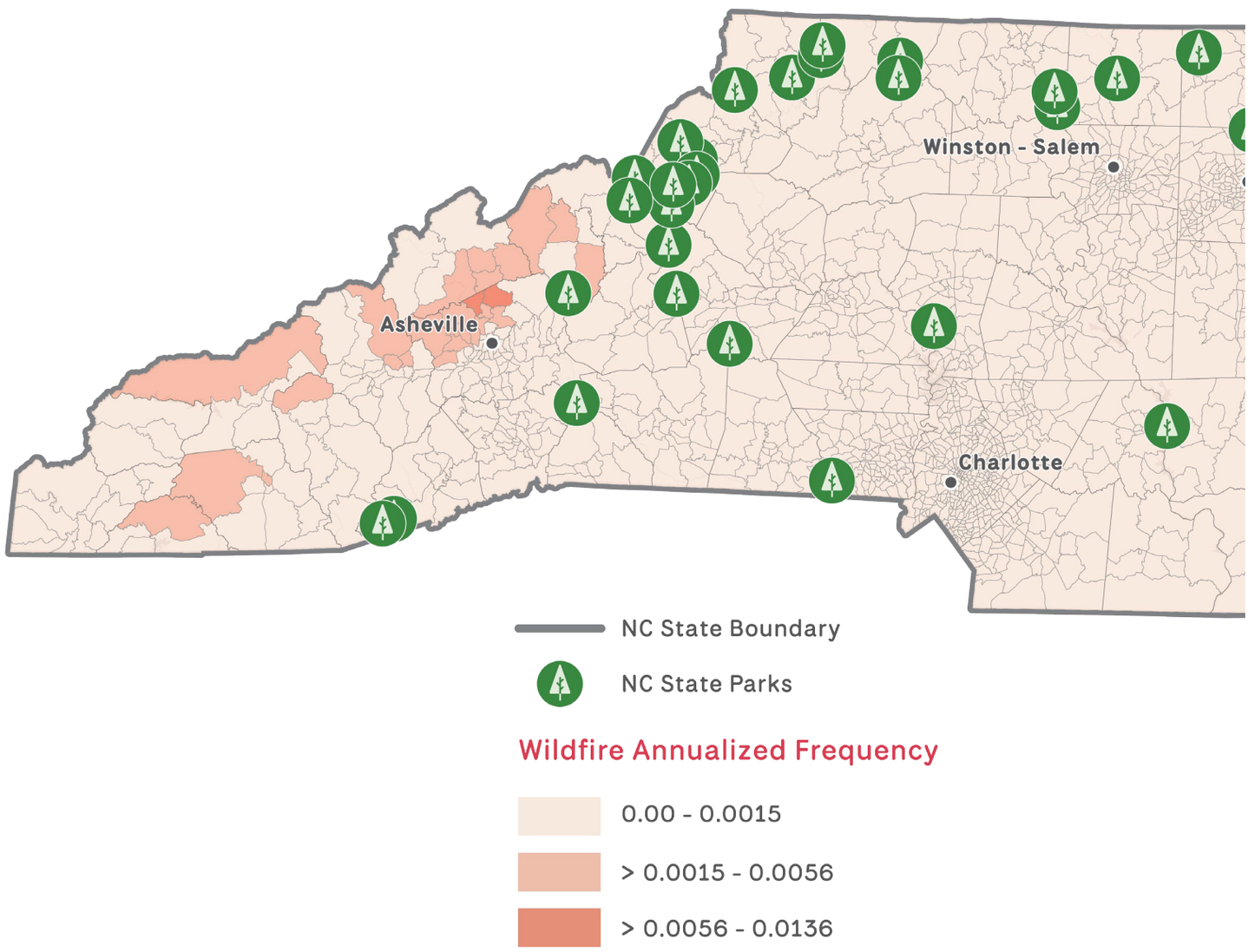
The map below models urban heat islands across the state. As one would expect, the more urban a community, the greater the heat island effect that is seen. Parks can mitigate heat island effects by providing larger expanses of vegetation and uninterrupted tree canopy, which reduces temperatures.

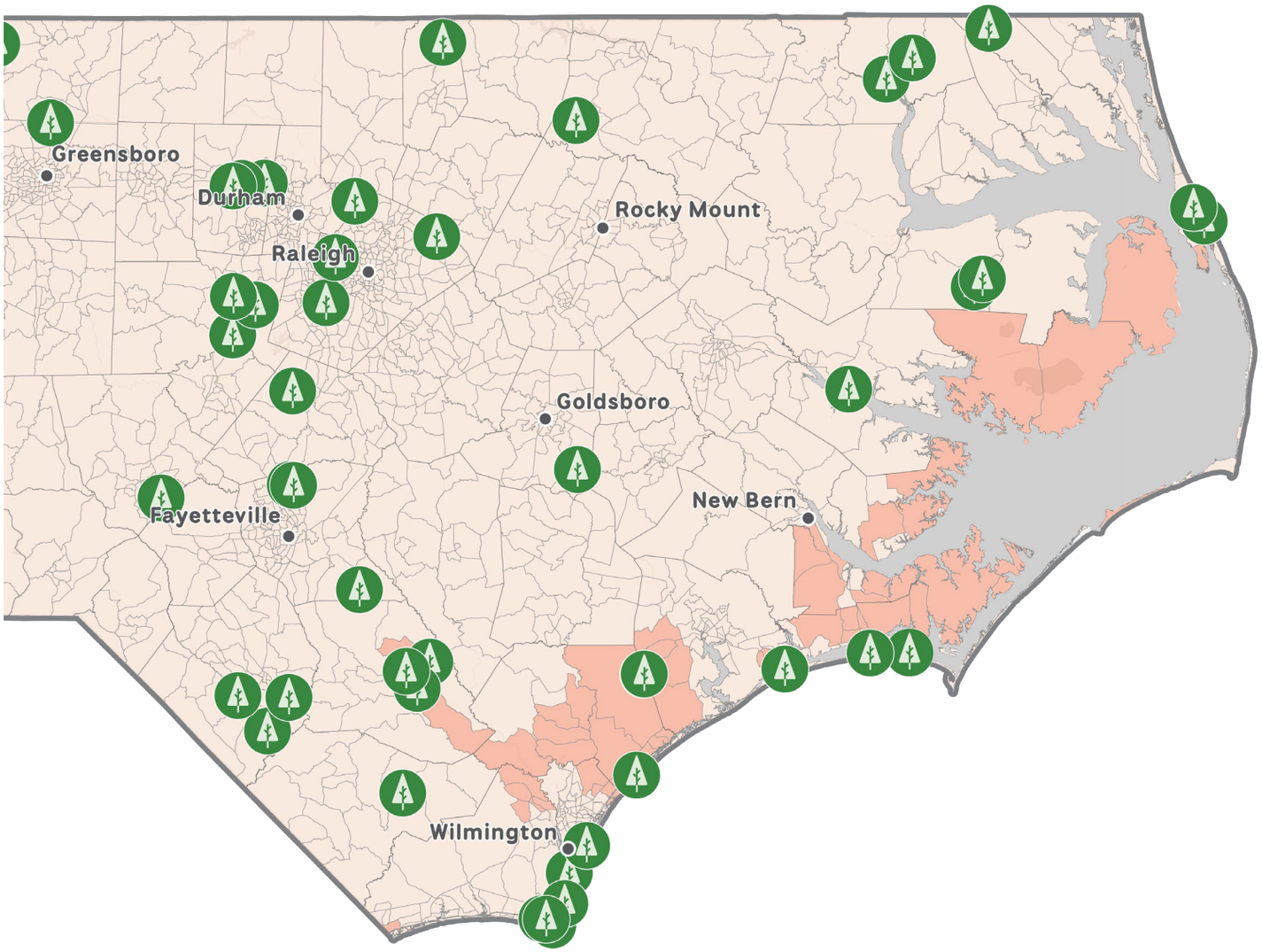



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## Wildfire Annualized Frequency

The map below shows the annualized frequency of wildfires. This data, provided by FEMA, is a combination of where wildfires are already occurring in the state and how frequently. This data, like others in this chapter, is not intended to say with any certainty where wildfires will happen in the future but where there is a demonstrated tendency for them to happen which provides insight into areas that are generally more at risk. As seen in the map, a portion of the coastal region as well as the more mountainous region have a higher frequency of wildfire activity than elsewhere in the state. Parks in these areas should have ongoing efforts to mitigate the risks of wildfires to adjacent communities.

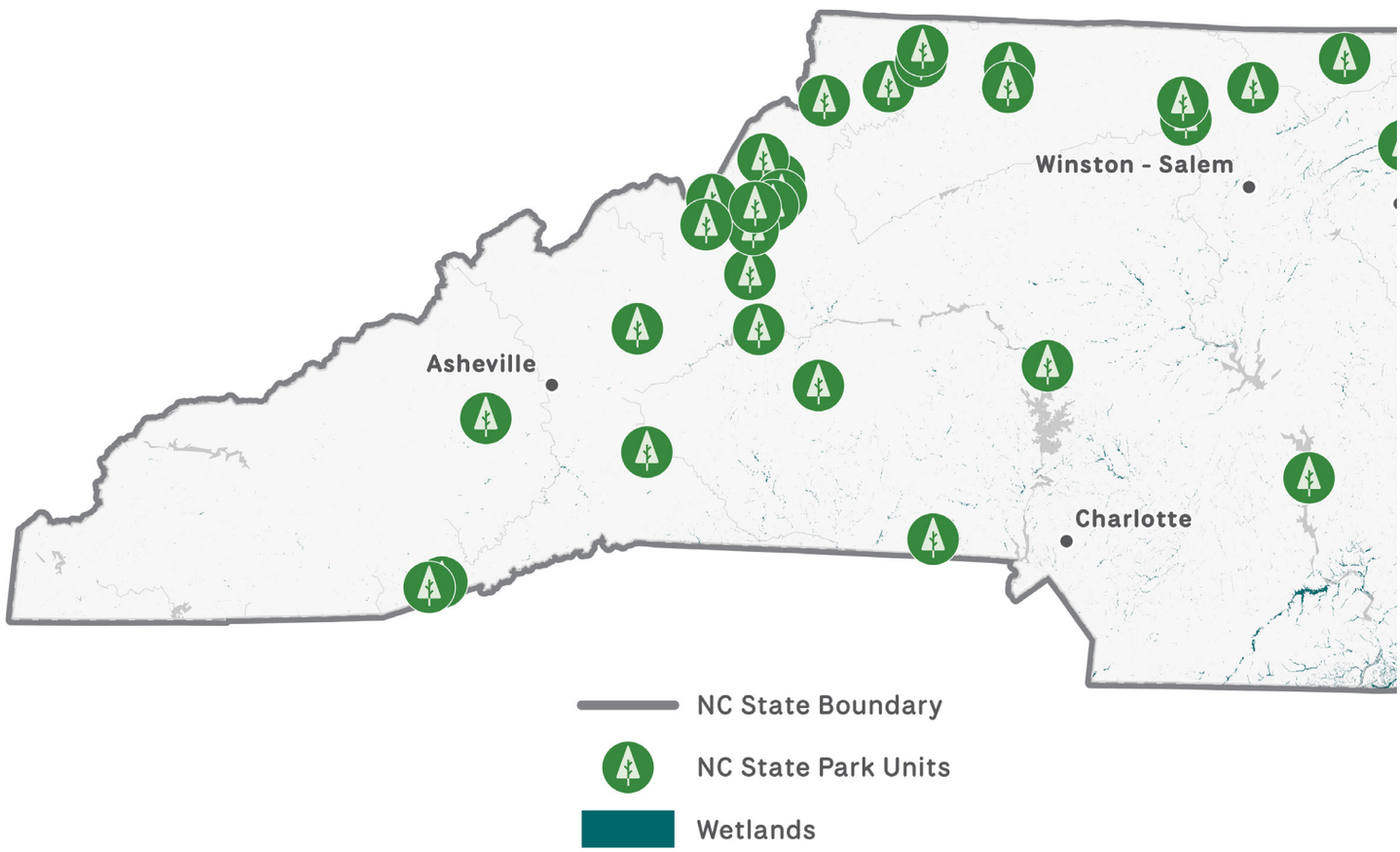


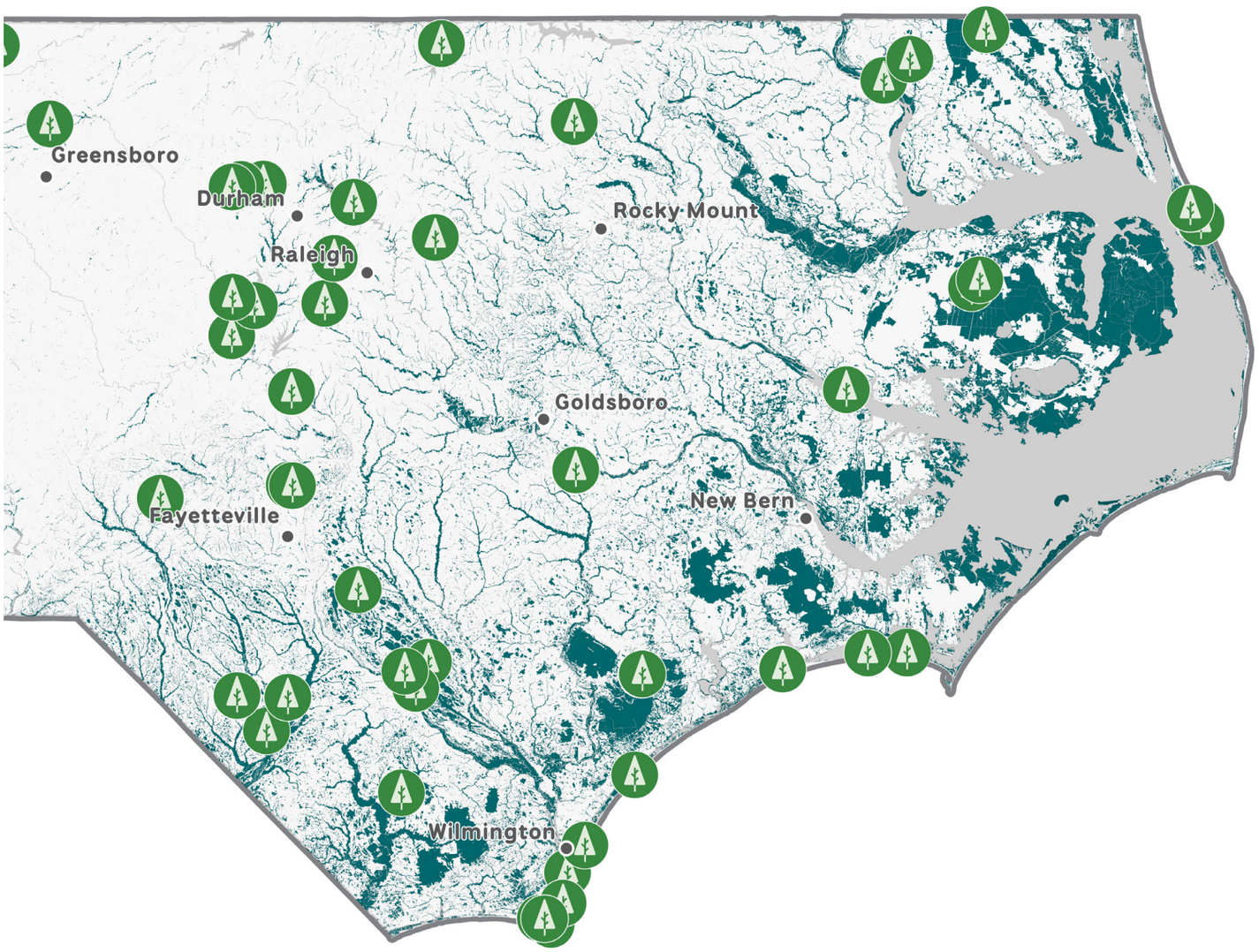

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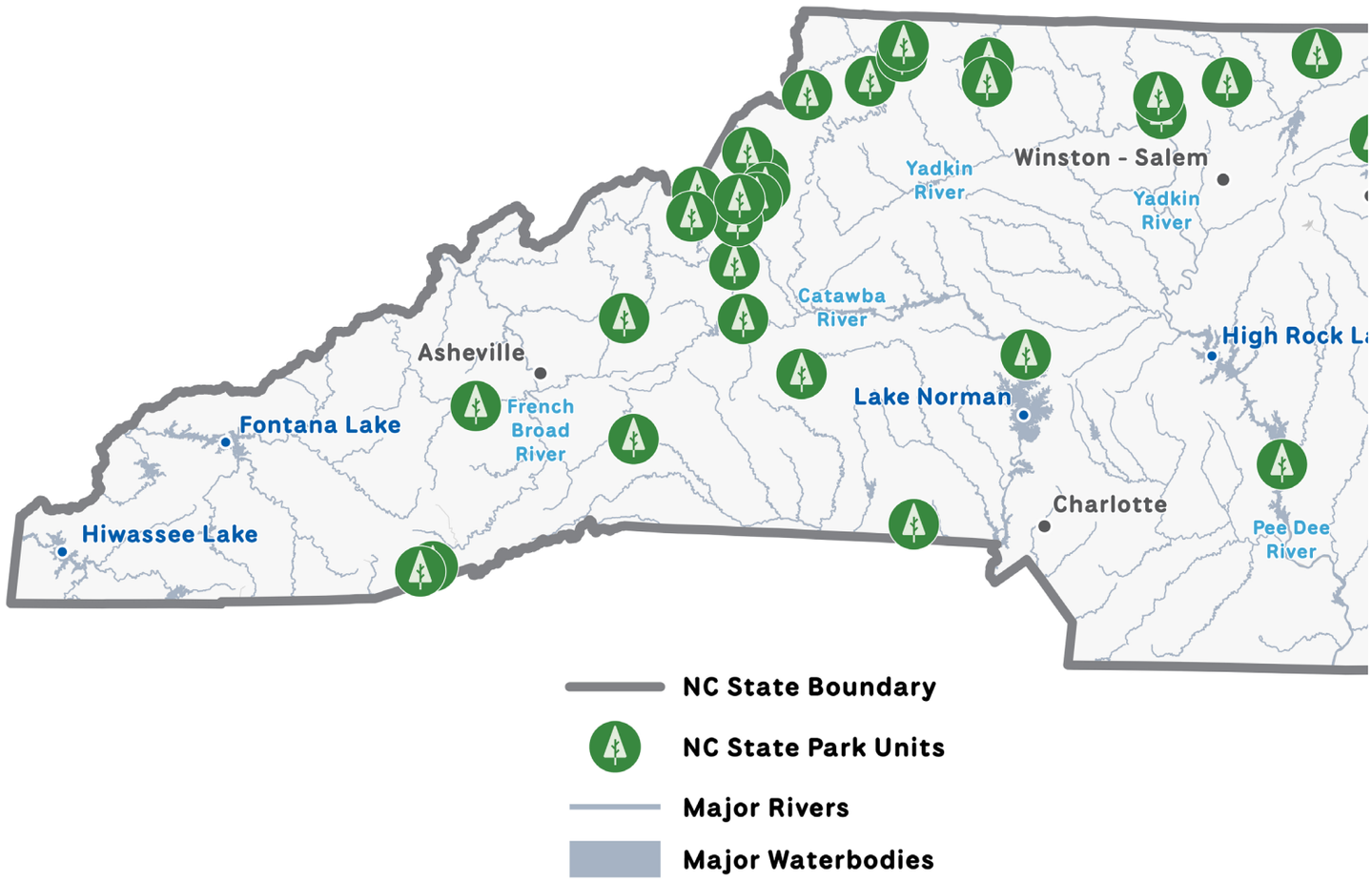
## North Carolina Wetlands

The maps below shows all wetlands, rivers, and major waterbodies across the state of North Carolina. Most wetlands in the state are concentrated just east of the 'fall line' that separates the Piedmont from the Coastal Plain. These wetlands are powerful components of the state's ecology — finding opportunities to protect them through establishing State or local parks or recreational facilities helps maintain the ecological health by reducing impact from more disruptive land development practices. This protection is paid forward by allowing the wetlands to more effectively mitigate large storms, particularly in areas close by.

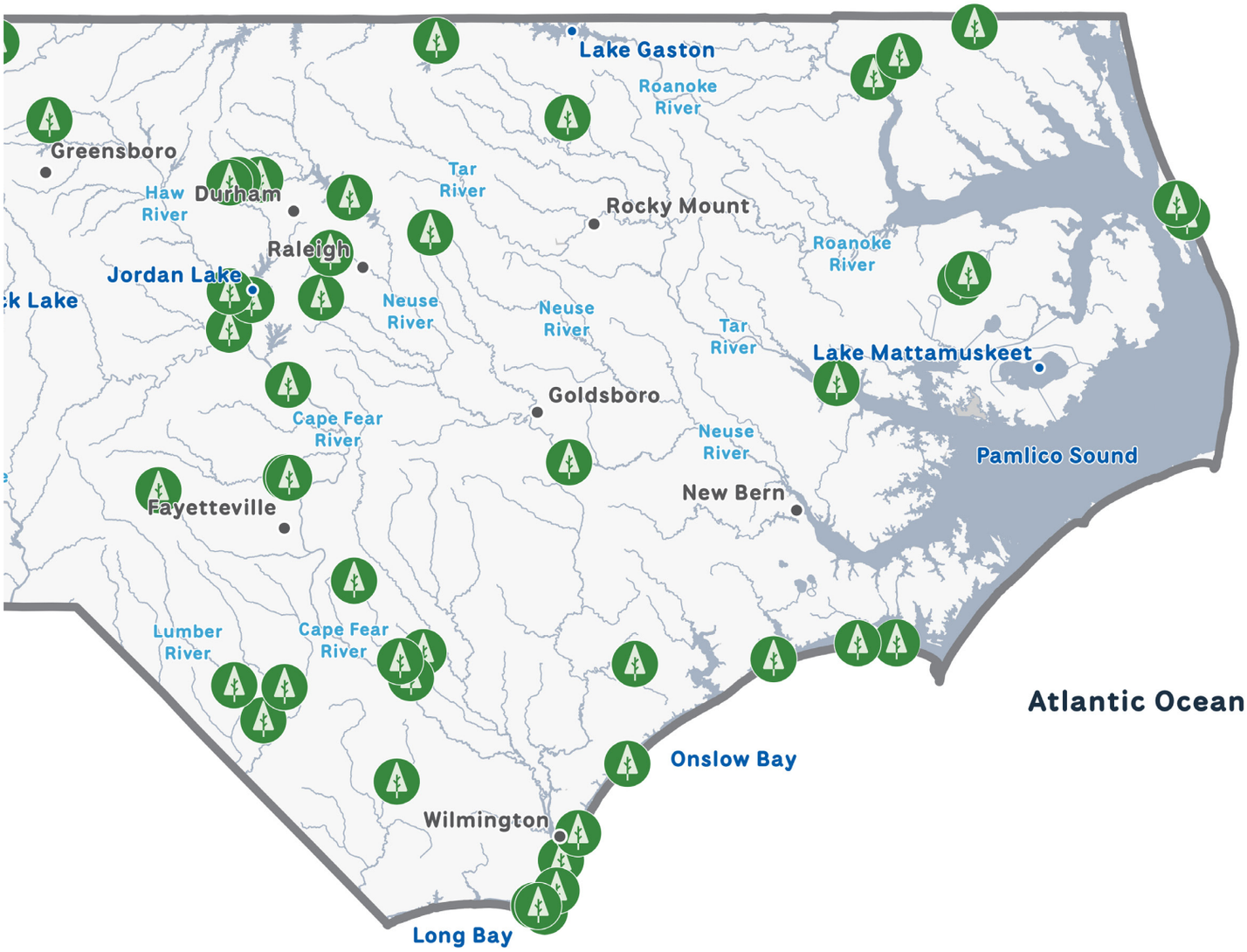
As seen in the maps, the State has done a great job at establishing a presence along many of our major river corridors and at our lakes. Continuing this work with a focus on conservation and improvement of ecological health provides direct benefits to residents across the state and the coast.




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Major Hydrologic Features in North Carolina


Lake Gaston
Roanoke River
Greensboro
Haw River
Durham
Tar River
Rocky Mount
Raleigh
Roanoke River
Jordan Lake
Neuse River
Neuse River
Tar River
Lake Mattamuskeet
Goldsboro
Cape Fear River
Neuse River
Pamlico Sound
New Bern
Fayetteville
Lumber River
Cape Fear River
Atlantic Ocean
Onslow Bay
Wilmington
Long Bay

# Dimension IV: Air

Parks play an essential role in maintaining and improving air quality by serving as vital green spaces that act as natural air filters. Forests, grasslands, and wetlands within these parks absorb carbon dioxide ($CO_2$) and other pollutants, such as sulfur dioxide ($SO_2$) and nitrogen oxides (NOx), which are commonly produced by industrial activity, transportation, and agriculture. Trees and plants within parks are particularly effective at sequestering CO2 through the process of photosynthesis, removing this potent greenhouse gas from the atmosphere and helping mitigate the effects of climate change. In addition to carbon sequestration, the diverse plant life in parks can also improve air quality by capturing particulate matter—tiny particles of dust, soot, and other pollutants—that can harm respiratory health. The combination of carbon storage and pollutant removal helps maintain cleaner, healthier air for surrounding communities and wildlife.

Moreover, the presence of large, undisturbed natural areas within parks contributes to better local and regional air quality by creating a "green lung" effect. This effect refers to the ability of forests and open spaces to act as buffers against air pollution and the heat island effect, which are especially prevalent in urban and industrial areas. Parks can reduce ambient temperatures by providing shade and releasing moisture through transpiration, which cools the air and lowers the demand for electricity for HVAC systems in nearby urban centers. This cooling effect can help reduce the formation of ground-level ozone, a major component of smog that worsens air quality and contributes to respiratory problems, particularly during hot summer months. Additionally, areas functioning as "green lungs" clean air by binding CO2 and exhaust gas particles, reducing the amount of air pollution impacting growing communities. By mitigating heat and absorbing pollutants, parks not only enhance air quality but also contribute to public health by reducing the risks associated with poor air quality, such as asthma and other respiratory diseases.

State Parks can also serve as spaces for scientific research and monitoring of air quality, providing valuable data that helps guide state, regional, and national environmental policies. Many parks are in areas with relatively low levels of air pollution, offering baseline data for studying the effects of pollutants on ecosystems and human health. By maintaining and expanding these protected areas, parks can further improve air quality through the preservation of native plant species and the restoration of degraded ecosystems, which in turn support cleaner, more breathable air for generations to come. Ultimately, the role of parks in improving air quality is multifaceted, encompassing carbon sequestration, pollutant filtration, and the promotion of healthy, sustainable ecosystems that benefit both nature and human communities.




**Clean Smokestacks Act Breathed New Life into NC Air Quality**
**Source: North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality**




**Max Patch Mountain, Hot Springs, NC**




# DID YOU KNOW?

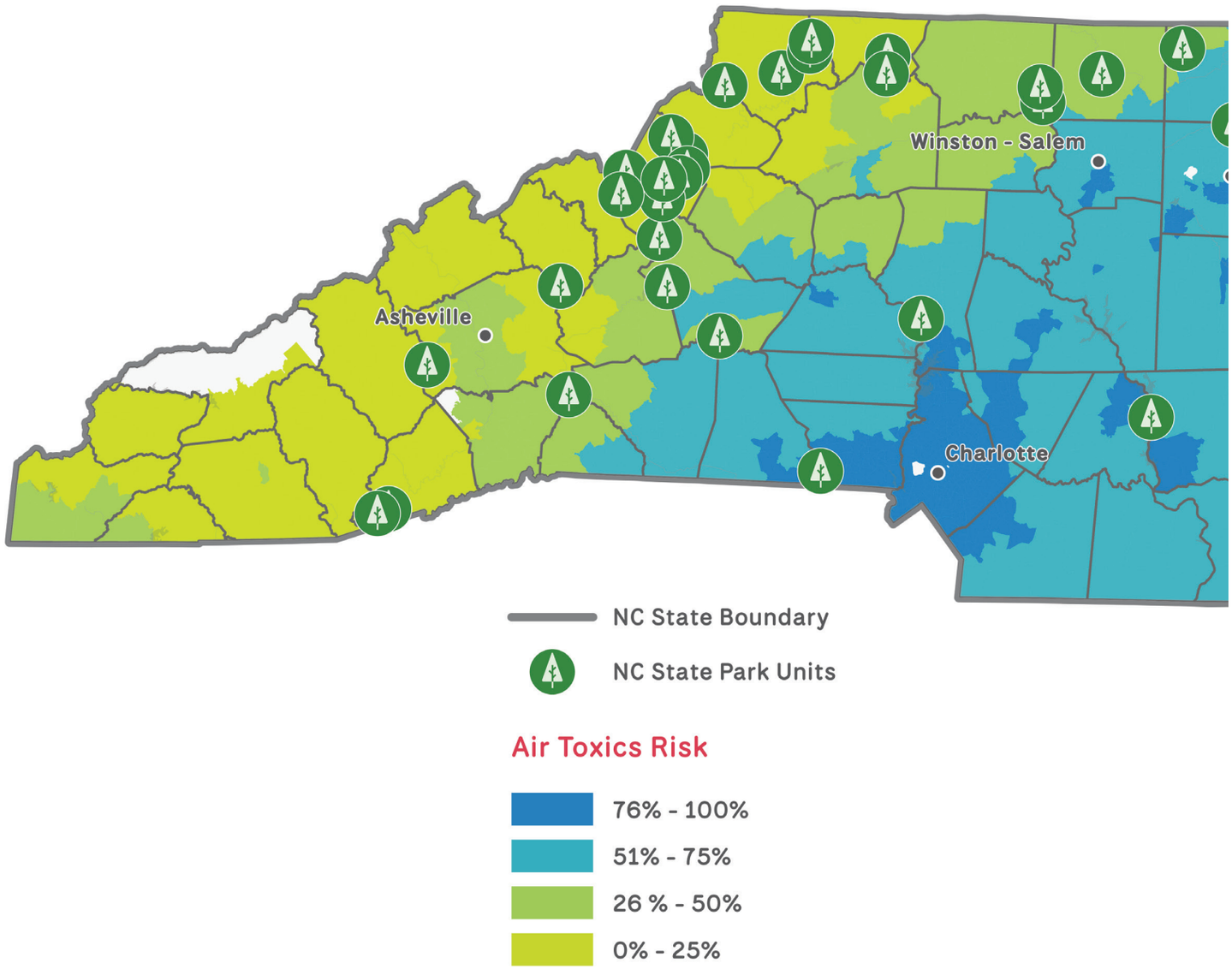
The Red Drum or channel bass is North Carolina's state saltwater fish. Red Drum can grow up to 5 feet, and are found in coastal waters from Massachusetts all the way to Key West, Florida. They are bottom feeders, and when feeding in shallow water, they turn their head down in the grass and expose their tail to the air, also known as "tailing."[1]

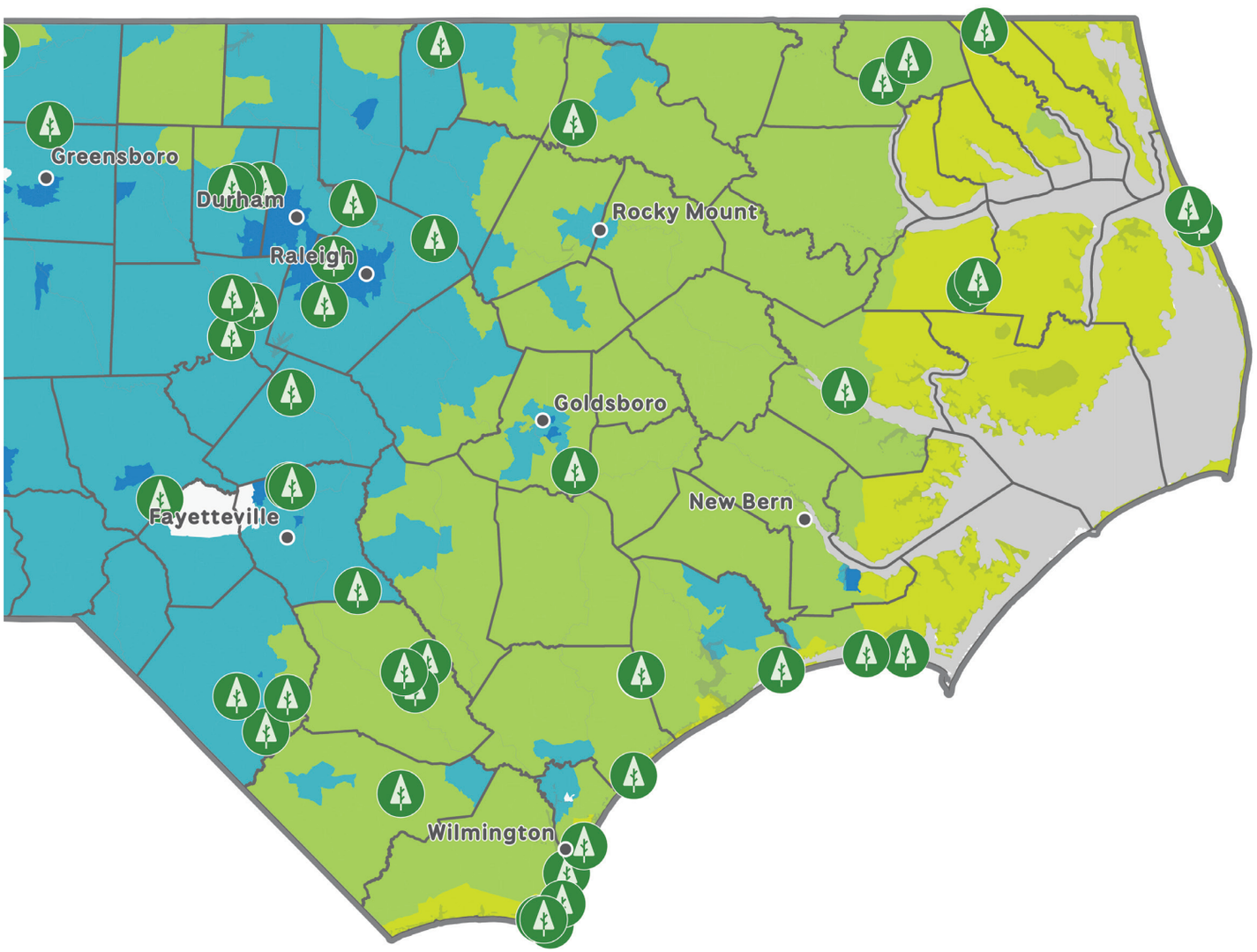
1 North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality, "Red Drum," North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality, https://www.deq.nc.gov/about/divisions/marine-fisheries/public-information-and-education/species-profiles/red-drum.

## Air Pollution Risks

The map below shows a component of the CDC's Environmental Justice Index known as the Air Toxics Risk indicator. This indicator ranks census tracts on how vulnerable they are to exposure to air pollution compared to other census tracts nationwide.

As seen in the map, large swathes of the state including metro areas in the eastern and western edge have low risk compared to the central part of the state as well as nationwide. The central part of the state, particularly the areas around the Charlotte metropolitan area and the Raleigh-Durham metropolitan area are much more vulnerable. Some of this vulnerability is due to the nature and intensity of development in these areas. A more intensive development pattern often correlates with large scale tree loss and thus a decline in air quality. Expanding facilities or partnering with local governments to preserve and expand their tree canopies can help stabilize and improve air quality conditions in these areas.




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# Key Findings

## Habitat & Biodiversity

- Parks protect critical habitats from urban development, agriculture, and industrialization, safeguarding ecosystems that provide refuge for countless plant and animal species.
- Biodiversity is essential for ecosystem health, and parks support the survival of endangered species while maintaining key ecological processes like pollination, seed dispersal, and soil health.
- Parks are living laboratories that help scientists understand ecosystems and inform conservation strategies, particularly regarding climate change and invasive species.
- Conservation impact is maximized by considering ecological significance when expanding parks, as identified by North Carolina's Natural Heritage Program, which highlights critical conservation regions often within parks.

## Natural Disasters

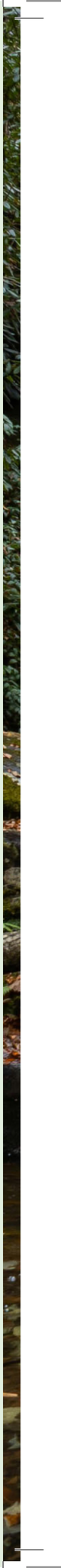
- Parks act as natural buffers against disasters like hurricanes, floods, and wildfires, by preserving forests, wetlands, and coastal ecosystems that reduce the severity of storm surges, flooding, and soil erosion.
- Coastal ecosystems in parks, including mangroves, and dunes, and living shorelines protect inland areas from storm surges and flooding, reducing the need for costly man-made infrastructure like seawalls.
- Wildfire mitigation through fire management practices like controlled burns and vegetation thinning helps prevent large, uncontrolled fires, while park ecosystems serve as firebreaks and protect nearby communities.
- After wildfires and hurricanes, parks aid in ecological recovery, providing refuge for displaced wildlife and accelerating the regeneration of plant life, stabilizing soil, and reducing erosion.

## Water Quality

- Parks filter and regulate water quality through natural ecosystems such as wetlands, forests, and riparian buffers, preventing pollutants like sediment, nutrients, and toxins from reaching water systems.
- Wetlands and riparian buffers absorb excess nutrients and trap sediment, improving water quality and preventing issues like algal blooms and water eutrophication.
- Watershed management in parks helps mitigate flooding and drought, maintains groundwater recharge areas, and supports both ecological and human water needs.
- Parks provide valuable research opportunities for monitoring and protecting water quality, informing water management strategies and conservation efforts.

## Air Quality

- Parks serve as natural air filters, absorbing pollutants such as $CO_2$, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen oxides, which improves air quality and contributes to climate change mitigation.
- Parks create a "green lung" effect, lowering temperatures and reducing ground-level ozone, which improves air quality and reduces the risks associated with smog, such as respiratory problems.
- Carbon sequestration in forests and grasslands, along with pollutant removal, helps maintain cleaner, healthier air for surrounding communities and wildlife.
- State parks also provide scientific data for studying the effects of air pollution, supporting environmental policies that enhance air quality at local, regional, and national levels.




Leslie Cross - Burnsville, NC

# 7.8 TRAILS

Thanks to visionary planning efforts and extensive collaborative efforts statewide, North Carolina has earned the title of the **Great Trails State**, a recognition celebrated by former Governor Roy Cooper, trail enthusiasts, and numerous partner organizations. Over the course of several decades, the Division has led the effort for trail development at the state and local levels, with regional organizations, local governments, and nonprofits infusing funding and expertise into individual communities. Trails within the state are a collective and consistent effort by dozens of agencies to ensure that an increasing number of people have trails to walk, bike, pedal, and ride. Trends for trail use and trail funding have evolved substantially over the past five years. These shifts have created opportunities to provide more people of all ages and abilities with trail experiences across North Carolina. This assessment explores policies and institutions that support trail development, North Carolina's growing network of trails, the impact of having trails in communities, and the trends pushing trails forward beyond 2025.






**Appalachian Trail**

## Supporting Institutions & Agencies

Across our state, no one entity bears the responsibility to plan, fund, construct, maintain, and program trails. Trails, and the trail ecosystem, are products of collaborations between partners at the federal, state, regional, and local level. The following sections provide an overview of the organizations that advance our trail network.

### Division of Parks & Recreation

The Division manages over 250,000 acres of iconic landscape across parks, recreation areas, and natural areas, with a mission dedicated to conservation, recreation, and education. Under the purview of the Division, the Trails Program oversees the creation and maintenance of North Carolina's wide system of trails. The NC Trails Program[1] originated in 1973 with the NC Trails System Act[2] and is dedicated to helping citizens, organizations, and agencies plan, develop, and manage all types of trails ranging from greenways and natural surface trails for hiking, biking, and horseback riding to paddle trails and off-road vehicle trails. The North Carolina Trails Program administers the Recreational Trails Program (RTP),[3] the Complete the Trails Program,[4] and the Great Trails State Program,[5] which provide grants for trail planning, construction, and maintenance.

1 "North Carolina Trails Program." North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreationn.d. https://trails.nc.gov/.

2 "North Carolina General Assembly 1973 Session. Chapter 670. House Bill 436." North Carolina General Assemblyn.d. https://www.ncleg.net/enactedlegislation/sessionlaws/html/1973-1974/sl1973-670.html.

3 "Trails Grants." North Carolina Trails Programn.d. https://trails.nc.gov/trail-grants.

4 "Complete the Trails Program." North Carolina Trails Programn.d. https://trails.nc.gov/state-trails/nc-complete-trails-program.

5 "Great Trails State Program." North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreationn.d. https://www.ncparks.gov/about-us/grants/great-trails-state-program.

**Trails discussed in this chapter are found in many forms and contexts.**

### State Trails

State Trails are a collection of long-distance trails authorized by the NC General Assembly that include blueways (paddle trails), natural surface, and paved trail types, also referred to as greenways. Many State Trails will feature multiple trail types as they traverse from rural to urban settings.

### State Park Trails

Trails in State Parks form standalone trail networks that serve park visitors who want to hike, bike, paddle, or ride horses. The trail networks in State Parks often feature a combination of natural surface, paved greenways, and some parks include paddle trails.

### National Forest Service (NFS) Trails

National Forests provide backcountry trail experiences through natural surface single track trails and gravel forest service roads. These trail networks are extensive, crossing thousands of acres and serve hiking, biking, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), and equestrian uses.

### Local Park Trails

Local parks throughout the state are home to trail networks which are unique to their natural and community context. Both paved greenways and natural surface trails are common in local parks.

### Local Greenways & Shared Use Paths

Local governments manage their own greenways, and shared use path trail networks which serve both transportation and recreation uses. Locally managed greenway networks are typically comprised of asphalt or concrete trails (in some cases natural surface) that serve walking and biking, and follow stream or street corridors to connect destinations.

## North Carolina Department of Transportation (DOT)

The North Carolina Department of Transportation's mission is: "Connecting people, products and places safely and efficiently with customer focus, accountability and environmental sensitivity to enhance the economy and vitality of North Carolina."[6]

One of DOT's nine divisions is the Integrated Mobility Division (IMD). IMD's mission is to provide leadership for safe, affordable, and innovative multimodal transportation. IMD has played an instrumental role in trail development and advancement since its creation in 2019. IMD is responsible for managing state and federal funds for bicycle and pedestrian programs, providing expertise on multimodal planning, technology, innovation, and mobility trends, and funding the state's public transit systems.[7]

While IMD has long supported local bicycle, pedestrian, and greenway planning efforts, IMD recognized a capacity gap that blocks communities from advancing projects from the planning to feasibility project development stages. In response to this need, in 2021, the NC General Assembly provided a $2 million, one-time allocation to advance paved trail feasibility studies, leading to the creation of the Paved Trails and Sidewalks Feasibility Grant Program.[8] The purpose of the Paved Trails and Sidewalks Feasibility Studies Grant Program was to improve the pipeline of bicycle and pedestrian projects accessing state and federal funding, resulting in successful implementation of projects led by communities prioritizing multimodal infrastructure.

6 "Goals and Visions of the Department." North Carolina Department of Transportationn.d. https://www.ncdot.gov/about-us/our-mission/Pages/goals-vision.aspx.

7 "Integrated Mobility Division." North Carolina Department of Transportationn.d. https://www.ncdot.gov/divisions/integrated-mobility/Pages/about.aspx.

8 "Paved Trails & Sidewalks Feasibility Study Grant Program." NCDOT Integrated Mobility Division, 2022. November 30. https://connect.ncdot.gov/municipalities/PlanningGrants/Documents/Webinar_Feasibility%20Study%20Grant%20Program_2022_11_30.pdf.

## Visit NC

Visit NC, the official destination marketing organization, is responsible for promoting the state as a top destination for travel, meetings, conventions, sports, and film productions. The organization is part of the North Carolina Department of Commerce's Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina (EDPNC), a private nonprofit that focuses on economic development in the state.

Visit NC published the inaugural Trail Town Guide[9] in August 2024 to promote pathways for adventure-loving travelers and culture seekers exploring the Great Trails State. The digital only guide features 15 destinations with links to a selection of trails and trip tips from local experts.

## Great Trails State Coalition

Formed in 2020, the Great Trails State Coalition (GTSC)[10] is a coalition of local governments, industry partners, and nonprofits formed to advocate for increased state investment in all types of nonmotorized trails in North Carolina. GTSC has formed a unified voice for championing the benefits of trails stakeholders, as well as communicating the importance of robust investment from the NC General Assembly in trails of all types. The coordinated efforts of the GTSC led to major legislative successes related to increased funding for the planning, design, maintenance, acquisition, and construction of trails.

9 "Outdoor NC Trail Town Guide." Outdoor NCn.d. https://outdoornc.com/trail-town-guide/.

10 "The Great Trails State Coalition"n.d. https://greattrailsstatecoalition.org/.

## State Trail Partner Organizations

Each of the 14 State Trails has a partner organization, which may be a federal, state, or local government agency, and nonprofit organizations. In addition to advocacy, promotion, volunteer recruitment, planning, and trail construction, the Division is responsible for distributing the funds allocated to each state trail partner through the Complete the Trails Program, which was established in 2021. Partner organizations have a signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Division that formalizes the collaboration and cooperation between the Division and the partners. The MOU requires each partner to develop a five-year plan for their state trail segment that outlines how the organization plans to spend the funds allocated for their trail for both organizational capacity building and trail development.[11] Capacity building funds allow partner organizations to advance planning and staffing for their State Trail while trail development funds support land acquisition, design, and the construction of State Trails.

11 "North Carolina Trails Program Annual Report 2024." North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation, 2025. January 15. https://issuu.com/ncdpr/docs/trails_annualreport_2024.

## Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) & Rural Planning Organizations (RPOs)

MPOs and RPOs are responsible for multimodal transportation planning in areas with a combined population exceeding 50,000 people. Federal funding for greenways or multiuse path development is channeled through MPOs. The 19 MPOs collaborate with DOT and the local governments that serve to advance trail development through a variety of avenues, including:

- Producing multimodal planning documents that advance greenways, including State Trails, within their planning area.
- Prioritizing bicycle and pedestrian projects within their planning area for submission to DOT's State Transportation Improvement Plan (STIP) for future funding allocations.
- Facilitating distribution of discretionary federal funds that may be directly allocated to transportation projects, including the planning, design, and construction of greenway projects.




**Rough Ridge Trail, Linville, North Carolina**

## Trails Legislation

Financial support from the NC General Assembly expands the ability of trail partners to advance trail construction and access. Legislation establishing the framework for trails began in 1973, with the NC Trails System Act, and has continued to evolve through more recent legislation which created the Complete the Trails Program and declared 2023 the "Year of the Trail."[12]

| State Trails & Policies | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Legislation** | **Year** | **Impact for Trails** |
| House Bill 436: NC Trails System Act[13] | 1973<br>2019 (modified) | Established a framework for creating and managing a system of scenic and recreational trails across North Carolina. The key focus of the Act included: Trail Categories, Trail Designation and Management, Trail Planning and Oversight, Public Participation and Environmental Protection, Coordination with National Trails System. |
| Session Law 1987-243 \| Senate Bill 425: State Parks Act[14] | 1987 | Established a structured framework for the preservation, development, and management of the North Carolina State Parks System. |
| Session 2013 \| Session Law 2013-183 House Bill 817 \| Strategic Prioritization Funding Plan for Transportation Investments (STI)[15] | 2013 | Prohibited the use of state transportation dollars on independent bicycle and pedestrian projects including greenway trails. |
| Session Law 2023-134 \| House Bill 259[16] | 2023 | A one-time allocation of $25 million for competitive grants through the Great Trails State Program and a $5 million allocation for the Complete the Trails Program. |

12 "General Assembly of North Carolina Session 2021 Session Law 2021-109 House Bill 554." North Carolina General Assemblyn.d. https://ncleg.gov/EnactedLegislation/SessionLaws/PDF/2021-2022/SL2021-109.pdf.

13 "General Assembly of North Carolina 1987 Session Chapter 243 Senate Bill 425." North Carolina General Assemblyn.d. https://www.ncleg.gov/EnactedLegislation/SessionLaws/PDF/1987-1988/SL1987-243.pdf.

14 North Carolina General Assembly, Session Law 1987-243, https://www.ncleg.gov/EnactedLegislation/SessionLaws/PDF/1987-1988/SL1987-243.pdf.

15 "General Assembly Of North Carolina  Session 2013 Session Law 2013-183 House Bill 817." North Carolina General Assemblyn.d. https://www.ncleg.gov/enactedlegislation/sessionlaws/html/2013-2014/sl2013-183.html.

16 "General Assembly of North Carolina Session 2023 Session Law 2023-134 House Bill 259." North Carolina General Assemblyn.d. https://www.

| Expired Legislation / Authorizations | | |
|---|---|---|
| Senate Bill 105-2021 \| Appropriations Act 2021[17] | 2021 | Creation of the Complete the Trails Program to support the planning, construction, promotion, and maintenance of State Trails with $29.15 million in funding. Allocated $2 million to IMD for DOT's Paved Trails Feasibility Studies Program. |
| Session Law 2021-109 \| House Bill 554[18] | 2021 | Legislative Declaration of 2023 as Year of the Trail. |
| Senate Bill 355: North Carolina Farm Act of 2024[19] | 2024 | Designated October 21, 2023, as Great Trails State Day. |

**Table 7.8.1: State Trails & Policies**

ncleg.gov/Sessions/2023/Bills/House/PDF/H259v7.pdf.

17 "General Assembly of North Carolina Session 2021 Session Law 2021-180 Senate Bill 105." North Carolina General Assemblyn.d. https://www.ncleg.gov/Sessions/2021/Bills/Senate/PDF/S105v8.pdf.

18 "General Assembly of North Carolina Session 2021 Session Law 2021-109 House Bill 554." North Carolina General Assemblyn.d. https://ncleg.gov/EnactedLegislation/SessionLaws/PDF/2021-2022/SL2021-109.pdf.

19 "Senate Bill 355: North Carolina Farm Act of 2024." North Carolina General Assembly, 2024. June 20. https://dashboard.ncleg.gov/api/Services/BillSummary/2023/S355-SMTQ-93(e3)-v-1.

# Comprehensive Planning Efforts

Trail networks result when state, regional, and local agencies collaborate on planning efforts. Our state is fortunate to have a variety of statewide and regional trail planning efforts with expanding networks that ultimately create meaningful trail connections between communities and major recreation destinations. The following section highlights a selection of recent planning efforts.

## Great Trails State Plan

Led by IMD and completed in 2022, the Great Trails State Plan[20] is a guiding plan to, "connect communities to the great outdoors while creating opportunities for active transportation, conservation, recreation, health, tourism and economic prosperity." The plan contains a Great Trails State Network Map that depicts the network of potential trails that, when completed, would connect all 100 counties and enhance accessibility to state parks and population centers.

This plan is a significant milestone for DOT and IMD as it provides the department with a clear direction for contributing to the planning, feasibility, design, and construction funding support for greenways, trails, and shared use path corridors.

## State Trails Planning

Since the NC General Assembly authorized the first State Trail in 1978 – the French Broad River State Trail – they have authorized 13 additional State Trails. More recently, the legislation that authorized the Complete the Trails Program also established a requirement that each State Trail partner organization complete a five-year plan for compliance with the Complete the Trails Program legislation. In addition, many State Trails have more detailed master plans that provide additional alignment analysis to advance implementation. The 14 State Trails and their authorization years are listed below. Additional details about each State Trail are provided in the Trails Inventory section of this chapter.

20 "The Great Trails State Plan." North Carolina Department of Transportation, 2022. July 18. https://www.ncdot.gov/divisions/integrated-mobility/multimodal-planning/great-trails-state/Documents/great-trails-plan.pdf.




**Figure 7.8.2: State Trails Logos**

## Regional Trail Organization (RTO) Plans & Initiatives

Regional trail initiatives have played a significant role in supporting the development of connected trail networks in and around many of the state's urbanized areas. In general, the RTOs provide a forum for collaboration, additional expertise, and greater funding capacity that benefits local government agencies and public advocates in their efforts to build trails in their communities. The guiding plans are foundational to local trail development, and in many cases, to State Trail development. The following organizations and initiatives are models that can be adapted to other regions in the state.

### Carolina Thread Trail Plans

The Catawba Lands Conservancy established the Carolina Thread Trail (CTT) in 2007.[21] Unlike many areas, the CTT region surrounding Charlotte does not have one single plan to guide network development. Instead, each of the 15 counties within Charlotte Metropolitan Region (CMR) has an adopted CTT Master Plan that reflects individual county trail needs and outlines how each plan connects to its neighboring county to form one 1,600-mile CTT network. The counties within CMR include 11 NC counties and four South Carolina counties, all of which share a common textile manufacturing history.

To date, the CTT Master Plans have directed construction of over 425 miles of trail and 170 miles of blueways open to the public along the CTT network. For many of these counties, their CTT Master Plan encompasses their entire greenway network, and for other counties, like Mecklenburg where Charlotte is located, the CTT Master Plan uses the most significant corridors from a previously established greenway system plan. A noted success factor of the CTT strategy is that local ownership is instilled when each Board of County Commissioners adopts their county-level CTT Master Plan, allowing the document and associated trail network to be fully incorporated into county and municipal policies regulating land use, transportation, and recreation. CTT also has an annual grant program that provides funding to local governments and nonprofits for trail planning, design, construction, and land acquisition projects.

21 White, Jon . "History of the Carolina Thread Trail: Starting the Project." Catawba Land Conservancy | Carolina Thread Trail, 2020. June 1. https://www.carolinathreadtrail.org/history-of-the-carolina-thread-trail-starting-the-project/.

### Piedmont Legacy Trails

Piedmont Legacy Trails (PLT) is the regional trail initiative serving the Piedmont Triad region. PLT's primary goal is to highlight the area's natural places, connect trail efforts, and give voice to regional trail interests for the benefit of its communities.[22] The Piedmont Land Conservancy (PLC), the Piedmont Triad Regional Council (PTRC), and representatives from surrounding counties collaborated to establish Piedmont Legacy Trails to brand the Piedmont Triad as a trails destination. The PLT serves a 12-county region that provides regional stakeholder coordination support via the Piedmont Legacy Trails Steering Committee. Of the 14 State Trails, six pass through the PLT region:

- Mountains-to-Sea
- Overmountain Victory
- Dan River
- Deep River
- Yadkin River
- Haw River

### Triangle Trails Initiative

The Triangle Trails Initiative (also known as Triangle Trails) is a collaboration between government, business, anchor institutions, and civic leaders to make the Research Triangle region a national leader in greenways and trails. Triangle Trails' goal is to plan, build, and promote the extensive network of greenways and trails in the 14-county region.[23] Triangle Trails is housed under the nonprofit umbrella of the East Coast Greenway Alliance and has five authorized state trails passing through the region:

- Mountains-to-Sea Trail
- East Coast Greenway
- Equine State Trail
- Deep River State Trail
- Haw River State Trail

22 "Piedmont Legacy Trails"n.d. https://www.piedmonttrails.org/piedmont-legacy-trails/.

23 "Triangle Trails Initiative"n.d. https://www.triangletrailsnc.com/about.

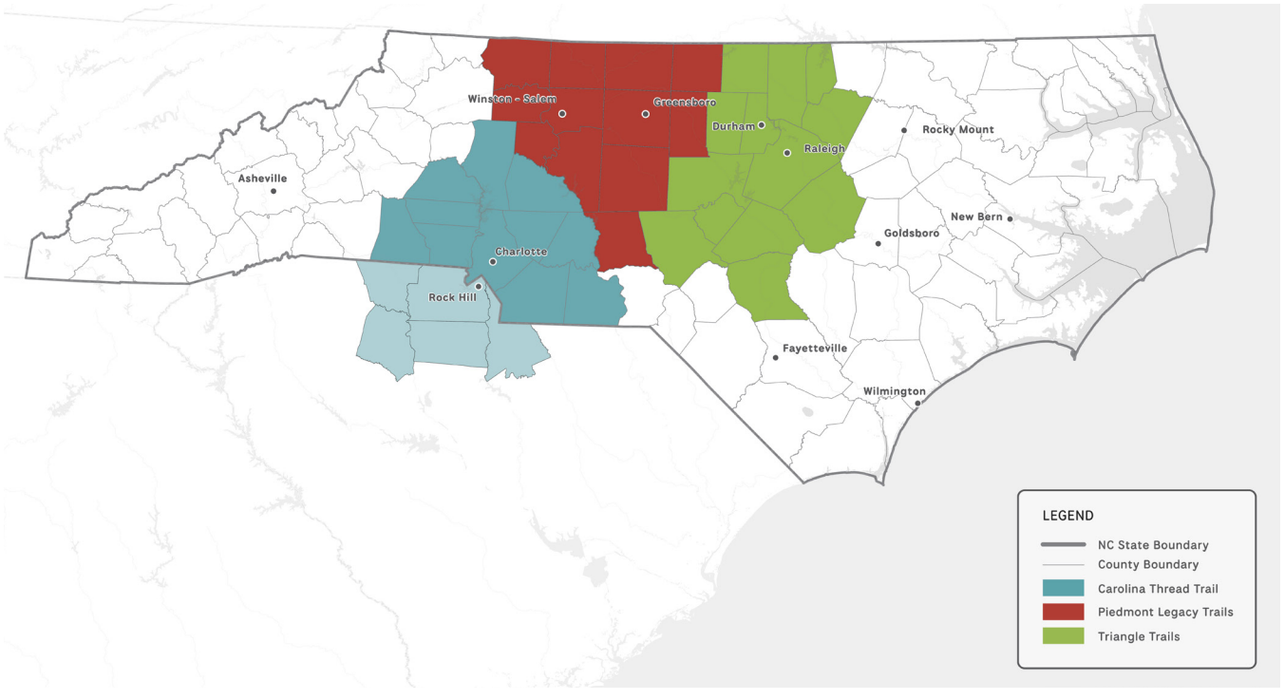



**Figure 7.8.3: Counties Covered by One of the Three Regional Trail Organizations**

## Hellbender Trails Plan

Led by the French Broad River MPO and Land of Sky Rural Planning Organization (RPO), the Hellbender Regional Trails Plan in WNC spans 161 trail miles across Buncombe, Henderson, Haywood, Madison, and Transylvania counties.[24] The region's name is an ode to the Eastern Hellbender, one of only three giant salamanders found in the world. Our state is home to more than 65 species of salamanders, with over 50 species in the mountain region along the streams and rivers that run through the trails plan.[25]

The Hellbender Regional Trail plan details how the region can connect existing and planned trail infrastructure to provide active transportation options to all ages and abilities, and meaningfully connect communities and destinations. While early in its development compared to other regions, the Hellbender network is quickly building momentum, particularly as the 19-mile Ecusta Trail nears completion. The success of the Ecusta Trail serves as a model for future Hellbender projects and other regional trail networks, demonstrating the power of collaborative planning, funding, and community engagement.




**North Carolina Hellbender**

24 "The Hellbender Trail: A Regional Trail for Western North Carolina." The Hellbender Trail, 2021. May 30. https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/2516fc1870db47cb8e3c7aa36dbed751.

25 "Eastern Hellbender." North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commissionn.d. https://www.ncwildlife.gov/species/eastern-hellbender.

The Ecusta Trail became a reality through the coordinated efforts of Conserving Carolina[26] that purchased the land, while Henderson County and the City of Brevard led the design and construction process in partnership with DOT. The Friends of the Ecusta Trail played a critical role in promotion and fundraising, and broad community support, including financial contributions from the local Tourism Development Authorities and area businesses, helped bring the vision to life.[27] Together, these partners created a framework that can advance trail development across the Hellbender region.

## G5 Trail Collective Regional Trails Plans

The G5 Trail Collective, a program of the Camp Grier summer camp, is a partnership between the U.S. Forest Service, local communities, and recreational trail user groups. G5 stands for the Grandfather District of the Pisgah National Forest and the five counties it covers - McDowell, Burke, Caldwell, Avery, and Watauga.[28] G5 has concentrated its trail work in two Grandfather District areas – Old Fort and Mortimer.

Old Fort is a small town that was once a thriving textile manufacturing hub. Since the decline of the manufacturing industry, the town has struggled to find its economic footing. Old Fort is within an outdoor hotspot; it sits at the base of the Blue Ridge Escarpment, is near to Mount Mitchell, the tallest peak east of the Mississippi River, and is surrounded by the Pisgah National Forest's Grandfather District. While these assets are at the town's back door, access to these resources and the Pisgah Forest single track trail network had not been possible from the town. Furthermore, Old Fort's existing trails had a high physical and technical barrier of entry, meaning trails were not accessible to most people. The Old Fort Trails plan developed a 42-mile network of new trails to complement the 30 miles of existing trail in the area, complete with new trail connections within walking and biking distance of Downtown Old Fort.[29] Highlights of the new trails include access to the accessible Gateway Trail area with six miles of beginner trail and the Copper Ridge Trail that is designated as a segment of the Fonta Flora State Trail. Furthermore, G5's trail development efforts bolstered the town's economic development efforts.

In Pisgah's Grandfather Ranger District, the Mortimer Trails Project will add 10 additional miles of mountain biking and hiking trails to the Wilson Creek area in Caldwell and Avery counties.[30] The Mortimer Trails Project identified trail relocations and new trail construction projects which aim to improve experiences and support more trail use. In 2021 and 2022, multiple projects were completed including:

- 1.2 miles of new backcountry single track for the realigned exit of the Yancy Ridge Trail.
- 1.5 miles of restoration and re-routes of the Schoolhouse Ridge Trail, maintaining its backcountry character.
- Trail armoring and sustainability projects on the Sinkhole Trail.

26 "Rail Line Purchased for Ecusta Trail! Campaign Launched to Fund Trail Construction." Conserving Carolina, 2021. August 16. https://conservingcarolina.org/rail-line-purchased-for-ecusta-trail/.

27 "Friends of the Ecusta Trail"n.d. https://www.ecustatrail.org/about-us/.

28 "G5 Trail Collective." Camp Griern.d. https://www.g5trailcollective.org/about.

29 "Camp Grier Receives $2.5 Million to Support Completion of the Old Fort Trail Project ." G5 Trail Collective | Camp Grier, 2023. September 26. https://www.campgrier.org/so/feOhHVw4N?languageTag=en.

30 "The Mortimer Trail Project." G5 Trail Collective | Camp Griern.d. https://www.g5trailcollective.org/mortimer.

# Key Takeaways

**DOT and the Division are collaborating to advance trails more than ever.**

- The adoption of the Great Trails State Plan formalized DOT's direction for contributing toward statewide greenway trail connectivity and development, and the Division played a key role in developing the plan's recommended network.

**State legislation appropriating trails specific funding is primarily non-recurring.**

- Major funding support for advancing trails has come from the NC General Assembly in the past five years, however the only new program with funding that has been re-authorized is the Complete the Trails Program. All other programs have been one-time appropriations which is a barrier to sustaining trail development momentum.

**State Trail authorizations are on the rise.**

- The NC General Assembly has authorized five new State Trails since 2020, bringing the system to 14 State Trails (from nine in 2020), which speaks to the opportunities that exist to add trail segments to State Trails corridors.

**Regional trail organizations provide essential resources to further trail development efforts.**

- Approximately one-third of NC's 100 counties fall under a regional trail organization's umbrella. There is room to support the creation of more regional trail organizations to provide support to all one hundred counties in North Carolina.

**The Great Trails State Coalition was a driver for increased trail funding from the NC General Assembly as well as statewide knowledge sharing.**

- Much of the new state trail funding was made possible by the leadership of the Great Trails State Coalition and its partners, with the inaugural Great Trails State Conference serving as a key forum for connecting trail implementers.

**Coordinated trail planning in National Forests enhances funding opportunities.**

- The Old Fort Trails plan represents a major step forward for planning and executing large-scale trail additions to NC's National Forests. This plan provided the foundation for $2.5 million of state funding for new trail development.




**Mountains-to-Sea Trail**

# Inventory & Analysis

## Introduction

NC trail inventory offers a broad selection from backcountry hiking trails, paved ADA accessible greenways, and paddle trails along serene waterways. As our state has evolved, so have the relationships between trail networks managed by state, local, and federal agencies. While not an exhaustive inventory of every trail in North Carolina, the following section provides an inventory of  State Trails, trails located in state parks, and trails identified in the Great Trails State Plan.

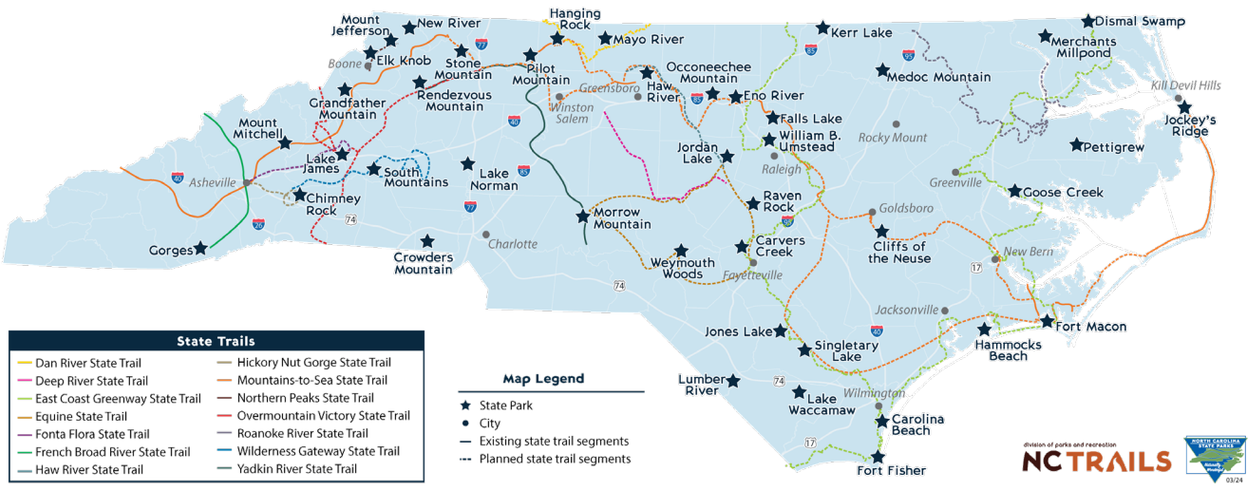



**Figure 7.8.4: Map of the State Trails System***
**Source: NC Trails**
*Following authorization in June 2025, the South Fork Passage State Trail is now part of the State Trails inventory. The team developed maps and figures in this document prior to its authorization, so it is not included here.




**Roanoke River State Trail, Washington County, North Carolina**

Each of the 14 State Trails is a unit of the North Carolina State Parks system. However, unless a segment is directly located within a state park, the trails are not owned, managed, or maintained by the Division. As trail partners construct land-based or paddle trail segments, the Secretary of DNCR must designate each segment through a process that includes a land manager application, evaluation by Division staff, a site visit, and a formal recommendation by the NCTC.[31] A selection of recent State Trails designation highlights include:

- **2021-2022**[32]
  - » 125 miles of trail designated to the State Trail network.
- **2022-2023**[33]
  - » 252 miles of land and paddle trail designated, including first time designations for the Overmountain Victory and Hickory Nut Gorge State Trails.
  - » 35 new public access points designated along paddle trail segments of the State Trails.
  - » Inaugural funding cycle for the Division's paddle access designation process.
- **2023-2024**
  - » 101 miles of land and paddle trail designated.
  - » 50 new public access points designated for paddle trail segments of the State Trails.

31 "North Carolina Trails Committee." Division of Parks and Recreationn.d. https://trails.nc.gov/nc-trails-program/north-carolina-trails-committee.
32 "North Carolina Trails Program Annual Report 2021 to 2022." North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation, 2022. November 15. https://issuu.com/ncdpr/docs/north-carolina-trails-program-annual-report-2021-2.
33 "North Carolina Trails Program Annual Report 2023." North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreationn.d. https://issuu.com/ncdpr/docs/updated_trails_annualreport_2023.

## Definitions of Trail Types

### Land Based Trail

A trail that allows hiking with some sections also allowing bicycling.

### Paddle Trail

A designated route on a navigable waterway, like a river or stream, similar to a hiking trail with developed access points for activities like kayaking and canoeing.

### Bridle Trails

A land-based trail that allows for equestrian access. These trails are often shared with hikers and in some instances bicyclist as well.




**Sandy Pines Bridle Trail**

| State Trail Designation Progress as of August 1, 2024 | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Trail** | **Date of Authorization** | **Trail Type** | **Planned Mileage** | **Designated Mileage (as of 8/1/24)** | **Percent Complete** | **CTP Trail Development Funds Allocated** |
| Dan River State Trail (DNST) | 2021 | Paddle trail | 90 miles | 59.4 miles | 66% | $665,000 |
| Deep River State Trail (DRST) | 2007 | Land-based<br>Paddle trail | 125 miles land, 125 miles paddle | 4.3 miles land, 12.2 miles paddle | Land: 3%<br>Paddle: 10% | $860,828 |
| East Coast Greenway State Trail (EGST) | 2021 | Land-based trail | 795 miles | 102.1 miles | 13% | $4,971,282 |
| Equine State Trail (EQST) | 2023 | Bridle trail | 350 miles | 0 miles | 0% | Not yet calculated |
| Fonta Flora State Trail (FFST) | 2015 | Land-based trail | 100 miles | 34.3 miles | 34% | $502,150 |
| French Broad River State Trail (FBST) | 1978 | Paddle trail | 117 miles | 0 miles | 0% | $210,375 |
| Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail (HGST) | 2017 | Land-based trail | 50 miles | 28.1 miles | 56% | $358,678 |
| Haw River State Trail (HRST) | 2023 | Land-based<br>Paddle trail | 80 miles land<br>80 miles paddle | 0 miles | 0% | Not yet calculated |
| Mountains-to-Sea Trail (MST) | 2017 | Land-based | 1400 miles | 684.48 miles | 49% | $5,086,059 |
| Northern Peaks State Trail (NPST) | 2019 | Land-based trail | 40 miles | 0 miles | 0% | $286,943 |
| Overmountain Victory State Trail (OVST) | 2019 | Land-based trail | 225 miles | 1 mile | 0% | $1,614,053 |
| Roanoke River State Trail (RRST) | 2021 | Paddle trail | 215 miles | 215 miles | 100% | $507,375 |
| Wilderness Gateway State Trail (WGST) | 2019 | Land-based trail Paddle trail | 170 miles | 2.0 miles | 1% | $1,219,506 |
| Yadkin River State Trail (YRST) | 1985 | Paddle trail | 162 miles | 139.1 miles | 86% | $210,375 |

**Table 7.8.2: State Trail Designation Progress as of August 1, 2024***

*This table does not include the South Fork Passage State Trail, which was authorized in June 2025.

## State Park Trails

Trails within state parks, state natural areas, and state recreation areas provide residents and visitors with access to NC's distinct landscapes. These trails are developed, managed, and maintained by the Division, in some cases with the support of nonprofit organizations. The total trail mileage available within these areas is 683 miles across NC's three regions, including:

- Areas within the Mountain region – 194 miles
- Areas within the Piedmont region – 294 miles
- Areas within the Coastal region – 195 miles

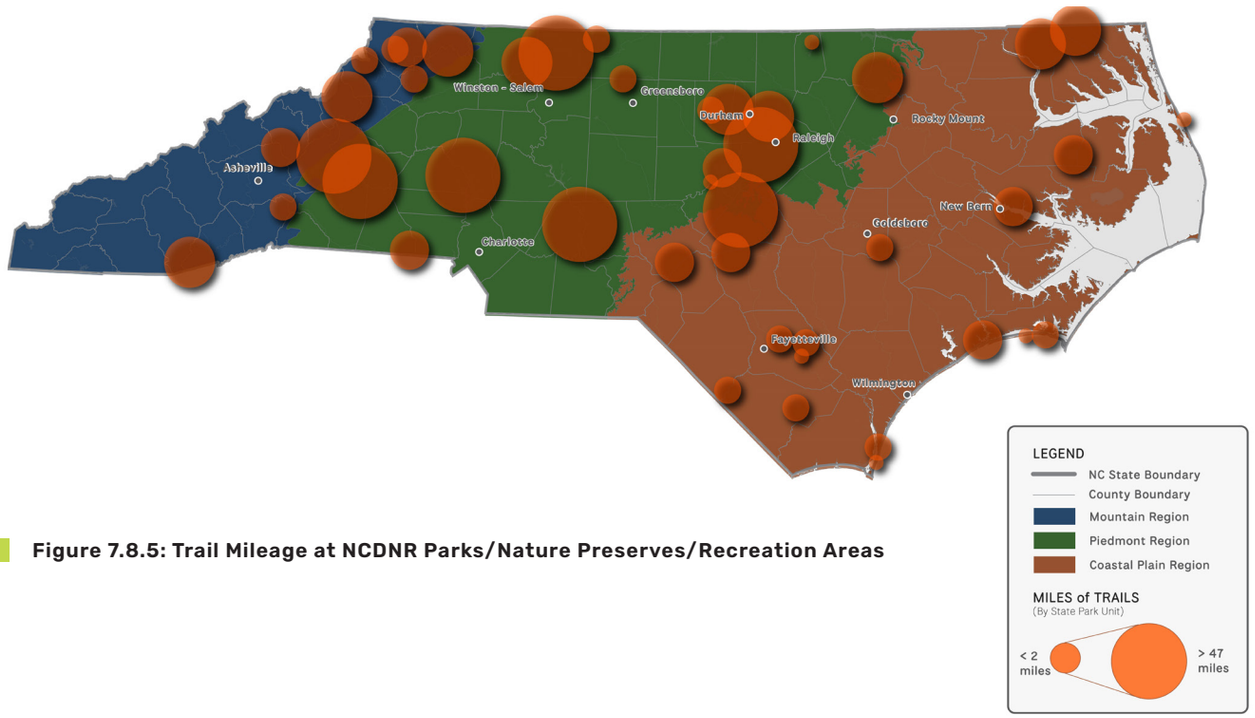



**Figure 7.8.5: Trail Mileage at NCDNR Parks/Nature Preserves/Recreation Areas**




# DID YOU KNOW?

Morus rubra, commonly known as the Red Mulberry, is the only mulberry species native to North Carolina. Native Americans used the plant medicinally as a worming agent, remedy for dysentery, laxative, and emetic.[1] The berry has a delicious, sweet-tart taste that both humans and creatures enjoy! Various birds like gray catbirds and northern mockingbirds are known to eat Red Mulberries. Even some mammals like foxes, opossums, and raccoons enjoy these small treats. Keep an eye out for Red Mulberries on your next adventure outside!

1 "Morus rubra (Red Mulberry)," NC State Extension, https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/morus-rubra/#:~:text=Morus%20rubra%2C%20or%20Red%20Mulberry,is%20found%20in%20all%20regions.

Some trails located throughout the State Parks system are designed to serve for single use, such as those for hikers or paddlers. There are other trails for a mix of users that allow hiking, biking, or equestrian activities. Taken as a whole, 56% of trails within the State Parks system are designated solely for hiking. Trails designed for hikers and bikers are the second most prevalent at 22% of all trails.

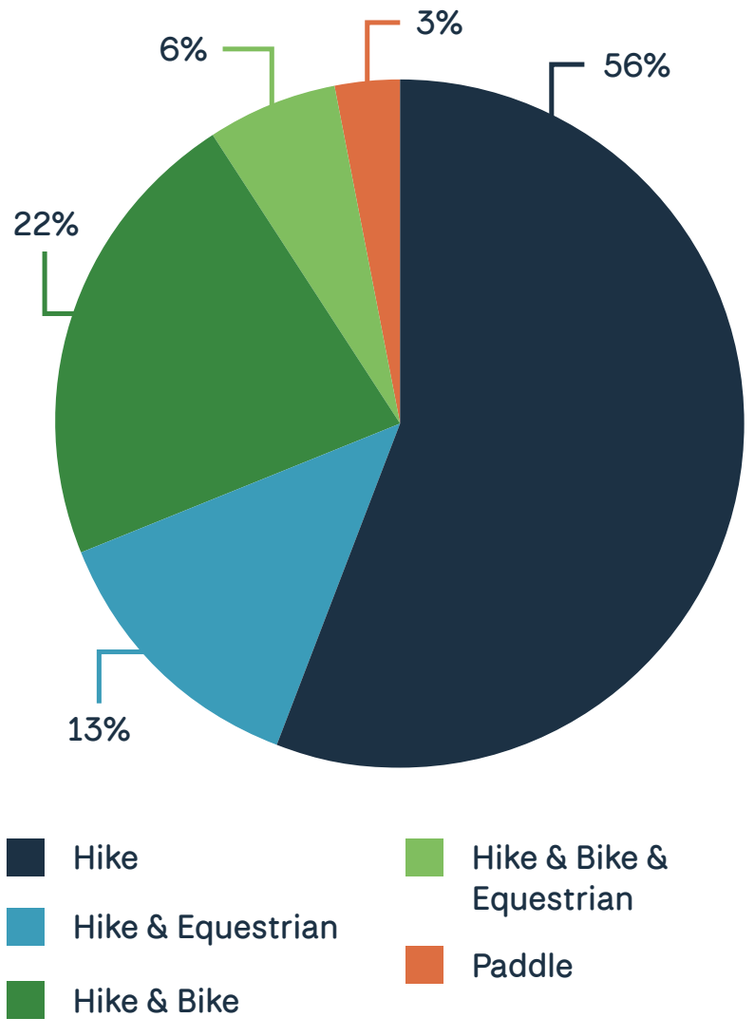



**Figure 7.8.6: State Park Trail Percentage by Use Type**

**"I love walking/hiking, very relaxing, peaceful, beautiful, great exercise, learning about new flora & fauna (iNaturalist and Merlin), Nature Centers & stores at larger parks."**

## Great Trails State Plan Network

A key result of the Great Trails State Plan is the proposed Great Trails State (GTS) Network map. The map depicts a 6,547-mile trail network of greenway, shared use, and trail corridors that connect all 100 counties. The GTS Network contains existing, proposed, alternate and gap segments, and some segments that overlap with State Trails. The plan makes a further distinction between the entire GTS network and the spine network – the spine being those segments that have the greatest potential for making regional connections. At the time of GTS Plan adoption in 2022, 580 miles of the entire network were complete, with 385 of the completed miles being spine segments. As the GTS Network evolves over time, exact alignments and mileage totals are subject to change based on local planning and regional coordination efforts.

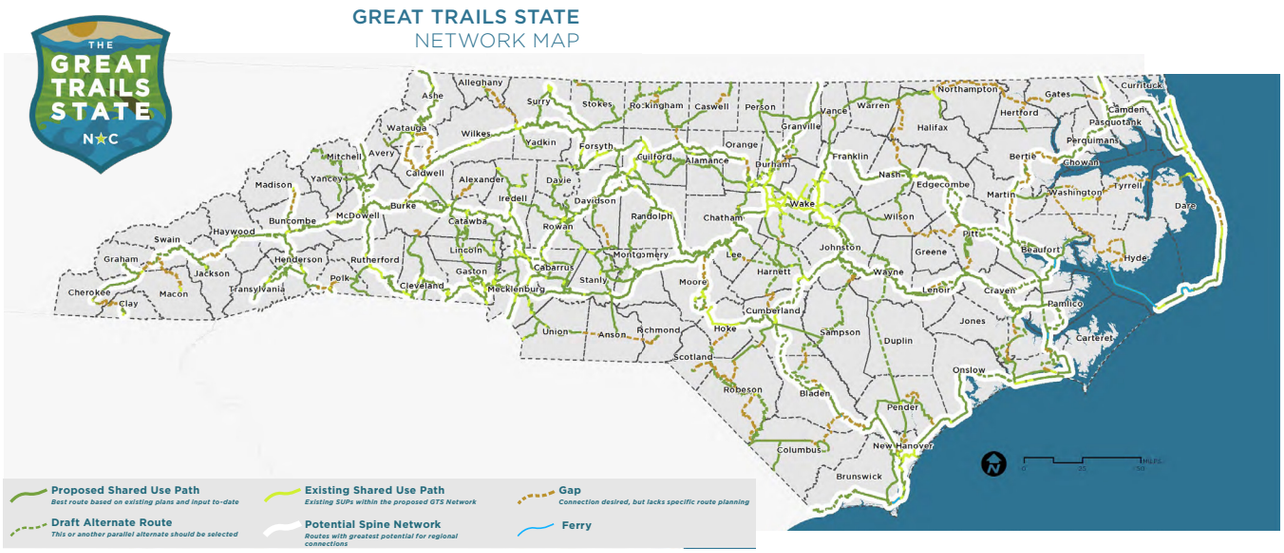



**Figure 7.8.7: The Great Trails State Plan Network with Spine Corridors Highlighted**
**Source: Great Trails State Plan**




**Rail Trail, Charlotte, North Carolina**

## Opportunities for Trail Connectivity

As evident by the findings within **Chapter 6 Community Engagement**, trail related activities like walking, hiking, and biking have the highest participation rate, as well as being the activities the public prefers. The work of partner agencies and the Division has garnered public support for trails, and the growth of the GTS Network is further evidence that support for trails has and continues to gain momentum. Even with the addition of new corridors, there are still major destinations within the State Parks system that are not connected to a State Trail corridor, or are a part of an actively developing regional trail corridor.

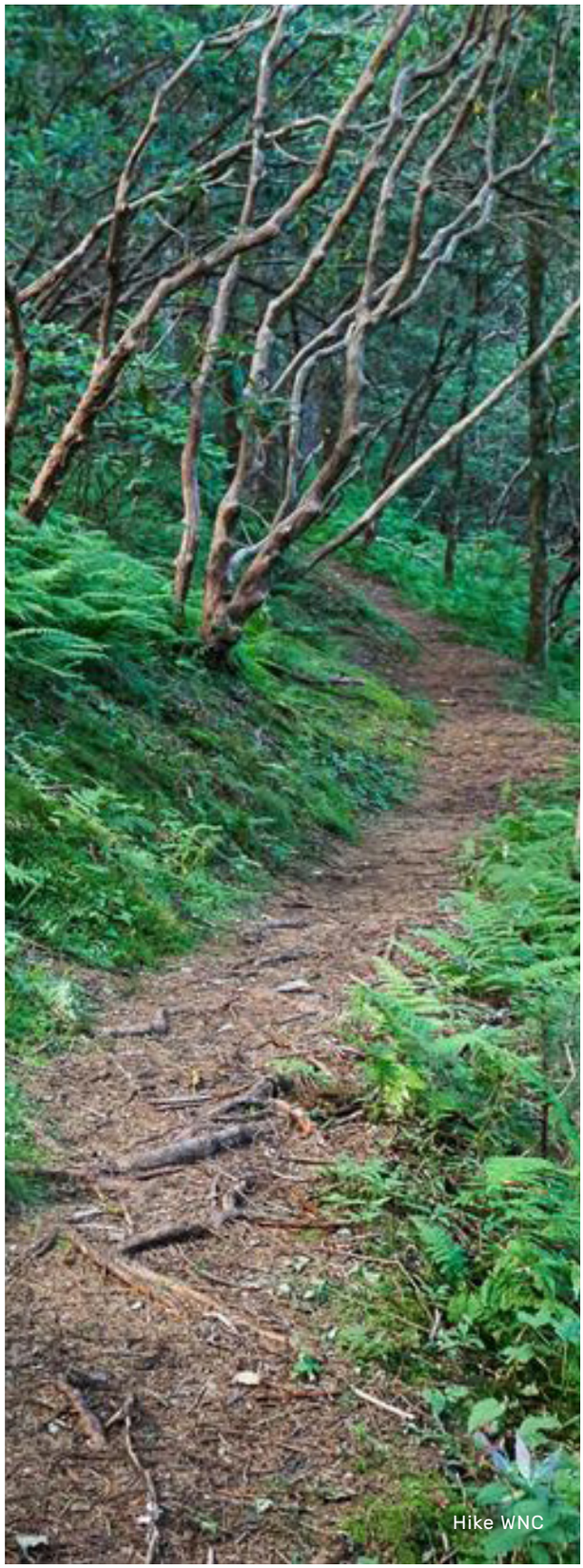
The following opportunities for enhancing statewide trail connectivity highlight trail corridors with the potential to:

- Integrate trail connectivity with signature Division assets.
- Connect local parks into statewide and regional trail corridors.
- Allow communities to realize the economic benefits of greater trail access.
- Leverage partnership opportunities to implement the GTS Network as well as advance the Great Trails State Plan and other regional trail plans.

The five trail connection opportunities detailed below are intended as examples to inspire the development of new trail projects, leveraging the power of partnerships between partners committed to advancing connectivity.




**Neuse River Greenway Trail**




**Twisted Rhododendron**

## Lake Norman State Park & the Carolina Thread Trail

This corridor leverages regional and statewide trail planning and provides an opportunity to connect neighboring communities to Lake Norman State Park (LANO), the 13th most visited state park in the system (614,156 visitors in 2023 ). LANO features over 30 miles of natural surface hiking and mountain biking trails, high quality camping facilities, a park lake, and a swim beach. These amenities make LANO a great trail head to start and end a trail trip, or a destination during a journey that began elsewhere.

- Corridor Length: ~40 miles
- Potential Trail types: Greenway, Shared Use Path, Natural Surface Trail
- This corridor is identified within the following planning documents:
  - Great Trails State Plan
  - Carolina Thread Trail Master Plan
  - Seam Trail Master Plan,[34] a regional trail corridor planning effort led by the Charlotte Regional Transportation Planning Organization
  - Western Piedmont Regional Trails Plan[35]
- Parks and Trail Connectivity
  - Lake Norman State Park
  - Murray's Mill Historic Site (Catawba County)
  - Mountain Creek Park (Catawba County)
  - Richardson Greenway (Town of Troutman)
  - Wilderness Gateway State Trail (once it is constructed in Catawba County)
- Community Connection Opportunities
  - Statesville, Troutman, Catawba, and Sherrills Ford

34 "The Seam Trail"n.d. https://seamtrailnc.com/.

35 "Western Piedmont Regional Trails Plan and Inventory." North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation n.d. https://issuu.com/ncdpr/docs/western-piedmont-regional-trail-plan.




**Lake Norman State Park**




**Carolina Thread Trail**

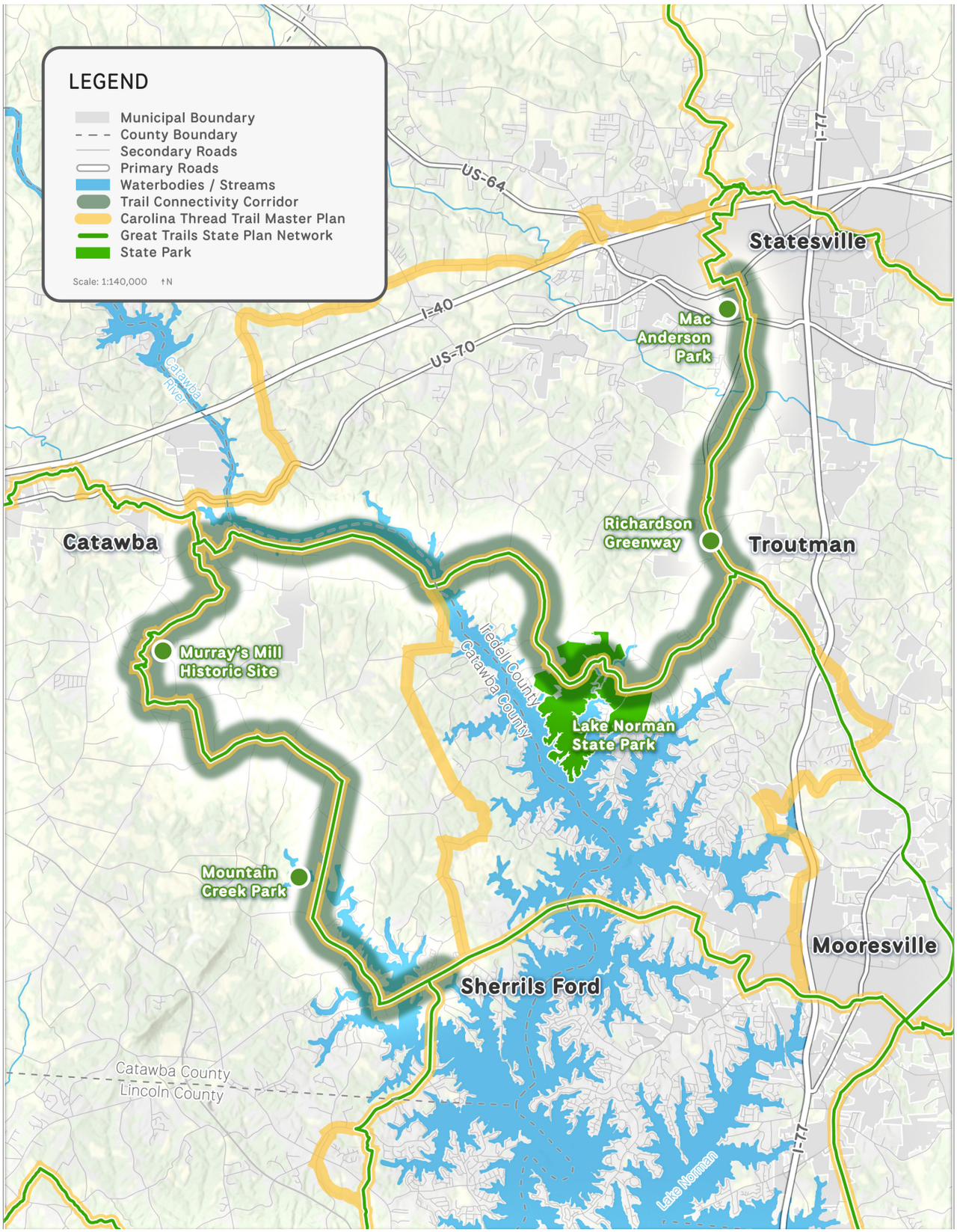



**Figure 7.8.8: Lake Norman Trail Map**

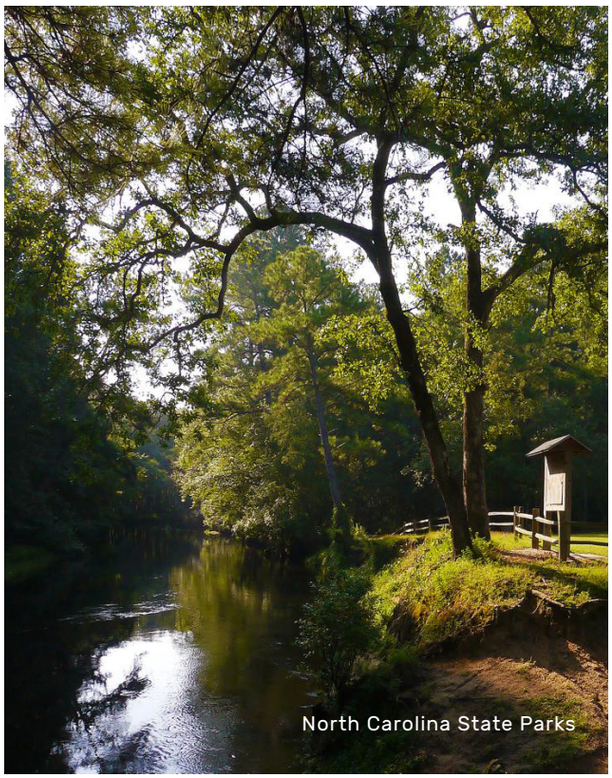
## Lumber River State Park & Lake Waccamaw State Park

Lumber River and Lake Waccamaw State Parks saw 137,000 and 186,000 visitors respectively in 2023. This trail corridor would connect both state parks and the nearby rural communities, many of which are still in economic recovery from the damage sustained in Hurricanes Matthew (2016) and Hurricane Florence (2018). The western half of this corridor parallels the active R.J. Corman Carolina Southern rail line that has exceptionally low train volumes. The eastern half parallels a decommissioned section of the same line with the potential for a rail to trail or rail with trail conversion.

- Corridor Length: Approximately 30 miles
- Potential Trail Types: Greenway, Shared Use Path, Natural Surface Trail
- This corridor is identified within the following planning documents:
  - » Great Trails State Plan
  - » Southeastern North Carolina Council of Governments (COG) Regional Trails Plan[36]
  - » Lumber River Regional Trails Plan[37]
- Parks and Trail Connectivity
  - » Lumber River State Park (LURI)
  - » Fair Bluff River Walk (Fair Bluff)
  - » Whiteville Recreation Center (Whiteville)
- Community Connection Opportunities
  - » Fair Bluff, Chadbourn, and Whiteville

36 "Southeastern North Carolina - Councils of Government Regional Trails Plan Technical Report." North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation n.d. https://cms3.revize.com/revize/waccamawgsats/Documents/Plans%20And%20Studies/Title%20VI/TIP/southeastern-north-carolina-councils-government-regional-trails-technical-report.pdf.

37 "Lumber River Region: Regional Trails Map and Plan." North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreationn.d. https://issuu.com/ncdpr/docs/lumber-river-regional-trails-plan.




**Lumber River State Park**




**Lake Waccamaw State Park**

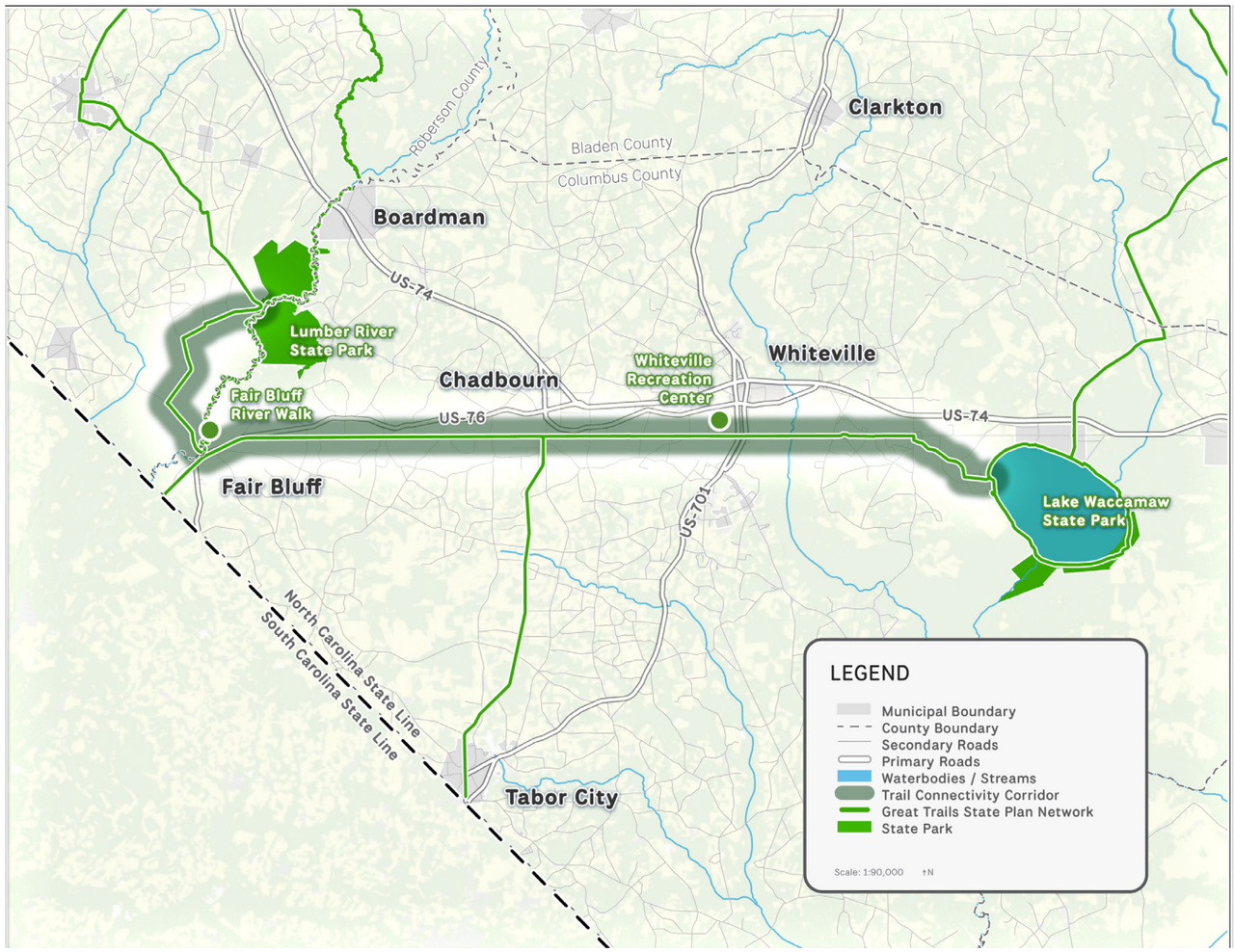



**Figure 7.8.9: Lumber River Trail Map**

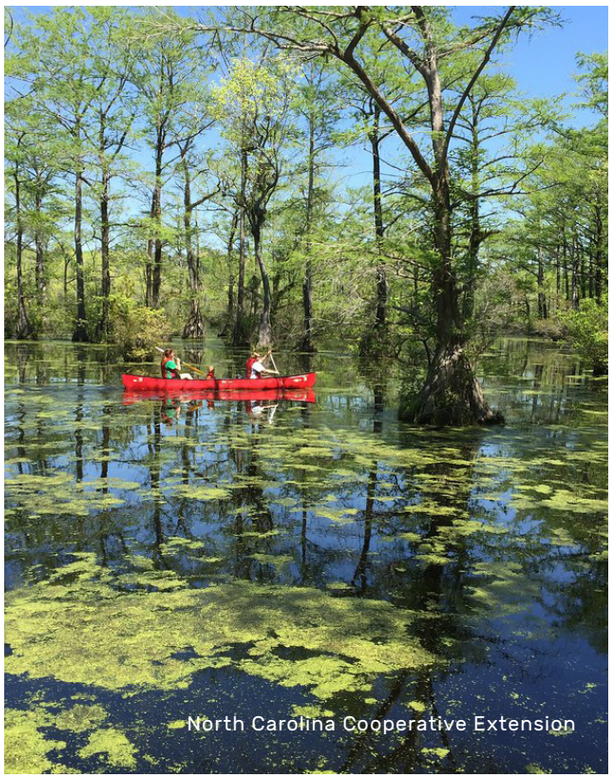
## Merchants Millpond State Park & Dismal Swamp State Park

Merchants Millpond and Dismal Swamp State Parks each have over 20 miles of trail and are near destination anchors along an identified Great Trails State Plan (GTSP) corridor. According to DOT's traffic volume database, US 158 from Gatesville to South Mills carries less than 4,000 vehicles per day.[38] Roadways with low volumes, when combined with appropriate roadway treatments such as a shared use path, can be a comfortable corridor for bicycle and pedestrian connectivity. The low traffic volumes on US 158 are also an opportunity for implementing wayfinding signage and pavement markings to establish the trail connection to the East Coast Greenway ahead of a shared use path construction. The communities of Gatesville and South Mills could benefit from the proven economic impact of increased access to trails and parks,[39] particularly with the opportunity for a direct connection to the East Coast Greenway State Trail.

- Corridor Length: Approximately 32 miles
- Potential Trail Types: Greenway, Shared Use Path, Natural Surface Trail
- This corridor is identified within the following planning documents:
  - » Great Trails State Plan
  - » East Coast Greenway State Trail Plan
- Park and Trail Connectivity
  - » Merchants Millpond State Park
  - » Dismal Swamp State Park
- Community Connection Opportunities
  - » Gatesville, Eason Cross Roads, Sunbury, and South Mills

38 "Traffic Volume Maps." North Carolina Department of Transportation , 2024. September 30. https://connect.ncdot.gov/resources/State-Mapping/pages/traffic-volume-maps.aspx.

39 "Benefits of Trails." Great Trails State Coalitionn.d. https://greattrailsstatecoalition.org/benefits-of-trails/.




**Merchants Millpond State Park**




**Dismal Swamp State Park**

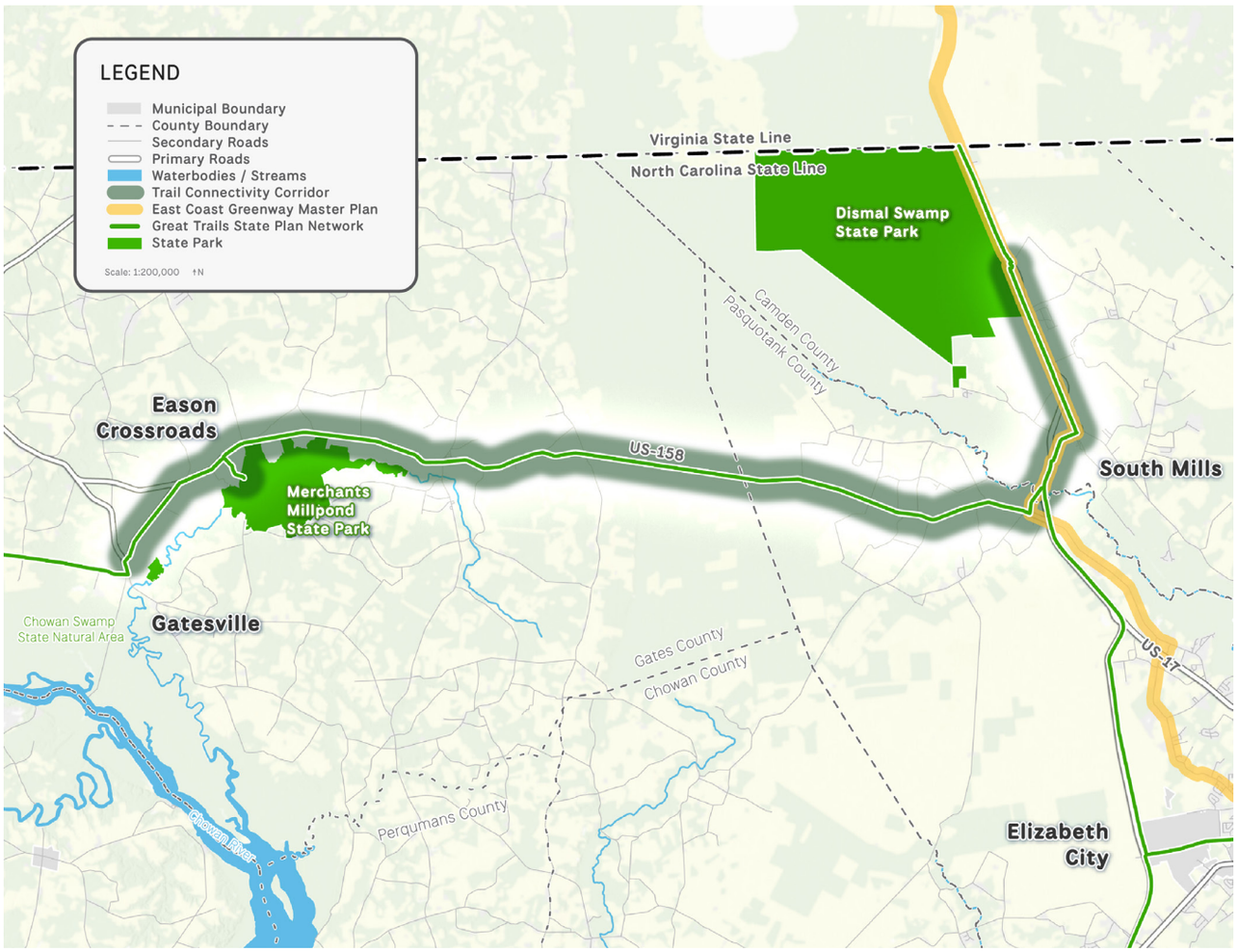


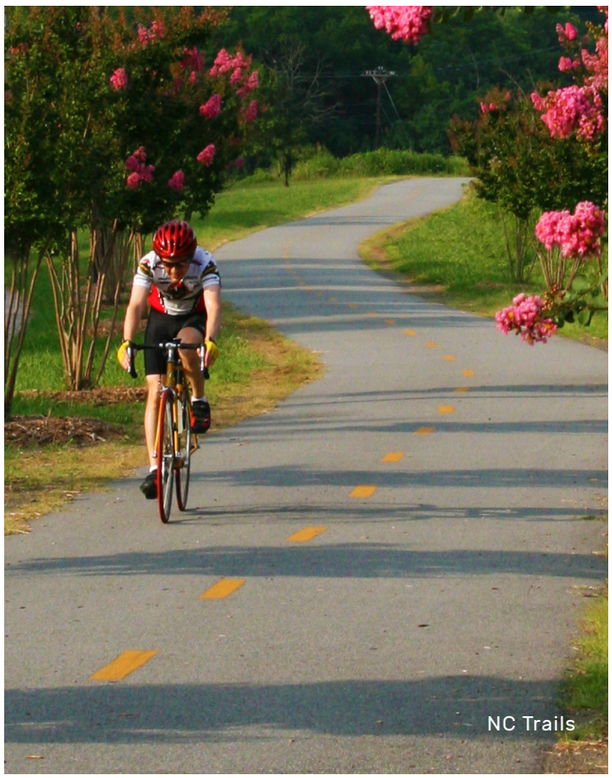

**Figure 7.8.10: Merchants Millpond Trail Map**

## East Coast Greenway State Trail & Kerr Lake Recreation Area

This opportunity leverages the proximity of the rapidly developing East Coast Greenway State Trail (EGST) and Kerr Lake State Recreation Area via the Great Trails State Plan network. Kerr Lake State Recreation Area was the fourth most visited park within the state parks system in 2023, and this corridor has the potential to provide a direct trail connection from the park to the Town of Henderson. From Henderson east to Oxford, open rural land provides desirable conditions for a greenway corridor as an active transportation connection between these communities.

- Corridor Length: Approximately 25 miles
- Potential Trail Types: Greenway, Shared Use Path
- This corridor is identified within the following planning documents:
  - » Great Trails State Plan
  - » East Coast Greenway State Trail Plan[40]
- Parks and Trail Connectivity
  - » Kerr Lake State Park
  - » East Coast Greenway State Trail
- Community Connection Opportunities
  - » Oxford and Henderson

40 "East Coast Greenway State Trail Plan: 2022-2027." East Coast Greenway Alliancen.d. https://trails.nc.gov/documents/ctp-five-year-plans-east-coast-greenway-state-trail/open.




**East Coast Greenway State Trail**




**Kerr Lake Recreation Area**

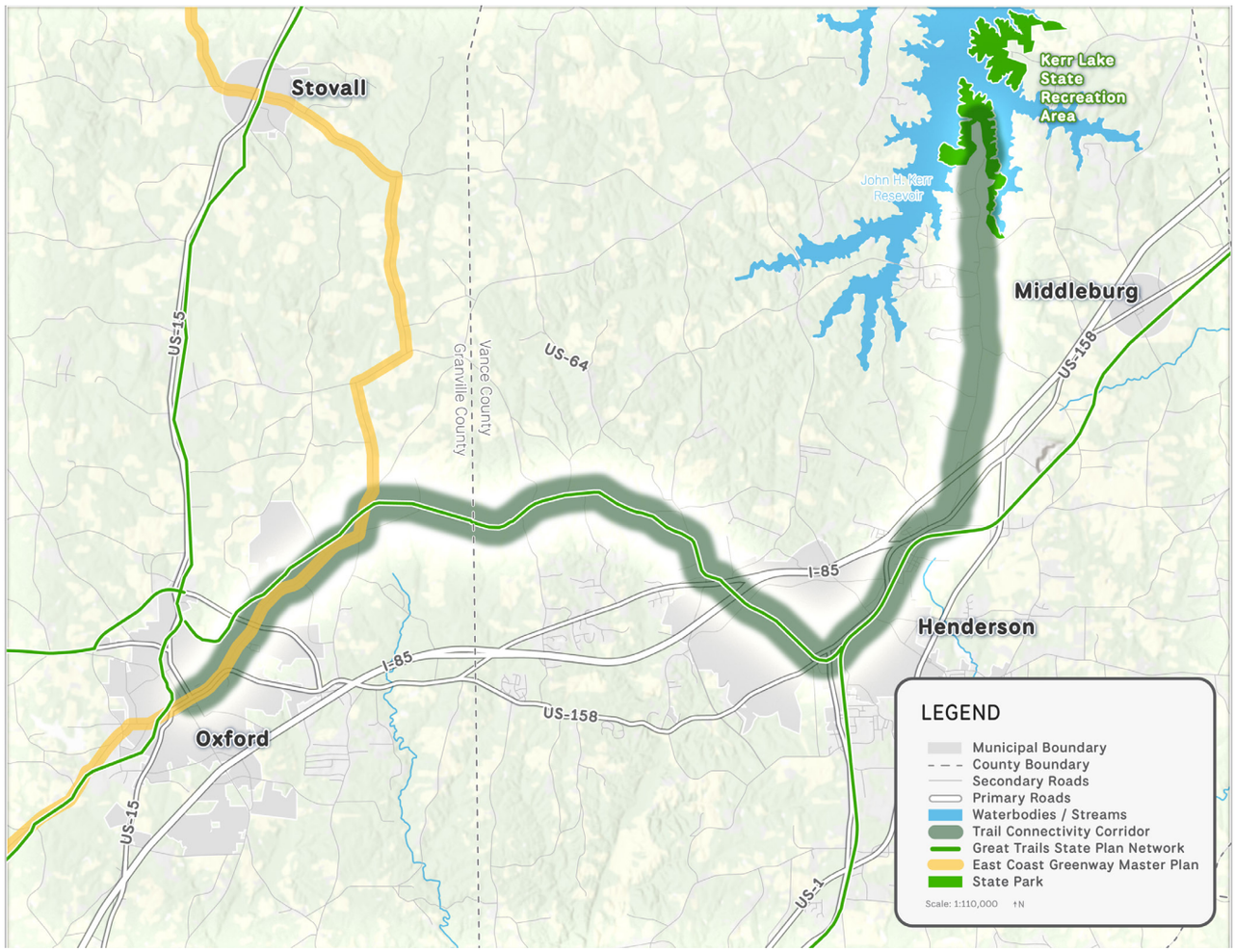



**Figure 7.8.11: Kerr Lake Trail Map**

## Crowders Mountain to Gastonia & Kings Mountain

Gaston and Cleveland counties are both Carolina Thread Trail (CTT) communities. This corridor leverages trail connectivity that has been identified and adopted into Cleveland and Gaston's CTT Master Plans. Existing greenway trails along this corridor serve as the foundation for connecting local parks, state parks, and the Kings Mountain National Military Park in South Carolina, which is a unit of the National Park Service (NPS). Connecting to the heart of Gastonia provides an active transportation corridor to Crowders Mountain State Park.

- Corridor Length: Approximately 25 miles
- Potential Trail types: Greenway, Natural Surface Trail
- This corridor is identified within the following planning documents:
  - » Great Trails State Plan
  - » Carolina Thread Trail Master Plan
- Park, Trail, and Cultural Connectivity
  - » Avon/Catawba Creeks Greenway (Gastonia)
  - » Lineberger Park (Gastonia)
  - » Highland Rail Trail (Gastonia)
  - » Crowders Mountain State Park
  - » Kings Mountain Gateway Trail (Kings Mountain)
  - » Kings Mountain National Military Park (NPS)
- Community Connection Opportunities
  - » Gastonia and Kings Mountain




**Crowders Mountain**




**Kings Mountain State Park Trail**

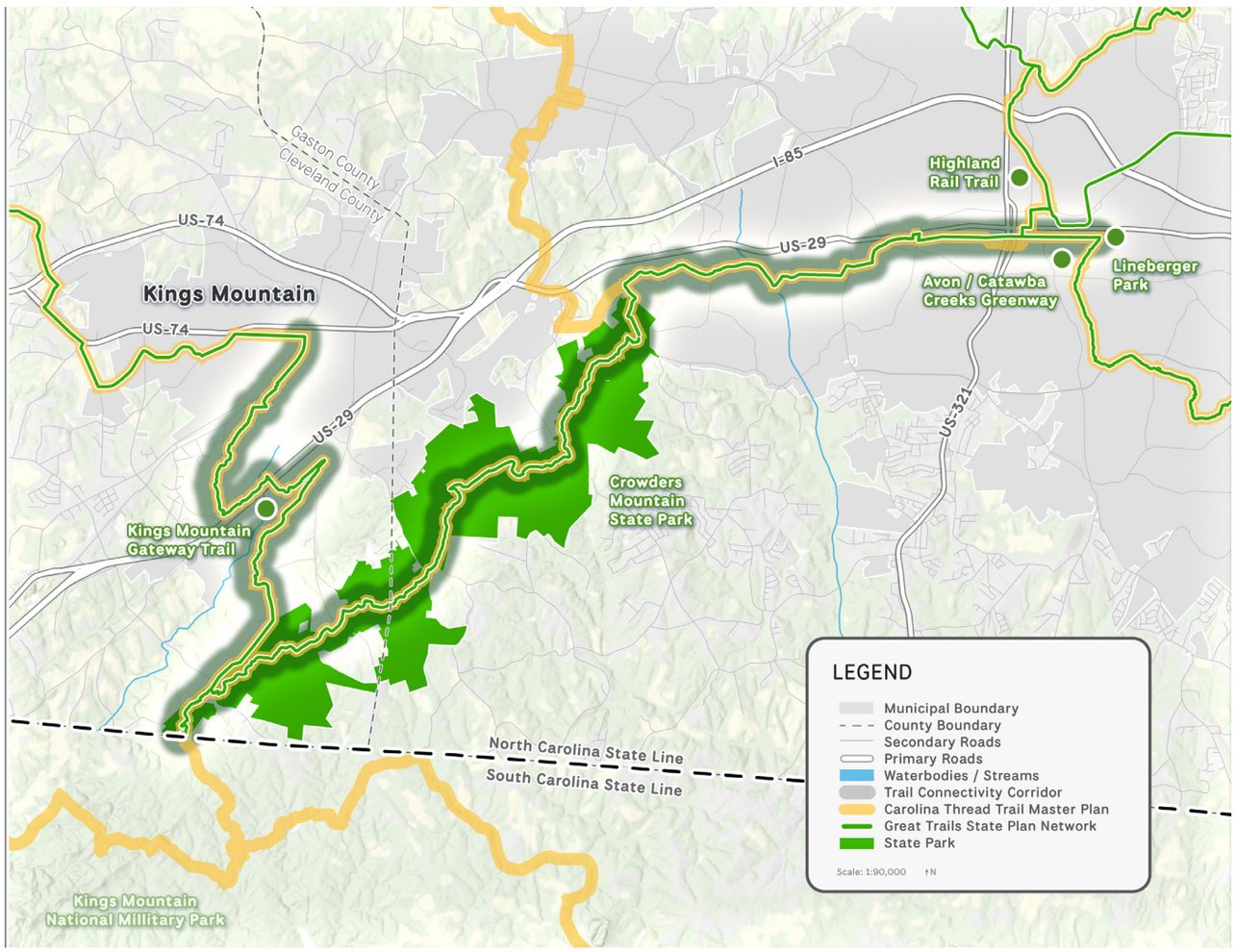



**Figure 7.8.12: Crowders Mountain Trail Map**

# Key Takeaways

**State Paddle Trails are gaining momentum.**

- The Roanoke River State Trail is the first State Trail to reach 100 percent completion with all 215 miles accessible through designated public access sites.

**State Park Trails have room to provide more access for user groups outside of hiking.**

- 97 percent of trails within North Carolina State Parks are open to hikers with only 28 percent available for bicycle users and 19 percent available for equestrian users.

**The Great Trails State Plan Spine Network provides a foundation for cross jurisdictional greenway trail connectivity.**

- The 2,900-mile Spine Network highlights corridors that provide the greatest potential for regional greenway trail connections. With statewide planning level guidance now established, partners should feel more compelled to collaborate on advancing projects along these corridors.




**Airlie Garden & Gary Shell Trail**

# Trail Benefits

Trails have been proven to enhance health and well-being, protect natural environments, generate stronger economies, improve access to recreational facilities, and enhance bicycle and pedestrian mobility.[41] Understanding the benefits of trails is paramount to rousing support for increased resources to fund, develop, and maintain trails.

## Carolina Thread Trail Benefits Study (2022)

In 2022, the Carolina Thread Trail partnered with the Institute for Transportation Research and Education (ITRE) to evaluate the economic, health, and environmental impacts of six trail segments across Mecklenburg, Cabarrus, Gaston, and York (South Carolina) counties.[42] Together, these segments span approximately 13 miles, representing just 1% of the planned Carolina Thread Trail network. Despite the limited reach, the study found that these trails deliver meaningful benefits to the communities they serve, illustrating the broader value and potential of the CTT system. These benefits include documented healthcare savings, tourism and recreation benefits, increased property values, business development and growth, and environmental benefits.

## Economic Benefits of Mountain Biking

The Trust for Public Land's 2025 Economic Benefits of Mountain Biking[43] report highlights the growing economic impact that the 8.7 million U.S. mountain bikers (as of 2021) bring to communities. The study evaluated 13 U.S. mountain biking destinations—including Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests—and found that mountain biking tourists spend an average of $416 per visit, supporting up to 1,626 jobs and generating $54.1 million in annual labor income.




**Carolina Thread Trail Benefits Study Cover**




**Hanging Rock State Park**

41 "The Value of Local Trails." National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA)n.d. https://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/park-pulse/the-value-of-local-trails/.

42 "Evaluating the Economic, Physical Health, and Environmental Impacts of Completing Six Key Segments of the Carolina Thread Trail." Catawba Lands Conservancy | Carolina Thread Trail, 2022. December 1. https://www.carolinathreadtrail.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/CTT-Econ-Impact-Report_Dec2022_Final.pdf.

43 "New Trust for Public Land Report Highlights Economic Power of Mountain Biking for Rural Communities." Trust for Public Land, 2025. March 27. https://www.tpl.org/media-room/new-trust-for-public-land-report-highlights-economic-power-of-mountain-biking-for-rural-communities.

Additional findings show that trail access improves health, boosts property values, and increases local tax revenue. The report stresses the importance of inclusive planning, sustainable trail design, and maintenance to manage challenges like environmental impact and housing pressures.

Drawing on prior research by the Outdoor Alliance, the study notes that the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests, which cover over one-million miles across Western North Carolina, host an estimated 435,000 mountain biking visits annually, making the region and the mountain biking sector a significant contributor to western NC outdoor recreation. The following table summarizes the annual estimated taxation generated by visiting mountain bikers within the five ranger districts.

| Region | Full-time Jobs Supported | Business Revenue Generated |
|---|---|---|
| **Pisgah National Forest Ranger Districts** | | |
| Grandfather | 39 | $3,092,626 |
| Appalachian | 20 | $1,905,824 |
| Pisgah | 198 | $12,413,462 |
| **Nantahala National Forest Ranger Districts** | | |
| Cheoah | 34 | $2,284,803 |
| Tusquitee | 19 | $1,485,984 |
| Nantahala | 55 | $3,690,271 |
| Total | 365 | $24,872,970 |

**Table 7.8.3: 2017 Economic Benefits of Mountain Biking in Western NC Summary[1]**

1 Maples, J. N., and M. J. Bradley. Economic Impact of Mountain Biking in the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests. Study funded by Outdoor Alliance. August 2017. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54aabb14e4b01142027654ee/t/5a996697652dea576a855021/1520002715468/OA_NPNF_MtnBikingStudy_Final_2.pdf.

## Year of the Trail

In 2023, the NC General Assembly proclaimed 2023 as the Year of the Trail to celebrate and bring exposure to the state's extensive network of trails.[44] This statewide initiative, led by the GTSP, in partnership with the DNCR and the Division, aimed to increase public engagement, support legislative investment, and promote the health, economic, and environmental benefits of trails.[45]

The initiative provided partners statewide with marketing assets, expert guidance, and event promotion. Highlights included:

- Tailored outreach tools for local governments and nonprofits.
- Over 1,700 events held in 93 counties, with 66 percent on natural surface trails.

The campaign culminated with the first annual Great Trails State Day[46] on October 21 and concluded with the launch of the Great Trails State brand—an evergreen identity continuing to support trail advocacy and community engagement. In 2024, this momentum carried into the inaugural Great Trails State Conference in Winston-Salem, drawing over 350 stakeholders to share best practices and shape the future of trail development.[47]

Key Outcomes from the Year of the Trail Include:

- Raised awareness and visibility of trail assets statewide.
- Secured increased legislative support for trail funding.
- Established Great Trails State Day as an annual celebration.
- Delivered lasting outreach tools to partners.

44 "Governor Proclaims North Carolina Year of the Trail 2023." North Carolina Office of the Governor, 2023. January 13. https://governor.nc.gov/governor-proclaims-north-carolina-year-trail-2023.

45 "Year of the Trail 2023." Great Trails State Coalitionn.d. https://greattrailsstatecoalition.org/year-of-the-trail/.

46 "Great Trails State Day." Great Trails State Coalitionn.d. https://greattrailsnc.com/great-trails-state-day/.

47 "The Great Trails State Conference." NC State University | Recreation Resources Servicen.d. https://rrs.cnr.ncsu.edu/professional-development/great-trails/.



# Key Takeaways

**Rural communities stand to benefit substantially from the economic impact of trails.**

- Spending by trail users, jobs created through trail construction, and increased local commerce related to trail activities all contribute to a meaningful economic impact, particularly in rural communities seeking new sources of economic growth.

**Western NC mountain biking provides a significant amount of support to the economic development within the region.**

- As local communities and agencies improve old trails and build new ones, the economic impact from mountain biking will continue to grow.

**The Year of the Trail success provides a model for statewide leadership for trail programming.**

- The support provided by the Year of the Trail sparked the creation of trail-related programs across the state implemented by cities, counties and towns, nonprofits, State Parks, and DNCR staff. Many of the programs which started in 2023 during the Year of the Trail campaign are now ongoing.

**When quantified, the health benefits of trails are significant.**

- The Goat Island Park and River Link Greenways in Cramerton, NC see 704,160 trail visits annually and the physical activity facilitated by this trail use saves an estimated $756,000 annually in healthcare costs.[48]

48 "Evaluating the Economic, Physical Health, and Environmental Impacts of Completing Six Key Segments of the Carolina Thread Trail." Catawba Lands Conservancy | Carolina Thread Trail, 2022. December 1. https://www.carolinathreadtrail.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ CTT-Econ-Impact-Report_Dec2022_Final.pdf.




**Chimney Rock State Park**

# Trends & Barriers

Trail development, programming, maintenance, and operations are all challenges trail managers struggle with and seek solutions to address. After assessing North Carolina's trails inventory, as well as previous planning and policy efforts, several trends arose around the development, programming, and maintenance of trails.

## Trail Development Trends & Barriers

### Trail Construction

In 1976, a group of trail professionals founded the Western Trail Builders Association to define and nurture a new industry—private trail contracting for the federal government, primarily the USDA Forest Service. Renamed in 2004, the Professional Trail Builders Association (PTBA) is now the official industry association for trail specialists, professional contractors, designers, and consultants that specialize in natural surface trail design and construction.[49] The public's desire for trail-based recreation is consistently a top request in plans at the local, regional, and state levels, which has led to growing opportunities for professional trail contractors as land managers seek to deliver high quality trail experiences.

### Trail Construction Examples

Mountain Creek Park in Sherrills Ford, NC (part of the Catawba County Parks and Recreation system) features an 18.7-mile mountain biking and hiking trail system designed and constructed by Elevated Trail Design (PTBA member company based in Marshall, NC). The Mountain Creek network represents the most ambitious single trail system project with all 18.7 miles of newly constructed natural surface trails opening to the public in June 2022.

Beginning in 2019, the Tarheel Trailblazers,[50] a nonprofit organization, led a community-driven effort to revitalize Rocky Branch Park in Belmont, NC, transformed it into a trail network for hikers and bikers of all ages and abilities. Over five years, they oversaw planning, design, funding, and construction, resulting in 1.2 miles of wide crushed concrete trail—part of the CTT—and 3.5 miles of mountain bike trails for all skill levels. The project came to life with support from professional trail planners and builders, including Community Trail Design and Nature Trails.[51]



**Elevated Trail Design Crew at Mountain Creek Park**
**Source: Elevated Trail Design**




**Finished Trail at Rocky Branch Park**

49 "Professional Trail Builders Association"n.d. https://www.trailbuilders.org/about-ptba.

50 "Tarheel Trailblazers"n.d. https://tarheeltrailblazers.com/.

51 "How a North Carolina Community Managed to Build High Quality

## Trail Construction Trends

- PTBA member companies report a 350 percent growth in gross revenue and 135 percent growth in employees over the last five years. Our state is home to eight PTBA member companies.
- Professional trail design and construction are especially valuable for mountain biking trails where nuanced design and construction techniques allow for a user experience that serves a wide range of skill levels, including adaptive mountain biking.
- Professional contractors deliver natural surface trail projects in significantly less time than volunteer trail construction.

## Trail Construction Barriers

- Funding – The budget required for professional trail planning and construction for natural surface trails can be a major barrier for communities or organizations that have traditionally relied on volunteer trail construction.
- Permitting – Professional trail construction is still a relatively young industry, and the permitting process is evolving. As more projects are permitted, best practices should be shared across the state.

## Cross Jurisdictional Trails

Most trail users are in search of a positive trail experience; and only a few users may care when they cross from one jurisdiction to another. Based on the success of trail network organizations, it can be assumed that cross-jurisdictional trail networks offer numerous benefits for both the trail user, and for trail development and management.

## Examples

**The Saluda Grade Trail Coalition** is a partnership of three nonprofit partners in North and South Carolina that, "share a commitment to serving their communities and providing places for outdoor recreation."[52] Together, Conserving Carolina and PAL: Play. Advocate. Live Well. in South Carolina, are advancing the vision of converting the 31-mile Saluda Grade Rail Line into a regional recreational trail that spans from Zirconia, North Carolina, to Inman, South Carolina. These nonprofits, in conjunction with local governments, are also exploring connection options from Zirconia to the Ecusta Trail in Hendersonville, North Carolina and from Inman, South Carolina to the Daniel Morgan Trail network in Spartanburg County, South Carolina, to create a trail network that would connect from Brevard, North Carolina to Spartanburg, South Carolina, a distance of over 70 miles. The Saluda Grade Trail Conservancy has successfully completed the initial Saluda Grade Trail Feasibility Study[53] and purchased the Saluda Grade Rail Line. Both of these efforts have been successful due to cross-state funding and collaboration efforts. The portion of the trail that lies in North Carolina was authorized as a State Trail in 2023 and the corridor will be transferred to the State of North Carolina by July 2027.[54]

The Research Triangle region is one of the fastest growing areas in the U.S. Implementing active transportation corridors is just one strategy the region has adopted to mitigate the area's growth impacts. Currently under design, the 23-mile Triangle Bikeway will connect the City of Raleigh to the Town of Chapel Hill along Interstate 40 and NC-54 corridor. The initial study,[55] which paved the way for the current design phase, was a partnership between the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (CAMPO) and Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization (DCHC MPO), now the Triangle West Transportation Planning Organization (TWTPO), and the City of Raleigh, Town of Cary, Town of Morrisville, Research Triangle Park, City of Durham, Town of Chapel Hill, Durham County, and Wake County. While the **Triangle Bikeway** is more of a transportation corridor, it is an excellent example of cross-jurisdictional collaboration that will result in a trail that provides recreational opportunities in addition to connections to jobs, housing, communities, as well as the broader trail network across the triangle.

MTB Trails in a City Park." Single Tracks, 2024. April 26. https://www.singletracks.com/mtb-trails/how-a-north-carolina-community-managed-to-build-high-quality-mtb-trails-in-a-city-park/.

52 "Saluda Grade Trail Conservancy"n.d. https://www.saludagradetrail.org/about.

53 "Saluda Grade Trail Feasibility Study." Saluda Grade Trail Conservancyn.d. https://www.saludagradetrail.org/files/files/SGT%20Feasibility%20Study%20single%20pages.pdf.

54 "Bill Summary for H 259 (2023-2024)." UNC School of Government | Legislative Reporting Service, 2023. April 5. https://lrs.sog.unc.edu/billsum/h-259-2023-2024-1.

55 "2019-2022 Triangle Bikeway Study." Central Pines Regional Counciln.d. https://www.centralpinesnc.gov/mobility-transportation/triangle-bikeway.

## Trends

- Expanded connectivity for users across communities, regions, and states. These trail systems or networks enable longer and more continuous routes for recreation and, in some cases, for transportation.
- Trail networks are becoming destinations for locals and visitors. In turn, they can support greater equity in access to outdoor spaces, promote tourism, and enhance a region's economic development efforts.
- Trail networks provide opportunities for regional collaboration on funding, trail development standards and typologies, maintenance, safety, and trail user standards.

## Barriers

- Building a cross-jurisdictional trail network requires collaborative leadership and an unobstructed vision. This is "long-haul" work that takes time, dedication, and funding to develop a network. Support for trail development can vary depending on political leadership and community priorities.
- Regulations and expectations are not uniform across jurisdictions, particularly across states. Trail development may be complicated by differing regulations, policies, and decision-making processes. Similarly, some communities may have differing programming and maintenance abilities and priorities.
- Across jurisdictions, funding may be fragmented or there may be uneven resource allocation. For example, smaller or more rural communities may struggle with funding matches or staff capacity dedicated to trail development compared to their larger or well-resourced neighbors.

# Regional Trail Organizations

Regional trail organizations across play a critical role in advancing trails across the state and jurisdictions. Their reach ranges from statewide advocacy and policy influence that benefits everyone, to promoting small local projects that may benefit a few hundred residents in a small community. The three major regional trail organizations that currently exist are Piedmont Legacy Trails, the Carolina Thread Trail, and the Triangle Trails Initiative. Each of these organizations hosts its own programming and has paid staff members to increase their capacity.

## Trends

- Regional trail organizations promote connectivity across jurisdictions by linking local trail segments into cohesive regional networks, allowing longer uninterrupted travel for recreation, commuting, and tourism.
- Trail development is a costly endeavor. Regional trail organizations pool funding, staff experience, and technical resources to plan, build and maintain trails more efficiently than individual jurisdictions acting alone.
- Trail users are looking for an experience. Trail organizations promote cohesive design, signage, wayfinding, and maintenance standards to improve the user experience and safety across their regions.
- Regional trails are more likely to be destinations for trail tourists. Regional organizations can attract visitors, boost tourism, and support local business-like bicycle shops, cafes, and lodging near trails.
- Trail organizations are typically focused on the "bigger picture." For example, they may be looking at environmental, open space conservation, or cumulative impacts across an entire region, planning for generations to come to still have access to the great outdoors.
- Because they serve a region, trail organizations have a broader base of people to engage with. For example, the organization can garner a more inclusive set of views during public engagement activities, and they can tap into a deeper well of volunteers for trail maintenance days or philanthropic endeavors.
- Acquiring land or easements for trail corridors can be complicated, especially in areas with private landowners or development pressure.

## Barriers

- Regional trail organizations are not a local government entity. They do not have regulatory power, and they rely on cooperation from local governments and landowners, which may slow progress.
- Funding the organization can be a challenge. Competition for grants and differing local budget priorities can limit trail expansion or maintenance.

- Trail organizations must balance varying local priorities. Some communities may be more focused on other transportation or development needs and may not see regional trails as a priority.
- Ensuring that all communities have a voice in regional trail planning and benefit from trail access.

## Access & Wayfinding

Ensuring that trails are easy to follow and access is essential to creating an inviting experience that encourages more people to use them.

### Trends

- Developing trail access points in activity centers and residential centers encourages people to access trails by foot or bike without an extra car trip to a trailhead parking area.
- Smartphone Apps like AllTrails, Strava, and Wander Maps offer useful tools for trail users to navigate during their trail experience, which is especially helpful on trails that do not have a hard copy map or on-site staff available.

### Barriers

- Trailheads often require additional land acquisition outside of the trail corridor. Land acquisition can be particularly difficult in more developed areas such as main streets, as well as suburban and urban centers.
- There is no one trail mapping smart phone application that has coverage for all trails across the entire state. The accuracy of the data on each app varies by region.

## Programming

Programming efforts at the local, regional, and state levels inspire people to enjoy trails. Recurring programs and community specific efforts all contribute to the successful activation of trails for users of all ages and abilities. Programs are catalysts for building communities around trails and can be powerful tools for reaching new trail user groups.

### Examples

Recurring statewide programming such as First Day Hike (January 1st), National Trails Day (first Saturday in June), and Great Trails State Day (third Saturday in October) are great ways for communities to build a programming foundation. These statewide initiatives provide communication and branding support, along with programming frameworks to build from.

The Aberdeen Area Convention and Visitors Bureau developed the **Pinecone Pathways Program**[56] to celebrate the Year of the Trail in 2023. Colorful glass pinecones were hidden along trails throughout Moore County from the first day of spring to Earth Day (mid-March to mid-April). Community members created their own Facebook page with over 3,000 members dedicated to sharing their trailside glass pinecone discoveries.

**The Town of Valdese's annual Great Trails State Day program** issues a challenge to their community to collectively hike, bike, and paddle the trails in and around the Valdese Lakeside Park. In 2023, community members logged over 1,500 miles, easily exceeding the 1,000-mile goal.[57]

In June 2024, the Division began a new partnership with Waypoint Adventure NC in Black Mountain to provide adaptive recreation programming for visitors with disabilities. Program offerings include guided hikes and adaptive kayaking. Programs continue to be offered at Lake James State, Lake Norman, Crowders Mountain, and Chimney Rock State Park for accessible kayaking and hiking experiences.[58] The Division also hired an Adaptive Trails Specialist and purchased trail wheelchairs to provide access to multiuse trails for mobility impaired visitors.

### Trends

- The Year of the Trail provided renewed energy for trails programming with 71 First Day outdoors events, 39 National Trails Day events, and 54 Great Trails State Day events.
- Tourism agencies are leveraging the power of trail events and activations to bring visitors into communities.

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56 "Pinecone Pathways Program." Convention & Visitors Bureau Pinehurst, Southern Pines, Aberdeen Area of North Carolinan.d. https://homeofgolf.com/pinecone-pathways/.

57 "Great Trails State Day | Friends of Valdese Parks and Recreation." Friends of the Valdese Recn.d. https://friendsofthevaldeserec.org/great-trails-state-day.

58 "Lake James Partners with Waypoint Adventure to Provide Adaptive Recreation Programs." Friends of Lake James State Park, 2024. June 20. https://www.lakejamesstatepark.org/news/2024/6/20/lake-james-partners-with-waypoint-adventure-to-provide-adaptive-recreation-programs.

- Our state is home to a variety of organizations that support adaptive programs for people living with disabilities and trail networks are evolving to support access to and use of mobility enhancing vehicles such as adaptive mountain bikes.

### Barriers

- Trail assets are unique across the state, and programming efforts must be individually tailored to each community, region, or trail network.
- There is an excessive cost for adaptive cycling equipment. Depending on mobility needs, models range from $8,000 - $20,000.[59]

## Recreation Sector

Government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and private sector companies have been strong advocates for trail development as part of the outdoor recreation sector. Conferences and other gatherings that bring together people from all regions have been instrumental in providing opportunities for networking, sharing best practices, and energizing trail champions. Long standing conferences such as the Carolina Thread Trail Forum (18 years) and the Piedmont Legacy Trails Summit (10 years) have provided valuable resources to our trail champions.

### Trends

- In September of 2024, the Recreation Resources Service (RRS) and the Great Trails State Coalition (GTSC) co-hosted the inaugural statewide trails conference in Winston-Salem. The Great Trails State Conference brought together trail and greenway advocates, managers, planners, and users nationwide. Over 350 trail supporters attended the three-day event to exchange information and best practices, discuss economic development opportunities, and shares ideas for building public support for trails.
- GTSC hosts a regular "Town's Cities and Counties for Trails" webinar series as a free educational resource for trail related stakeholders. In 2025, the Coalition hosted presenters from the Great Trails State Conference whose sessions were recorded and uploaded to YouTube, forming an open-source library of trail knowledge.

59 Kinchen, Kimberly . "Electric Mountain Bikes Reconnect Riders With Disabilities With the Outdoors." People for Bikes, 2022. March 2. https://www.peopleforbikes.org/news/electric-mountain-bikes-reconnect-riders-with-disabilities.

### Barriers

- Determining a cadence for statewide conference activities with frequent enough events to keep up with the pace of innovation.

## Maintenance & Operations

While the term "sustainable trails" is widely used, a more practical expression may be "maintainable trails," as all trail infrastructure requires some level of proactive maintenance to remain functional and safe over time. Advancements in design and construction techniques for both paved greenways and natural surface trails have helped reduce long-term maintenance needs. Trail network operations present many challenges that vary depending on the land manager and the trail type.



**Pisgah Area SORBA Sawyer on a Maintenance Hike**
**Source: Pisgah Area SORBA**

### Trends

- Trail construction and maintenance training programs are becoming more widely available, including through the state's community college network. McDowell Tech Community College's Trail Construction and Sustainability Program provides an array of classes covering trail assessment and maintenance, hand-built trail techniques, mechanized trail construction, and sustainable trail planning and design.[60]

60 "Trail Construction and Sustainability Program." McDowell Technical Community Collegen.d. https://mcdowelltech.edu/academic-degree-programs/cewd/trail-construction-and-sustainability/.

- Nonprofit and volunteer groups are effective partners for maintaining trails, particularly natural surface trails that require frequent, cyclical maintenance that can be performed with hand tools and small mechanized equipment.
- Nonprofit organizations are growing their trail maintenance capacity. Organizations such as Pisgah Area Southern Off Road Biking Association (SORBA) and the Pisgah Conservancy coordinate most ongoing maintenance activities on the over 400 miles of trail in the Pisgah Ranger District.[61] In the past three years, Pisgah Area SORBA transitioned from an entirely volunteer-led organization to one that employs five staff members, including two positions dedicated solely to trail maintenance. These staff members not only complete trail maintenance projects themselves, but also serve as crew leaders for large volunteer workdays increasing the effectiveness of volunteer labor.
- Electric assist bicycles (E-Bikes) are becoming a trendy way to enjoy paved greenways and natural surface trails. E-Bikes provide access to users that may not be able to ride significant distances or climb hills on traditional bikes. Policies around E-Bike access vary across jurisdictions and land management agencies.

## Barriers

- Many natural surface trails were built before modern design standards were established, which has led to increased maintenance needs in both the scope and the frequency of maintenance work. Natural surface trails that do not follow the 'half rule'—a guideline that limits trail grade to no more than half the sideslope—or that lack frequent grade reversals—small dips and rises that help shed water—often require intensive maintenance to preserve the trail tread.[62]
- Major maintenance projects to reconstruct trail tread or re-route a trail entirely require both planning expertise and skilled labor to execute, and re-routing requires adequate funding resources. Pisgah Area SORBA received a $100,000 Recreational Trails Program federal grant to re-route the Middle Black Mountain trail in Pisgah National Forest.[63] The project resulted in a 2-mile trail re-route using modern design principles. These costs can be a burden to land managers that do not have reoccurring maintenance funds or partnerships with a nonprofit organization.
- Budgeting for repaving asphalt and concrete trails is an often-overlooked maintenance activity that requires extensive resources.

## Funding

Funding for land acquisition, planning and design, and the construction of trails has evolved significantly in the past five years. Traditional funding sources for trail projects such as the federal RTP and the Division funded Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) were bolstered by three new state funding sources over the past five years.

## Funding Trends

- The DOT Paved Trail Feasibility Studies Program funded 67 feasibility studies with a one-time allocation of $2 million. The feasibility studies completed with this program are well positioned for future design and implementation should more state funding become available.
- The Complete the Trails Program is one of the greatest funding sources available at the moment, $2.4 million of its authorized trail development funds delivering 37 projects within 11 of the 14 State Trails.

## Funding Barriers

- New funding sources buoyed by the momentum of the Year of the Trail have provided a spark for trail planning and construction, however these funding sources are non-recurring in the State's budget. The absence of these recurring funding sources will reduce local government and nonprofit capacity to deliver trail projects.
- Partner organizations for State Trails need adequate capacity from staff to develop and administer construction projects to effectively utilize Complete the Trails Program.

61 "Trail Status." Pisgah Area SORBA Trail Networkn.d. https://www.pisgahareasorba.org/trail-status.

62 NC Trails Program Sustainable Trail Design information sheet: https://trails.nc.gov/state-trails-design-and-construction-toolbox-sustainable-design.

63 "Black Mountain Reroute." Southern Off-Road Bicycling Association n.d. https://sorba.org/black-mountain-reroute/.

# Recommendations

**Identify a funding source for implementation of the Great Trails State Plan and designate an entity to continually update the Great Trails State Network.**

Action items:

- Seek reauthorization of the Great Trails State Program funding from the NC General Assembly.
- Develop an annual reporting process for the GTSP network which includes updated GIS data and statistics on status changes for trail segments that have advanced to a new stage of design or completion.

**Support the creation of more regional trail organizations like the Carolina Thread Trail, Piedmont Legacy Trails, and the Triangle Trails Initiative to add trail development capacity at a regional level across the state.**

Action items:

- Continue regional trail planning through the Division.
- Identify existing nonprofit or local government partners that may be candidates to house new regional trail organizations.
- Identify a funding source to provide operational support to start up organizations.

**Increase opportunities for adaptive trail users by encouraging new natural surface trails to be built to adaptive trail use standards or identify existing natural surface trails that can be retrofitted to meet adaptive trail use standards.**

Action items:

- Establish an adaptive trail use standard through the Division based on national best practices.
- Identify parks with existing adaptive trail programming as opportunities to promote and showcase trail planning and construction best practices for adaptive uses.
- Include adaptive trail activities as a user type when inventorying trails within state parks.

**Establish annual trails programming based on the Year of the Trail model to increase trail programming across all 100 counties.**

Action items:

- Designate an internal liaison within the Division to lead trail programming coordination.
- Provide adequate resources through the Division or statewide partner organizations to effectively provide programming support and leadership to communities at a statewide level.

**Increase the capacity of Partner organizations to coordinate planning, design, and construction activities for their State Trail.**

Action items:

- Assess the current capacity building grants provided through the Complete the Trails Program to understand the impact of those dollars related to hiring and maintaining staff at partner organizations dedicated to their state trail.

**Support the continued development of trail benefits studies.**

Action items:

- Identify opportunities for studies on the impact of paddle trails, in addition to studies of land based trails.
- Support communication channels that share these resources with local jurisdiction partners.

# SWAMP RABBIT TRAIL CASE STUDY

Between 1998 and 1999, two critical actions laid the foundation for what has become one of the southeast's most successful rail to trail projects. First, Greenville County, South Carolina received an alert from the Rail to Trails Conservancy's early warning system that the company Railtex planned to abandon its Greenville County rail line.[1] With urging and support from Upstate Forever, Greenville County, through the Greenville County Economic Development Corporation (GCEDC), purchased the rail line - nicknamed the "Swamp Rabbit" for its bumpy ride[2]– and began planning to convert the line to a trail. It took another decade of work for the Swamp Rabbit Trail to officially open in 2009. Since opening, the Swamp Rabbit has become a regional attraction that promotes economic growth, active transportation, and outdoor recreation.

The Swamp Rabbit Trail showcases how repurposed infrastructure can enhance transportation and outdoor recreation, boost local economies, and improve community health. Its transformation from an abandoned railway into a thriving multi-use greenway demonstrates the long-term benefits of investing in connected accessible outdoor spaces.

The remainder of this case study contains key takeaways learned from the Swamp Rabbit Trail that state and local trail agencies in North Carolina may consider. While some of the strategies used to develop the Swamp Rabbit Trail are novel to Greenville County and local dynamics, many are like efforts currently underway in North Carolina.

1 Unless otherwise noted, Ty Houck with Greenville County provided supporting information in an interview conducted on February 5, 2025.
2 "How Did the Swamp Rabbit Trail Get Its Name? It Has More to Do with Railways than Rabbits." The Post and Courier Greenville, 2025. March 10. https://www.postandcourier.com/greenville/news/swamp-rabbit-trail-name-history-greenville-railroad/article_7b6f660c-f935-11ef-9258-03524c87f108.html.




**Swamp Rabbit Trail**

# Takeaways

## Accelerate the Vision

David Shi, President of Furman University, accelerated the Swamp Rabbit vision in the early 2000s. President Shi was dedicated to sustainability and active transportation and had a vision for the Swamp Rabbit Trail's potential for connectivity and revitalization. He brought Chuck Flink, one of America's leading greenway planners and designers, to the County to kick-start the Swamp Rabbit Trail vision and bring a new perspective to the region.

## Piecemeal & Persistent

Early in Swamp Rabbit Trail development, Greenville County hired Ty Houck as their Greenways and Natural and Historic Resources Manager. Ty has led the vision for the greenway for over 17 years, forging relationships with partners, building trust and accountability, and tirelessly pursuing funding opportunities to expand the Swamp Rabbit Trail vision. Ty and the Greenville County staff's vision has always been ambitious, and their piecemeal and persistent approach has proven successful. For example, if a funder or opportunity did not prove successful, they moved on to other tasks only to return after the dust settled. "If you have a good idea, it will come to fruition, but it will never come on your timetable," says Ty.

## Establish the Network

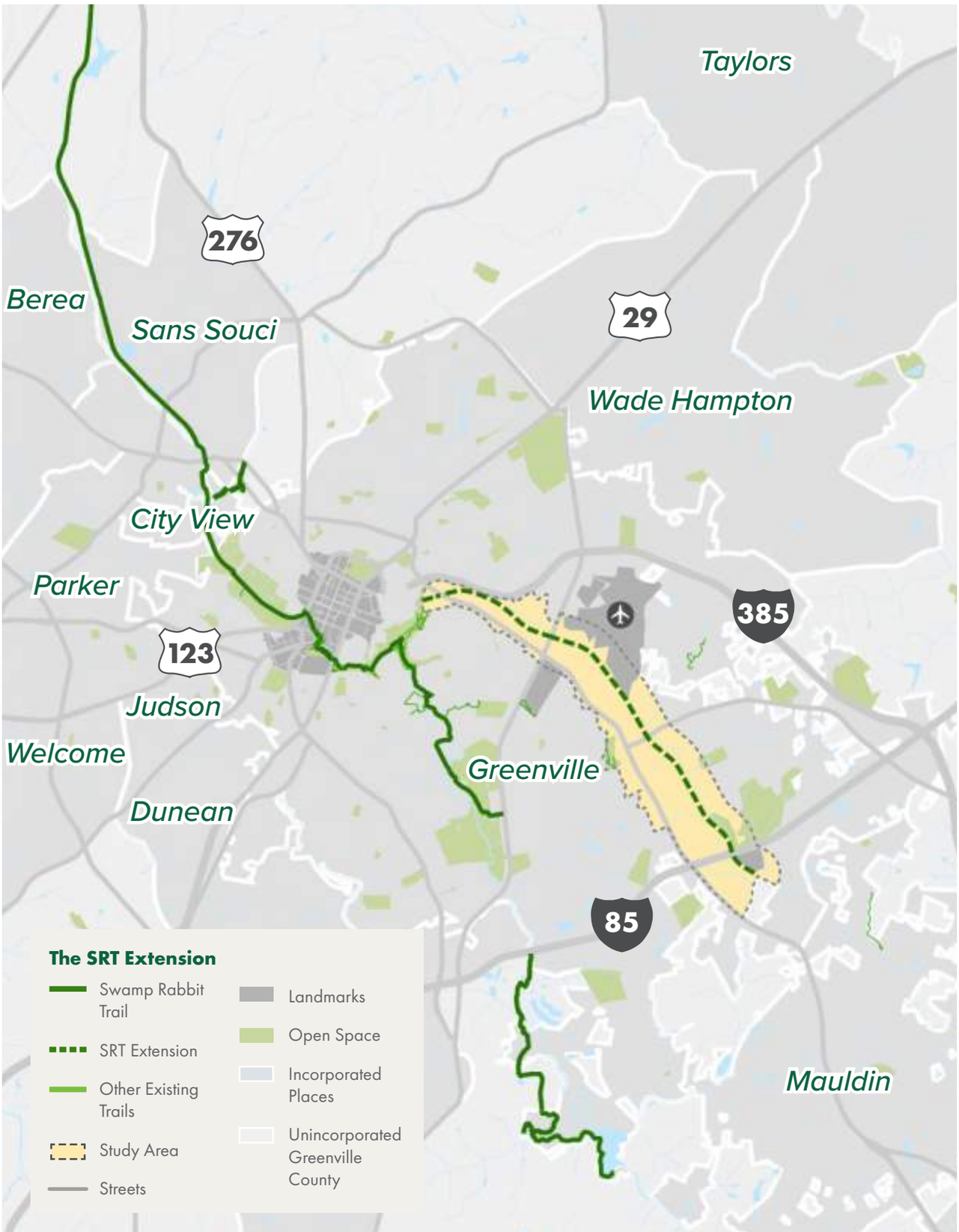
Getting the first 10 miles of trail in place, connecting downtown Greenville to Travelers Rest, was significant. This milestone connected two urban, walkable places and showed people what was possible with greenways. This initial Swamp Rabbit segment generated a tremendous amount of excitement , and proved that one trail can be many things: a transportation facility, a recreation corridor, and a catalyst for downtown Travelers Rest's revitalization. This initial wave of excitement propelled the expansion of the Swamp Rabbit Trail network from its initial 10-miles to the expansive 28-mile footprint it has today.[3]

3 "The Swamp Rabbit Trail Network." City of Greenville, South Carolinan.d.




City of Greenville, South Carolina

**A new EcoCounter installation opens on the Swamp Rabbit Trail**




**Two System Expansion Map**
**Source: Swamp Rabbit Trail Extension Master Plan**

## Strategic Private Partnerships

Prisma Health (formerly Greenville Health Systems) became a major sponsor early in the life of the trail. The County and its partners approached Prisma's Marketing Department, pitching the trail's health benefits and sharing the project vision. The County was strategic to begin their conversations with the Marketing Department – and not Philanthropy – because they knew what the greenway could be and the exposure it could bring to the area if successful. Prisma Health's support gave the Swamp Rabbit Trail political clout, visibility, and credibility.

## Brand It Early

Greenville County used a portion of the Prisma Health funding to create the Swamp Rabbit brand. This early step built familiarity with the logo and created name recognition amongst the community. All partners used the official branding to help promote trail development, creating a strong visual image. The trail was heavily advertised throughout the City of Greenville and Greenville County before it was fully connected. Businesses in the vicinity of the trail latched on to the Swamp Rabbit branding including hotels (Swamp Rabbit Inn), cafes (Swamp Rabbit Café and Grocery), and even residential developments such as the Trailside at Reedy Point apartments.

## Measuring Economic Impact Early & Often

Knowing that communicating the success of the Swamp Rabbit to the public and local government officials would enhance support for future funding, the County conducted several economic impact studies in the early years of trail development. The data from these studies provided the County with a measure of success for the Trail that the County was then able to leverage to support construction funding requests for system expansion.

## Stay in Touch

The County maintains an e-newsletter that shares "hoppenings" about the trail. The Hoppenings newsletter reaches over 4,200 people and has been an avenue to building trust, respect, and stewardship in the Swamp Rabbit Trail community. Although these voices are small,

https://www.greenvillesc.gov/316/Swamp-Rabbit-Trail.




**Trailside at Reed Apartment Entrance Sign with Swamp Rabbit Branding**




**Swamp Rabbit Cafe & Grocery**




**A Section of the Swamp Rabbit Trail Constructed by the Water Tower Apartments**

they are collectively powerful and may uncover future opportunities. Even the individual voice, and their individual love and support, is important to the success of the Swamp Rabbit Trail.

## Partners Big & Small

The County looked to every corner of South Carolina to find partners who will support the Swamp Rabbit Trail. They realized that the key to success is good working relationships with state agencies, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO), the private sector, other jurisdictions, and nonprofit organizations. Over time, the County has learned that maintaining good relationships leads to future success. Ty noted that, "Some partnerships are unpredictable and piecemeal, and that is okay." Greenville County's Hospitality Tax (authorized in 2001) was the primary funding mechanism to catalyze the construction of the Swamp Rabbit Trail. The State of South Carolina's Recreational Trails Program and Appalachian Regional Council of Governments have provided some funding support over the life of the Swamp Rabbit Trail, but not foundation capital contributions. The Swamp Rabbit has received Federal Transportation Alternatives Program funding through Greenville Pickens Area Transportation Study (GPATS), the regional MPO for project construction. The City of Greenville and Greenville County Land Development Ordinances require new developments along the Swamp Rabbit Trail to construct segments along their development frontages. The Water Tower Apartment complex is a great example of a private development that constructed a greenway segment and embraced the amenity with direct access to the trail from ground floor units.

## Tried & True Design Guidance

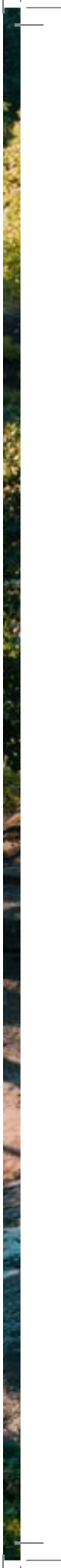
The County has always relied on the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) Bike Guide[4] as the design resource for building the trail to industry standards. The Bike Guide provided a single, consistent resource for trail design and was a trusted resource for partnering with SCDOT, the private sector, and other partners on the trail's expansion. National Design guidelines like the AASHTO Guide for the Development of Bicycle Facilities are solid foundations from which to establish uniform design standards for greenway trails that cross jurisdictional boundaries. However, each trail context is unique and may require a more tailored set of design guidelines that expand on national standards. Establishing an agreed upon set of design guidelines or choosing a national standard to follow can help streamline tradeoff discussions and decision making processes when multiple partners are involved in project implementation.

## Operationalizing Maintenance

The County currently employs a four-person team to maintain the trail daily. When addressing resurfacing needs, the County uses staff from their Roads and Bridges Department who, according to Ty, "are very willing to work on a trail repaving project instead of roadway pothole repair." This collaborative effort across interdepartmental teams is essential to ensuring the trail's long-term sustainability. For larger or special repairs, the County employs Specialty Maintenance contracts as needed.

# Summary

State trail agencies in North Carolina can learn from the collaborative approach to trail development that anchors the Swamp Rabbit Trail's success. Strategic early partnerships, political support, early trail wins, and a data-driven approach were essential for laying the foundation of the Swamp Rabbit Trail. Other key successes include encouraging public-private partnerships and long term sustainability through maintenance programs and partnership efforts. The Swamp Rabbit Trail framework prioritized cross-jurisdictional cooperation to ensure sustained funding as well as political, institutional, and public support for trails.



4 "Guide for the Development of Bicycle Facilities, 5th Edition." American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials , 2024. December 13. https://aashtojournal.transportation.org/aashto-releases-5th-edition-of-comprehensive-bicycle-guide/.


Swamp Rabbit Trail
Bucketlist Bri



# RECOMMENDATIONS & 5-YEAR PLAN

# OVERVIEW

From the peaks of the Blue Ridge Mountains to the shimmering beaches along the coast, North Carolina offers numerous opportunities for adventure, exploration, and recreation. Waterfalls, lakes, gardens, forests, and more connect residents and visitors to 'Naturally Wonderful' destinations. Local artists keep culture and traditions in the State through inspiring arts and crafts. Not only for its natural resources, North Carolina has just secured the top spot as "Number One State for Business," which means more businesses, more jobs, and more people moving into the State. North Carolina's projected growth to 11.7 million residents by 2030 needs proactive planning to meet the needs of growing and changing demographics. The state's strong economy, high quality of life, and attractiveness to new residents and businesses highlight the need for innovative and forward-looking recommendations and actions.



The 2023 North Carolina State Parks System-wide Plan acknowledged multiple conflicting demands on the State parks system. The increasing demand for outdoor recreation spaces against the need to protect and conserve our natural and cultural resources; public support for state parks against high operational efficiency and fiscal responsibility; and increased visitation against impact to sensitive natural resources. These conflicting demands also bring in the benefits of recreation growth opportunities and improvements to the State assets. The overarching goals established in this plan specifically for the State Parks include:

Goal #1 – Continue to Expand the State Parks System

Goal #2 – Make Parks More Accessible to Provide the Best Possible Visitor Experience

Goal #3 – Increase Operational Efficiency

Goal #4 – Support Local Economic Development

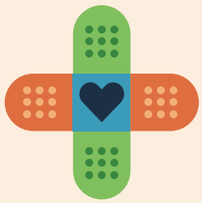
Goal #5 – Support State and Local Health and Wellness

Goal #6 – Increase Natural and Cultural Resource Stewardship

Many objectives and action items support these goals to ensure proactive planning and evaluation of statewide priorities for the best use of funding. While the system-wide plan focuses solely on the State Park units, the Statewide Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Plan evaluates the overall parks system, including the state and local parks across the State.

This 2025-2030 SCORP is organized around four key themes that were established at the beginning of this project- Health and Well-being, Recreation for All, Resiliency, and Economic Impact. These four themes align with the system-wide plan goals, and several recommendations and action items align with what this SCORP is proposing. These four themes are foundational elements of this plan, on which the recommendations and action items are based. These four themes were validated through extensive community engagement, staff input, and stakeholder involvement to address current and future priorities. This level of organization for a 5-year strategic plan provides a steady framework for decision-making, ensuring that all recommendations and actions align with the Division's mission and vision. This framework makes the themes universally applicable, in case the recommendations or action items need to adapt, shift, or change over the next five years.

# Plan Themes



## Health & Well-Being

**Transform parks into dynamic spaces for physical activity, mental rejuvenation, and social connection.**

Parks and open spaces are essential infrastructure investments for a healthy and resilient community, offering thoughtfully designed environments that promote physical activity, mental restoration, and social interaction. There is an increasing amount of evidence that helps us recognize the powerful role that access to nature plays in public health outcomes. Findings from the supply and demand chapter reinforce this connection, noting that North Carolina residents overwhelmingly prioritize amenities like trails and activities like walking and hiking that support everyday movement and active living. Survey respondents also identified visiting parks for engaging with outdoor spaces. By designing inclusive, well-connected, and inviting landscapes, we not only support healthier lifestyles but also create public realms that foster connection, equity, and long-term community vitality.



## Recreation for All

**Reimagine all parks as welcoming, safe, and valued places for all users through universal access.**

As North Carolina's population grows and becomes increasingly diverse, the State must provide fair access to outdoor recreation for all residents, regardless of location, background, or ability. The community engagement findings demonstrate a strong, statewide interest in additional trails, playgrounds, and water-based recreation, particularly in rapidly developing areas. To address these needs, it is essential to develop new facilities within growth corridors while also revitalizing aging amenities in established communities. Equitable recreation planning requires intentional engagement with groups historically underrepresented in park systems. Strategies such as increasing public awareness among non-users, fostering workforce diversity, and collaborating with Indigenous communities can help bridge access gaps and enhance cultural relevance.

Addressing barriers such as overcrowding, limited accessibility, and unwelcoming environments is also critical. By enhancing educational programs, implementing inclusive design principles, and leveraging technology to simplify park use, parks and open spaces can become more inviting and accessible to all. These recommendations, grounded in public input and data-driven analysis, establish a framework for a park system that is equitable, inclusive, and sustainable for every North Carolinian.



## Resiliency

**Achieve lasting resiliency and build sustainable, adaptive park systems that prepare our communities for future challenges.**

Resiliency stands out as an overarching theme in the future of outdoor recreation planning in North Carolina, ensuring that landscapes, communities, and park systems are equipped to adapt and flourish amid ongoing climate, population, and ecological changes. It is clear from public engagement findings that North Carolinians deeply value access to natural resources that face increasing vulnerability from environmental stressors. The protection and conservation of high-quality natural areas, including wetlands, forests, and scenic corridors, are essential not only for sustaining recreation opportunities but also for preserving the ecosystem services that help buffer communities from the impacts of climate change. As a rapidly growing state, people are demanding a balance of growth with prioritizing protection and conservation of assets that are unique to North Carolina.

Moving forward, infrastructure investments should prioritize climate-resilient design, including flood-resilient trails and recreational amenities that incorporate shade, while advancing broader conservation objectives. Fostering community stewardship and raising awareness of natural, cultural, and historical resources will empower residents to take an active role in safeguarding North Carolina's unique outdoor heritage. Ultimately, a resilient parks and recreation system is about more than durability; it is about protecting legacy landscapes, supporting ecological health, and ensuring that all residents have affordable and fair access to high-quality outdoor experiences for generations to come.



## Economic Impact

**Harness the transformative power of parks to stimulate business development, tourism, and community investment.**

Outdoor recreation is a powerful economic engine for North Carolina, fueling local economies, supporting job creation, and enhancing community well-being. The supply and demand assessment data indicate that both residents and visitors consistently seek access to trails, water-based recreation, and natural destinations as assets that drive tourism, increase property values, and support small businesses throughout the State. Therefore, promoting the economic benefits of recreation should remain a central strategy in statewide planning.

To fully realize this economic potential, equitable funding strategies are essential to ensure that all communities, whether urban, rural, or historically underserved, can access, maintain, and expand their outdoor recreation infrastructure. This approach includes diversifying funding sources, strengthening the use of grants, and establishing dedicated funding streams for trail development and statewide recreation initiatives such as the Great Trails State Plan. Partner organizations should be empowered with the capacity to plan, design, and implement trail systems that stimulate local economies.

As North Carolina continues to position itself as a premier recreation destination, it must also proactively prepare for economic disruptions caused by natural disasters and other unforeseen events. A resilient and well-funded parks and recreation system will enable communities to adapt, recover, and thrive while reinforcing the long-term economic value of outdoor recreation.



# HEALTH & WELL-BEING

| # | Recommendation | | Action Item |
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| HW1 | Support improvements in public health and fitness by increasing opportunities for physical activity. | HW1.1 | Provide adequate park land and recreational facilities to encourage children and their families to be more physically active. |
| | | HW1.2 | Promote public and private partnerships, especially with third party recreation providers, healthcare organizations, and insurance companies, to encourage physical activity through outdoor recreation. |
| | | HW1.3 | Provide communities with up-to-date information about the role of parks and open space, and non-motorized and active transportation routes in promoting healthy lifestyles. |
| | | HW1.4 | Encourage the development of community policies regarding recreational facilities, the use of school facilities, and trails and bicycle-friendly routes to help people be more physically active. |
| | | HW1.5 | Focus on designing intergenerational amenities that appeal to diverse residents for holistic health benefits. |
| | | HW1.6 | Encourage local providers to use the Priority Investment Rating findings to provide relevant new amenities that increase opportunities to stay active. |
| | | HW1.7 | Include tutorial placards on park amenities that support physical activity. For example, fitness stations, walking loop, or open play. |

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| HW1 | Support improvements in public health and fitness by increasing opportunities for physical activity. | HW1.8 | Include signage noting the benefits of exercise. (i.e. Three full walks around this park is equivalent to 15 minutes of structured exercise needed by most adults.) |
| | | HW1.9 | Leverage the use of apps and online data sources to support positive health and wellbeing outcomes. |
| HW2 | Promote programming, facilities, and built environment improvements that provide physical and mental health benefits. | HW2.1 | Raise awareness of using local and regional trails to engage in exercises such as walking, biking, hiking, roller blading, etc. |
| | | HW2.2 | Incorporate and promote unique offerings at parks that encourage staying active, including play areas, fitness areas, sports courts, and water-related activities. |
| | | HW2.3 | Support local communities in building amenities that encourage socialization, such as event spaces, festivals, group gatherings, etc. |
| | | HW2.4 | Promote parks that offer nature-based activities to provide deeper connection to nature. |
| | | HW2.5 | Create an 'Unplugged at State Parks' campaign to highlight offline activities and offerings at state parks. |
| | | HW2.6 | Support and promote programs that encourage mindfulness and improve mental health. |
| | | HW2.7 | Provide basic outdoor recreation courses, particularly in urban areas, to increase comfort with more intensive outdoor activities such as kayaking, camping, backpacking, etc. |

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| HW2 | Promote programming, facilities, and built environment improvements that provide physical and mental health benefits. | HW2.8 | Encourage and support overnight camping programs within larger county and municipal parks to reduce demand and strain on state parks. |
| | | HW2.9 | Encourage the development of intergenerational programming to bring diverse user groups together and create teach-learn opportunities. |
| | | HW2.10 | Focus on protection and expansion of tree canopies within state parks, particularly in and adjacent to vulnerable communities. |
| | | HW2.11 | Provide education on the benefits of tree canopy protection to local agencies and support their efforts to protect and expand tree canopy in local parks. |
| | | HW2.12 | Work with local planning officials to determine planting requirements to be applied to all developments. |
| HW3 | Identify the disparities in how people access park system and champion efforts to reduce inequities in access. | HW3.1 | Use GIS maps and data within SCORP to identify health-vulnerable areas within your community. |
| | | HW3.2 | Create a comprehensive inventory of outdoor recreation opportunities, including parks, amenities, greenways, and trails in relation to socially vulnerable areas. |
| | | HW3.3 | Liaise with local hospitals and health care organizations as they conduct their community health needs assessment. |
| | | HW3.4 | Forge data-sharing agreements with your local hospitals and health care organizations. |

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| HW3 | Identify the disparities in how people access park system and champion efforts to reduce inequities in access. | HW3.5 | Stay updated on health equity measures, data, and assessments. |
| | | HW3.6 | Continue partnerships with NC State University and other educational institutions to promote research into recreation best practices. |
| | | HW3.7 | Share current research and best practices to educate healthcare providers, interested organizations, and the public about the importance of parks and open space investment in the areas of need for improving the health indicators. |
| | | HW3.8 | Partner with relevant organizations to assess current safe access levels and opportunities for infrastructure improvements to increase safe and fair access for communities and visitors. |
| | | HW3.9 | Strategically expand parks and recreational spaces in areas with limited access to health-promoting natural environments. |
| | | HW3.10 | Acquire public park land in areas with high health vulnerability. |
| HW4 | Support the creation of more regional trail organizations like the Carolina Thread Trail, Piedmont Legacy Trails, and the Triangle Trails Initiative to add trail development capacity at a regional level across the state. | HW4.1 | Continue regional trail planning through the Division. |
| | | HW4.2 | Identify existing nonprofit or local government partners that may be candidates to house new regional trail organizations. |
| | | HW4.3 | Identify a funding source to provide operational support to start up organizations. |

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| HW5 | Increase opportunities for adaptive trail users by encouraging new natural surface trails to be built to adaptive trail use standards or identify existing natural surface trails that can be retrofitted to meet adaptive trail use standards. | HW5.1 | Develop an assessment tool to measure and rate the trail accessibility to help users select trail routes that meet their need for level of difficulty for walking/ hiking. |
| | | HW5.2 | Establish an adaptive trail use standard through the Division based on national best practices. |
| | | HW5.3 | Identify parks with existing adaptive trail programming as opportunities to promote and showcase trail planning and construction best practices for adaptive uses. |
| | | HW5.4 | Include adaptive trail activities as a user type when inventorying trails within state parks. |
| HW6 | Establish annual trails programming based on the Year of the Trail model to increase trail programming across all 100 counties. | HW6.1 | Designate an internal liaison within the Division to lead trail programming coordination. |
| | | HW6.2 | Provide adequate resources through the Division or statewide partner organizations to effectively provide programming support and leadership to communities at a statewide level. |
| HW7 | Support the continued development of trail benefits studies. | HW7.1 | Identify opportunities for studies on the impact of paddle trails, in addition to studies of land based trails. |
| | | HW7.2 | Support communication channels that share these resources with local jurisdiction partners. |

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# RECREATION FOR ALL

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| RA1 | Meet the needs of North Carolina's rapidly growing population by providing more recreation opportunities in areas of the state where growth is taking place. | RA1.1 | Add additional recreation opportunities near major urban areas to help decrease the long-term demand on the more ecologically sensitive state parks and natural areas. |
| | | RA1.2 | Provide funding to local parks and recreation departments for new recreation amenities in areas with growing populations. |
| | | RA1.3 | Better educate residents about current and future outdoor recreation resource needs for a growing population. |
| | | RA1.4 | Extend information and data sharing capacity between recreation providers and non-recreation providers within government agencies so that more holistic planning practices are possible. |
| | | RA1.5 | Grow recreation regional planning capacity on all levels and incentivize these plans by promoting their best practice in grant applications. |
| | | RA1.6 | Encourage construction of multi-use facilities to allow flexibility for diverse uses and interest groups. |
| | | RA1.7 | Provide beginner-level programs and learning opportunities for outdoor recreation activities targeted specifically for individuals with limited access to outdoor experiences. |
| | | RA1.8 | Encourage local agencies to provide space for pop-up events and amenities like pop up play, movie nights, block parties, etc. to increase access to outdoors where permanent access to recreation is not available. |

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| RA2 | Renovate, replace and revitalize existing park amenities across the state. | RA2.1 | Target funding to renovate, replace and revitalize existing recreation amenities for state and local agencies before facilities go into disrepair due to overwhelming demand. |
| | | RA2.2 | Retrofit existing facilities to enhance access to all user groups, including age and ability levels. |
| | | RA2.3 | Ensure that all updates demonstrate best practices for accessibility. |
| | | RA2.4 | Renovate existing facilities to serve new purposes. |
| RA3 | Increase opportunities and public awareness of the state's natural resources and recreation opportunities for the unaware and current non-users. | RA3.1 | Promote opportunities that align with grade-level science and social science curriculum, and take students outdoors to learn about the environment through visits to state and local parks. |
| | | RA3.2 | Continue to design recreational facilities to ensure universal access with recognition of the needs of special needs and aging populations. |
| | | RA3.3 | Encourage local agencies to identify unaware and non-users and provide funding and engagement opportunities in these areas. |
| | | RA3.4 | Identify key partners to address challenges and enhance access to recreation in areas with fewer recreational opportunities. |

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| RA3 | Increase opportunities and public awareness of the state's natural resources and recreation opportunities for the unaware and current non-users. | RA3.5 | Develop targeted outreach efforts for non-users and unaware users to identify specific barriers to access and engagement with the parks system. |
| | | RA3.6 | Identify key partners who work with non-users to help raise awareness about outdoor recreation. |
| | | RA3.7 | Utilize education, outreach and marketing efforts, trainings, and other customized tools to promote unique experiences in local and state parks. |
| RA4 | Improve outdoor educational programs to achieve multiple benefits such as local history, cultural awareness, and environmental stewardship. | RA4.1 | Find opportunities to increase culturally focused programming events and efforts. |
| | | RA4.2 | Identify local partner organizations and institutions to help create programs focused on local history and traditions. |
| | | RA4.3 | Create new programs with a focus on location-specific environmental stewardship. |
| RA5 | Address the real and perceived barrier of 'overcrowding' in parks. | RA5.1 | Promote strategies such as 'low impact' recreation and enforcement of rules to ensure long-term sustainability of sensitive ecosystems. |
| | | RA5.2 | Train staff and educate visitors about the 'Leave No Trace' principles while outdoors. Source: https://www.ncparks.gov/conservation/park-sdafety-and-respect/leave-no-trace. |
| | | RA5.3 | Create online live dashboards or other ways for more popular parks to suggest nearby alternative destinations or alternative days and times to visit. |

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| RA5 | Address the real and perceived barrier of 'overcrowding' in parks. | RA5.4 | Provide alternative immersive digital experiences using VR technology, media, videos, etc. to reduce human footprint on highly sensitive habitats. |
| | | RA5.5 | Allow intentional area closures to let the landscape and local flora to heal and recuperate from human impacts. |
| | | RA5.6 | Provide guided, timed tours of highly popular recreational amenities. |
| | | RA5.7 | Explore options such as shuttle services from nearby parking areas in popular seasons to reduce vehicular traffic on sensitive park properties. |
| | | RA5.8 | Develop information for potential visitors to direct them to other parks/areas that provide similar unique outdoor experiences. |
| RA6 | Develop multi-layered strategies to provide easier access to local and state parks for all residents. | RA6.1 | Continue to advance the State's parks system to provide access to state parks within thirty minutes to an hour's driving distance. |
| | | RA6.2 | Promote and encourage local agencies to provide outdoor recreational opportunities within a 10-minute walk for all residents. |
| | | RA6.3 | Work with local agencies to provide transportation in areas without vehicle ownership and single-car households. |
| | | RA6.4 | Work with local nearby towns to provide shuttle transportation and day-tours to state parks. |

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| RA6 | Develop multi-layered strategies to provide easier access to local and state parks for all residents. | RA6.5 | Raise awareness and knowledge of close-to-home facilities and parks in collaboration with local agencies. |
| | | RA6.6 | Encourage the development of time-bound programs for users with time limitations to enjoy the outdoors. |
| | | RA6.7 | Develop tools and resources to educate people about alternative modes of transportation to access the outdoors, including public transport, trails, and bike routes. |
| | | RA6.8 | Include public transportation information on park websites. |
| RA7 | Create a more welcoming environment in parks across the State. | RA7.1 | Provide Spanish Translation on signage within the park system. |
| | | RA7.2 | Provide Spanish Translation of visitor materials at State Parks. |
| | | RA7.3 | Provide educational signage and storytelling component to celebrate Black History in State Parks. |
| | | RA7.4 | Work with NC American Indian Heritage Commission (AIHC) and local tribes to ensure accurate and respectful storytelling about American Indian communities of the past and present at our parks. |
| | | RA7.5 | Work with disability advocate groups to name gaps in the existing system and shared initiatives and funding opportunities. |

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| RA7 | Create a more welcoming environment in parks across the State. | RA7.6 | Adopt the Principles of Universal Design as a requirement for all future park projects. |
| | | RA7.7 | Encouraging inclusive design in park facilities to ensure all visitors feel welcome and safe. |
| | | RA7.8 | Create internship opportunities for youth from diverse backgrounds, including people of color, interested in future employment positions. |
| RA8 | Promoting workforce diversity to strengthen ties between parks and diverse user groups. | RA8.1 | Conduct an internal staff audit to figure out the diversity of staff within State Parks, as it aligns with the demographics within a 0.5-1 hour driving distance. |
| | | RA8.2 | Encourage local agencies to hire Bilingual/ Multilingual staff in specific parks to allow easier communication with diverse user groups. |
| | | RA8.3 | Include cultural competency training to improve engagement and reduce communication barriers. |
| RA9 | Leverage technology to enhance outdoor experiences when visiting State parks. | RA9.1 | Engage the Division staff and local providers in training to gain familiarity with emerging technology to enhance outdoor experiences for visitors. |
| | | RA9.2 | Train existing staff on tools like Translation apps to interact with bilingual users easily. |
| | | RA9.3 | Expand digital sources, mapping, and online information to encourage people to get outside. |

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| RA9 | Leverage technology to enhance outdoor experiences when visiting State parks. | RA9.4 | Use digital sources, storymaps, and virtual tours for historic resources that have limited accessibility for mobility-challenged visitors. |
| | | RA9.5 | Encourage visitors to share their experiences on existing social media platforms to attract new visitors to enjoy parks, trails, and other destinations. |
| | | RA9.6 | Leverage technology to educate the public in their language of choice about the environmental, cultural, and historic resources. |
| | | RA9.7 | Develop pre-recorded audio tours, digital education materials in multiple languages. |
| RA10 | Leverage the strong presence of federally and non-federally recognized indigenous communities to expand recreation experiences. | RA10.1 | Develop strategic collaborative efforts with the American Indian organizations to inform outdoor recreation experiences. |
| | | RA10.2 | Incorporate intentional engagement and feedback from indigenous communities for planning, design, and programming at local and state parks. |
| | | RA10.3 | Promote cultural awareness about indigenous communities through outreach, education, and marketing efforts. |
| | | RA10.4 | Partner with statewide cultural organizations to showcase outdoor recreation as an integral part of all human experience. |

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# RESILIENCY

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| RS1 | Protect and conserve North Carolina's high-quality natural resources and landscapes. | RS1.1 | Encourage local agencies to identify environmentally sensitive natural areas near high-growth areas for protection, conservation, and passive recreation. |
| | | RS1.2 | Encourage the Division or local agencies to acquire unique natural areas that are at risk of development. |
| | | RS1.3 | Develop a standard operating procedure (SOP) for the Division to pass along land acquisition opportunities to other entities that do not meet the State Park acquisition criteria. |
| | | RS1.4 | Explore land-holding mechanisms for properties that could be turned over to local governments for development and operation, especially for the development of greenway corridors. |
| | | RS1.5 | Continue collaborations with land conservancies to provide planning resources to local governments for land conservation and property acquisitions. |
| | | RS1.6 | Explore opportunities to allow for land preservation around military installations, linking agriculture and defense to strengthen the state's economy and military readiness. |
| | | RS1.7 | Seek partnerships with federal, state, and local governments, as well as nonprofits on coordinated goals for the continued protection, enhancement, and expansion of important natural resources and landscapes. |
| | | RS1.8 | Pursue land donations such as easements, inheritance trusts, developer incentives, etc. to assist in acquiring and preserving important outdoor natural resources. |

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| RS2 | Continue to focus on the protected and unprotected wetlands across the state for conservation efforts. | RS2.1 | Continue pursuing use of parks as protection for critical areas within the state's watersheds. |
| | | RS2.2 | Determine priority for acquisition of wetlands based on the acquisition criteria established in the Wetlands Assessment for SCORP and the updated North Carolina Conservation Planning Tool once published. |
| | | RS2.3 | Continue to prioritize isolated wetlands mapping to ensure their protection as part of the planning and design of parks. |
| | | RS2.4 | Treat unprotected and isolated wetlands as a natural resource and leverage current and future parks to protect these features. Some wetlands may need preservation as open space instead of being a part of the state or local park system. |
| | | RS2.5 | Support local agencies that provide voluntary restoration and protection of wetlands through parks and open space management. |
| | | RS2.6 | Continue to partner with other governmental organizations that are leading initiatives to improve water quality, sensitive habitats, and conservation efforts. |
| RS3 | Invest in infrastructure improvements that consider the impacts of climate change on outdoor recreation. | RS3.1 | Invest in ecologically sensitive and resilient infrastructure that can tolerate the environmental impacts of climate change. |
| | | RS3.2 | Install pilot projects and demonstration sites that use native and adapted plants and pollinators in outdoor recreation areas and support other agencies in their efforts to do so. |
| | | RS3.3 | Prioritize data-driven strategies in highly sensitive areas with the greatest need for interventions to ensure high-quality outdoor recreation is available for the community. These strategies could include data related to the frequency and impact of natural disasters, vulnerable demographics, presence of threatened and endangered species, unique cultural resources, etc. |

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| RS3 | Invest in infrastructure improvements that consider the impacts of climate change on outdoor recreation. | RS3.4 | Implement nature-based solutions to gain layered benefits for the community and the environment. |
| | | RS3.5 | Plan, design and construct projects using Nature-Based Design Solutions to ensure the essential infrastructure enhances the natural setting. |
| | | RS3.6 | Proactively incorporate disaster planning efforts into recreational planning, design, construction, and parks management to ensure functionality of park spaces before, during, and after emergencies. |
| | | RS3.7 | Invest in new technology and tools to project and monitor the impacts of natural disasters to help proactively plan for recovery efforts. |
| RS4 | Raise community stewardship across the State to protect natural, cultural, and historical resources. | RS4.1 | Identify and implement best management practices to encourage stewardship across the State. |
| | | RS4.2 | Provide training to staff and parks visitors to raise awareness about human impacts on resources. |
| | | RS4.3 | Develop awareness campaigns using social media and technology to educate visitors about protection and conservation of resources. |
| | | RS4.4 | Champion stewardship efforts by volunteers, friends groups, and partners in state and local parks. |
| | | RS4.5 | Utilize partnerships with nonprofits and private entities to relay consistent messaging for environmental awareness campaigns. |
| | | RS4.6 | Use storytelling tools to share the impact of environmental stewardship efforts from the Division and key partners (Department of Commerce, Department of Transportation, etc.) on outdoor recreation. |

| Alignment with other themes | | | Timeframe | | Responsibility | Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| RA | RS | EI | 1-3 Years | 3-5 Years | | |
| | X | | X | | | |
| | | | X | | | |
| | | | X | | | |
| | X | | X | | | |
| | | | X | | | |
| | | | X | | | |
| | | | X | | | |
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| | | | | X | | |
| | | | X | | | |



# ECONOMIC IMPACT

| # | Recommendation | | Action Item |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |
| EI1 | Promote the economic benefits of the state's recreation opportunities for communities across North Carolina. | EI1.1 | Use the GIS layers from the 2025-2030 SCORP assessments to identify the economically challenged areas across the State and promote strategic planning efforts for outdoor recreation. |
| | | EI1.2 | Develop innovative programming efforts that examine underutilized or underdeveloped recreation opportunities in economically challenged areas. |
| | | EI1.3 | Promote marketing efforts with partners like Visit NC in economically challenged areas to increase participation and enhance the economic impact. |
| | | EI1.4 | Develop and promote recreation programs, events, and facilities that attract regional travelers, to encourage overnight stays in economically challenged areas. |
| | | EI1.5 | Develop targeted recreation opportunities that help residents in economically challenged areas and serve to improve the local and regional economic vitality. |
| | | EI1.6 | Establish partnerships with local artisans – and especially tribal communities – to sell their goods at NC Parks' gift shops. |
| EI2 | Develop strategies around funding allocations to ensure the needs of all communities are met. | EI2.1 | Allocate funding specifically to areas with limited access to parks, green spaces, or recreational services. This may involve prioritizing resources for urban areas or rural communities that face geographic, economic, or social barriers to access. |
| | | EI2.2 | Provide recurring funding to small communities for grant assistance and deferred maintenance of amenities that have received grant funding for initial construction. |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | |
| Alignment with other themes | | | Timeframe | | Responsibility | Status | |
| RA | RS | EI | 1-3 Years | 3-5 Years | | | |
| X | X | | X | | | | |
| X | X | | | X | | | |
| X | X | | X | | | | |
| | | | X | | | | |
| | X | | | X | | | |
| | X | | X | | | | |
| | X | X | | X | | | |
| | X | | | X | | | |

| # | Recommendation | | Action Item |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |
| EI2 | Develop strategies around funding allocations to ensure the needs of all communities are met. | EI2.3 | Encourage local agencies to engage residents in the planning and decision-making process to understand the process of where and how funds are allocated. |
| | | EI2.4 | Continue partnering with Recreation Resources Service and other relevant organizations to manage grant programs that are adaptable to the diverse needs of different regions and communities, including those that may not have the infrastructure or capacity to apply for larger or more rigid grants. This can include smaller grants, technical assistance, or simplifying application processes. |
| | | EI2.5 | Funding opportunities for training, technical support, or seed funding should be considered as the Division continues working with organizations and agencies in underserved areas to build their organizational capacity. |
| | | EI2.6 | Encourage local agencies to develop fair funding policies that not only address immediate needs but also focus on long-term sustainability, ensuring that communities can maintain and manage parks and recreation facilities for future generations. |
| | | EI2.7 | Create awareness campaigns around health saving benefits of outdoor recreation while promoting the economic benefits. |
| EI3 | Explore diversifying funding sources to support the federal grants allocations in expanding recreation opportunities for state and local parks. | EI3.1 | Continue to support advocacy efforts for state and local funding. |
| | | EI3.2 | Support increases to dedicated government funding, leverages private funding, and partnerships to address the aging infrastructure needs. |

| Alignment with other themes | | | Timeframe | | Responsibility | Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| RA | RS | EI | 1-3 Years | 3-5 Years | | |
| | | | X | | | |
| | X | | X | X | | |
| | X | | X | | | |
| | X | | X | X | | |
| X | X | | X | | | |
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| # | Recommendation | | Action Item |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |
| EI3 | Explore diversifying funding sources to support the federal grants allocations in expanding recreation opportunities for state and local parks. | EI3.3 | Encourage partnerships with non profits, private providers, and other state departments including Department of Commerce to strengthen the outdoor recreation economy. |
| | | EI3.4 | Encourage and expand private investments in outdoor recreation. |
| | | EI3.5 | NC Parks should conduct periodic (i.e., every 4-5 years) analysis of how investments into State Parks and trails are stimulating increased resources for local communities through higher property tax revenues. |
| EI4 | Market North Carolina as recreation destination. | EI4.1 | Develop dedicated branding efforts to boost visitation and economic impact for special events and programs. This could include logos, marketing material, highlighting unique stories, experiences, and distinct identity. |
| | | EI4.2 | Provide easy access to information about diverse events, programs, and festivals through various platforms and partner sources. |
| | | EI4.3 | Continue to share success stories of public-private partnerships and celebrate the impact of private investments across the State in order to encourage more organizations to show their commitment to enhancing outdoor recreation experiences. |
| EI5 | Prepare proactively for unforeseen challenges with natural disasters or other events. | EI5.1 | Explore the feasibility of setting aside emergency funds for resources and grants for unforeseen needs. |
| | | EI5.2 | Continue to fund park investments in areas with high environmental vulnerability such as frequent flood events, high temperatures, wildfires, landslides, etc. that focus on resilient design strategies. |

| Alignment with other themes | | | Timeframe | | Responsibility | Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| RA | RS | EI | 1-3 Years | 3-5 Years | | |
| | X | | X | | | |
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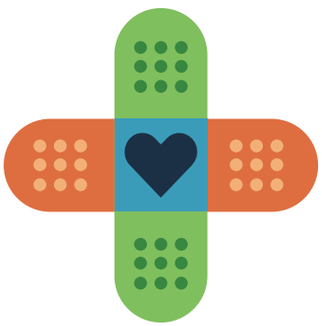
| # | Recommendation | | Action Item |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |
| EI6 | Continue to promote trails network across the State as economic driver. | EI6.1 | Fund key gaps in the statewide trail network to attract trails-related tourism to promote outdoor recreation economy. |
| | | EI6.2 | Fund local trails to provide easy, close to home access to outdoors for communities. |
| EI7 | Identify a funding source for implementation of the Great Trails State Plan and designate an entity to continually update the Great Trails State Network. | EI7.1 | Continue collaborations with the Great Trails Coalition to seek reauthorization of the Great Trails State funding from the General Assembly. |
| | | EI7.2 | Develop an annual reporting process for the Great Trails State Plan network which includes updated GIS data and statistics on status changes for trail segments that have advanced to a new stage of design or completion. |
| EI8 | Increase the capacity of Partner organizations to coordinate planning, design, and construction activities for their State Trail. | EI8.1 | Assess the current capacity building grants provided through the Complete the Trails Program to understand the impact of those dollars related to hiring and maintaining staff at partner organizations dedicated to their State Trail. |

| Alignment with other themes | | | Timeframe | | Responsibility | Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| RA | RS | EI | 1-3 Years | 3-5 Years | | |
| X | X | | X | | | |
| X | X | | X | | | |
| X | | X | X | | | |
| | X | X | X | | | |
| X | X | | X | | | |

# Recommendations & 5-Year Strategic Plan Summary

As the North Carolina outdoor recreation landscape continues to expand, the Division and local agencies will need to focus on meeting the increasing demands for protecting unique natural and scenic resources and providing opportunities for outdoor recreation. Consistent funding support will be needed for future parkland acquisitions, development of amenities and facilities that are in line with evolving recreation trends, and most importantly, to be able to take care of our existing recreational assets through ongoing management and maintenance.

The recent $11 million in funding authorization for trails development from the General Assembly is just an example of strategic collaborative efforts from various stakeholders and partner organizations that will create a significant positive impact in increasing the trail connectivity across the State. The 5-year strategic plan that outlines the recommendations supported by key action items will serve as the blueprint for the Division and local agencies to show and track continuous improvements, adapt and revise any action items when new opportunities arise, and pivot the efforts when certain action items no longer serve the larger goals of the statewide outdoor recreation. This actionable roadmap will ensure outdoor recreation continues to grow as a system that supports community well-being, enhances quality of life, and responsibly serves future generations.



HEALTH & WELLBEING



RECREATION FOR ALL



ECONOMIC IMPACT



RESILIENCY




Gene Gallin

**Hatteras Island, North Carolina**



# APPENDIX


A — List of Acronyms

B — Open Project Selection Process

C — North Carolina Wetlands Summary



# APPENDIX A: LIST OF ACRONYMS

| Acronyms | Full Form | Chapter Location |
|---|---|---|
| AASHTO | American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials | Trails |
| ABPP | American Battlefield Protection Program | Introduction |
| ADA | Americans with Disabilities Act | Recreation for All |
| AP | Accessible Parks Grant Program | Recreation for All |
| AZA | Association of Zoos and Aquariums | Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| BEA | Bureau of Economic Analysis | State of System, Recreation Trends |
| BIPOC | Black, Indigenous, and People of Color | Recreation Trends |
| BOA | Boating Access Areas | Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| CAMPO | Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization | Trails |
| CCCN | Cities Connecting Children to Nature | Recreation Trends |
| CCST | Connecting Communities to State Trails Grants | Introduction |
| CDC | Centers for Disease Control | Recreation for All, Health Assessment |
| CMR | Charlotte Metropolitan Region | Trails |
| CO2 | Carbon Dioxide (Pollutant) | Resiliency |
| COG | Council of Government | Previous Plans |
| CORE | Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies | Introduction, Supply and Demand |

| Acronyms | Full Form | Chapter Location |
|---|---|---|
| CTP | Complete the Trails Program | Introduction, Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| CTT | Carolina Thread Trail | Trails |
| DCHC MPO | Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization | Trails |
| DCM | N.C. Division of Coastal Management | Introduction |
| DEQ | N.C. Department of Environmental Quality | Previous Plans |
| DHHS | NC Department of Health and Human Services | Health Assessment |
| DNCR | N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources | Introduction, State of System, Community Engagement, Health Assessment, Recreation Trends, Previous Plans |
| DNST | Dan River State Trail | Trails |
| DOD | U.S. Department of Defense | Introduction |
| DOI | U.S. Department of the Interior | |
| DPST | Deep River State Trail | Trails |
| DSRF | DuPont State Recreational Forest | Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| EDPNC | Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina | Introduction, Trails |
| EGST | East Coast Greenway State Trail | Trails |
| EJI | Environmental Justice Index | Recreation for All, Health Assessment, Land Acquisition |
| EO305 | Executive Order 305 | State of System |
| EO80 | Executive Order 80 | State of System |
| EPA | Environmental Protection Agency | Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |

| Acronyms | Full Form | Chapter Location |
|---|---|---|
| EQST | Equine State Trail | Trails |
| ESF | Educational State Forests | Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| ETC | ETC Institute | Community Engagement |
| EXPLORE ACT | Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act | State of System |
| FBST | French Broad River State Trail | Trails |
| FFST | Fonta Flora State Trail | Trails |
| FHWA | Federal Highway Administration | Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| GAOA | Great American Outdoors Act | Introduction, Recreation Trends |
| GBF | Global Biodiversity Framework | Recreation Trends |
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product | Recreation Trends |
| GTS | Great Trails State | Trails |
| GTSC | Great Trails State Coalition | Trails |
| GTSP | Great Trails State Plan | Trails |
| HBCU | Historically Black Colleges and Universities | Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| HGST | Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail | Trails |
| HRST | Haw River State Trail | Trails |
| IDEA | Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility | Recreation for All |
| IMD | Integrated Mobility Division | Trails |

| Acronyms | Full Form | Chapter Location |
|---|---|---|
| ITRE | Institute for Transportation Research and Education | Trails |
| IUCN | International Union for Conservation of Nature | Recreation Trends |
| LANO | Lake Norman State Park | Trails |
| LURI | Lumber River State Park | Trails |
| LWCF | Land and Water Conservation Fund | Introduction, State of System, Community Engagement, Recreation Trends, Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| MAP | National Forest Foundation Matching Awards Program | Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| MCPRSS | Municipal and County Parks and Recreation Services Study | Supply and Demand |
| MPO | Metropolitan Planning Organization | Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers, Trails |
| MST | Mountains-to-Sea Trail | Introduction, Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers, Trails |
| NAAEE | North American Association for Environmental Education | Recreation Trends |
| NC PATH | Parks and Trails for Health | Health Assessment |
| NC SHIP | NC State Health Improvement Plan | Previous Plans, Health Assessment |
| NCCSR | North Carolina Climate Science Report | State of System |
| NCDOT | North Carolina Department of Transportation | Community Engagement, Trails |
| NCRPA | N.C. Recreation and Parks Association | Community Engagement, Introduction, State of the State |
| NCSU | North Carolina State University | Supply and Demand |
| NCWRC | N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission | Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| NEA | National Endowment for the Arts | Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |

| Acronyms | Full Form | Chapter Location |
|---|---|---|
| NEEF | National Environmental Education Foundation | Recreation Trends |
| NEH | National Endowment for the Humanities | Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| NFS | National Forest Service | Trails |
| NIH | National Institute of Health | Health Assessment |
| NOAA | National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration | Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| NOx | Nitrogen Oxides | Resiliency |
| NPS | National Park Service | Introduction, Trails |
| NPST | Northern Peaks State Trail | Trails |
| NRPA | National Recreation and Park Association | Recreation for All, Health Assessment |
| NSF | National Science Foundation | Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| NWL | Natural and Working Lands | Previous Plans |
| OIA | Outdoor Industry Association | Recreation Trends, Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| OPSP | Open Project Selection Process | Introduction |
| OREC | N.C. Office of Outdoor Recreation | Introduction |
| ORLP | Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership | Introduction, State of System, Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| ORRA | Outdoor Recreation Roundtable Association | State of System |
| OVST | Overmountain Victory State Trail | Trails |
| PARTF | North Carolina Parks and Recreation Trust Fund | Introduction, Recreation for All, Health Assessment, Community Engagement, Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers, Trails |

| Acronyms | Full Form | Chapter Location |
|---|---|---|
| PIR | Priority Investment Rating | Community Engagement, Supply and Demand |
| PLC | Piedmont Land Conservancy | Trails |
| PLT | Project Learning Tree | Recreation Trends |
| PLT | Piedmont Legacy Trails | Trails |
| PORTS | Parks Online Resources for Teachers and Students Program | Recreation Trends |
| PTBA | Professional Trail Builders Association | Trails |
| PTRC | Piedmont Triad Regional Council | Trails |
| REPI | Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program | Introduction |
| RPO | Rural Planning Organization | Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers, Trails |
| RRS | Recreation Resource Services | Community Engagement, Supply and Demand, Recreation for All, Trails |
| RRST | Roanoke River State Trail | Trails |
| RTO | Regional Trail Organization | Trails |
| RTP | Recreational Trails Program | Introduction, Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers, Trails |
| SCORP | Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan | Introduction, Community Engagement, Health Assessment, Recreation Trends, Needs Assessment, Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| SDOH | Social Determinants of Health | Recreation for All |
| SFIA | Sports & Fitness Industry Association | Recreation Trends |
| SLAD | National Park Service's State and Local Assistance Programs Division | Introduction |

| Acronyms | Full Form | Chapter Location |
|---|---|---|
| SLO | State Liaison Officer | Introduction |
| SNCC | Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee | State of System |
| SO2 | Sulfur Dioxide (Pollutant) | Resiliency |
| STIP | State Transportation Improvement Plan ( | Trails |
| SVI | Social Vulnerability Index | Recreation for All, Health Assessment |
| TPL | Trust for Public Land | Health Assessment |
| TWTPO | Triangle West Transportation Planning Organization | Trails |
| WGST | Wilderness Gateway State Trail | Previous Plans |
| WGST | Wilderness Gateway State Trai | Trails |
| WMO | World Meteorlogical Organization | Resiliency |
| WSFR | Wildlife and Sports Fish Restoration Program | Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| YIP-EE | Youth in Parks - Environmental Education Grant | Health Assessment, Funding and Third Party Recreation Providers |
| YRST | Yadkin River State Trail | Trails |



# APPENDIX B: OPEN PROJECT SELECTION PROCESS

# NORTH CAROLINA'S OPEN PROJECT SELECTION PROCESS (OPSP)

## INTRODUCTION

The State of North Carolina (N.C.) offers federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) assistance for land acquisition and the development/renovation of outdoor recreational facilities through an open and competitive grant process known as the Open Project Selection Process (OPSP). Information on N.C.'s OPSP assures equal opportunity for all eligible project sponsors and all sectors of the public to participate in the benefits from the LWCF State and Local Assistance Program, and to enable the state to affirmatively address and meet priority recreation needs. On behalf of the N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (DNCR), the Division of Parks and Recreation (Division) administers the LWCF grant program for the State. LWCF manual used for the OPSP is dated April 21, 2025.(NPS) requirements cited in the OPSP chapter of the LWCF Federal Financial Assistance Manual, dated April 21, 2025.

The LWCF State and Local Assistance Program requires states to develop and maintain a Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). This plan is essential for a state to be eligible for LWCF funding and aims to:

1. Assess outdoor recreation needs and resources: SCORP evaluates the supply of and demand for outdoor recreation opportunities within a state, considering existing resources (local, state, and federal) and identifying areas needing improvement or expansion.
2. Set funding priorities: SCORP establishes outdoor recreation priorities for using LWCF funds to address the identified recreation needs and support statewide recreation goals.
3. Provide guidance for recreation development and management: SCORP outlines the state's goals for providing quality parks and outdoor recreation opportunities, including recommendations for operations, administration, planning, development, and recreation programs.
4. Ensure public involvement: The SCORP development process includes input from the public to ensure the plan reflects the needs and priorities of the state's residents.

By requiring and utilizing the SCORP, the LWCF State and Local Assistance Program ensures that LWCF funding is strategically directed towards meeting priority outdoor recreation needs and achieving plan recommendations.

A requirement for states to maintain their eligibility to receive LWCF monies is the completion of an approved SCORP and the OPSP at least once every five years. N.C.'s OPSP was developed in accordance with the National Park Service requirements.

LWCF grants are provided to the states, and through the states to local governmental jurisdictions, on a matching basis for up to 50% of the total project-related costs for the acquisition of land and the development of facilities for public outdoor recreation and for fulfilling the program's planning requirements. Eligible local applicants include counties, municipalities and federally recognized Native American tribes (local governments).

The administration of N.C.'s program, including the evaluation and selection criteria, is the focus of this document. The rating system was established to evaluate state and local acquisition, development/renovation and combination acquisition &development/renovation projects for parks and trails. The rating system also ensures that the selection of competing projects for funding is fair and equitable.

The current OPSP consists of the following seven components required by the NPS. These components are identified and explained in the following sections:

1. Priority rating system
2. Project selection process
3. Amendments
4. Recurring funding cycle
5. Public notification
6. Application Assistance
7. Public Participation

### PRIORITY RATING SYSTEM

N.C.'s priority rating system is based on an application evaluation, which is used to rank projects according to specified criteria. The criteria are used to evaluate the project need, applicant compliance history, site and project quality and alignment with the current SCORP goals.

N.C. has an OPSP priority rating system for local and state projects.

### PROJECT SELECTION PROCESS

Applications will be evaluated and selected based on quality and conformance with the priority rating system and project evaluation criteria in a single competition among all State, local, and tribal projects. The points are awarded per project type: acquisition (ACQ), development and ACQ, and development. The project types are consistent for each project type identified in the 2025-2030 SCORP goals. The distribution of a state's apportionment strictly based on geography or location of political subdivisions is prohibited.

Additionally, the scoring system for projects includes but is not limited to: planning efforts, public participation at the project sponsor level, public recreation facilities provided by the project, ACQ and/ or development of outdoor recreation facilities, ability of the sponsor to operate and maintain the project, and previous grant administration compliance.

Applications are ranked on the percentage of points achieved out of the total possible by project type (see page 10). Projects with the highest total scores that fall within the available LWCF funds will be recommended for funding, with preference given to areas currently lacking outdoor recreation opportunities. All local governments that are not selected for funding may reapply during a future funding cycle.

The maximum grant request for local governments is $750,000. There shall be no minimum funding request. There shall be no maximum request by State Parks.

### AMENDMENTS

Amendments and modifications can occur at any time during the project period. Every funding award is based upon the details described in the grant proposal and approved in the award agreement (contract). The amendment is a legal act that would alter the contract between the state and grantee. All amendments require prior approval from the awarding agency. Types of amendments considered:

- Revisions of budget and program plan (200.308);
- Modification to period of performance (200.309);
- Reallocation of funds (less than 10% per line item);
- Changes to key personnel.

Additional Amendment Requirements:

- Consent to changes must be clearly demonstrated.
- Amendments cannot change the original intent/scope of the award agreement; and
- Require prior approval from the awarding agency.

### RECURRING FUNDING CYCLE

N.C.'s LWCF grant program will be administered on an annual cycle. Please refer to the application notification for guidance.

### PUBLIC NOTIFICATION

The funding cycle begins each year when the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Interior issues the notice of apportionment to the governor. This notification identifies the amount of funds which will be made available for distribution to state parks, cities, counties, towns and federally recognized Native American tribes to apply for matching grants through LWCF. Upon notification, the Division issues a public notice of the funding opportunity to solicit applications for proposed projects through email notification and on the Division's and RRS's website.

The Division obtains an email list of all eligible local governments and parks and recreation directors throughout the state who have jurisdictional responsibility for parks and trails.

All interested parties can download an application guide from the Division's website. The guide and web page announce the application schedule, deadline, and anticipated date of notification of approved for selected projects. Local government applications are submitted through an electronic folder in Microsoft SharePoint. Applicants should contact their Recreation Resources Service (RRS) regional consultant to request access to the SharePoint folder. Applicants are encouraged to request access early in the process to allow for technician support, as needed.

The schedule below assumes that the state will be notified of the annual apportionment at the beginning of the federal fiscal year (October 1). If notification is received later, the schedule may be delayed accordingly.

May 1 – Public notification of the grant cycle.

November 3 by 5pm – Deadline for the submission of applications to the Division.

Spring – Applications are reviewed, evaluated and rated per the state's LWCF Priority Rating System. RRS conducts pre-award inspections of each project site. On behalf of the Division, RRS provides field administration and technical assistance to local governments. Division grant staff evaluate all applications and submit the recommendations to the State Liaison Officer (SLO) and Alternate State Liaison Officer (ASLO) for funding consideration.

Summer – State Liaison Officer recommends projects to NPS for review, approval and execution of project agreements. For local projects, project agreements are initiated after NPS approval is attained.

This schedule above allows the State to submit federal forms and other requirements to NPS for federal approval and obligation of funds prior to the end of the federal fiscal year (September 30).

### APPLICATION ASSISTANCE

The Division provides outreach and technical assistance to potential local government LWCF applicants through regional RRS consultants and through the Division and RRS's websites. Every effort is made to answer questions regarding application procedures, the proper completion of an application, and the criteria used for project selection and grant awards. Site visits with the applicant will occur prior to the scoring and rating of projects to better understand the project and the site's environmental suitability for the proposed project.

The Division's Planning and Recreation Resources (PARR) section will provide outreach and technical assistance to potential state park LWCF applicants as requested. Also, PARR staff will conduct site visits with state park applicants prior to the scoring and rating of projects.

### PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Federal guidelines require that the state's SCORP and OPSP include opportunities for public comment before implementation of the new program criteria. Public participation is required to ensure that the preparation and revision of the selection process and rating systems are based on public involvement and participation. In North Carolina, public involvement in determining the SCORP goals and the selection process were made in several ways.

Public participation throughout the SCORP planning process was instrumental in determining the major outdoor recreation issues which are a significant part of the selection process and rating system for state and local projects. All documents/press releases were posted on the Division website. In addition, four separate surveys (scientific, public, tribal, and recreation providers) were used to ensure public participation and input into the development of the state's SCORP goals and initiatives, and therefore, the associated scoring system's criteria. Several presentations were made at conferences throughout the process including the North Carolina Recreation and Park Association's annual conference, Municipal and County Recreation Director's Conference, and the first ever North Carolina State Trails Conference. Information about the LWCF program and SCORP was made available at the NC League of Municipalities and NC Association of County Commissioner's conferences.

# Project Evaluation Criteria

State of North Carolina
Department of Natural and Cultural Resources

**Revised Open Project Selection Process (OPSP)**
**COMING SOON**



# APPENDIX C: NORTH CAROLINA WETLANDS SUMMARY

# North Carolina Wetlands Summary

*"The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land."*—Aldo Leopold

## North Carolina Wetlands Overview

Wetlands are part of that larger community Leopold describes in which water plays a crucial role. Wetlands are areas that are inundated or saturated by surface water or groundwater at a frequency and duration sufficient to support, and that under normal circumstances do support, a prevalence of vegetation typically adapted for life in saturated soil conditions (Mitsch and Gosselink 2015). The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers define wetlands as "*areas that are inundated or saturated by surface or ground water at a frequency and duration sufficient to support, and that under normal circumstances do support, a prevalence of vegetation typically adapted for life in saturated soil conditions.*" By the current definition, jurisdictional wetlands extend into streams, lakes and the ocean as far as the plants that are rooted in soil have leaves or stems that extend above the surface of the water. Terrestrial or land-based wetlands occur on land where plants adapted to grow in predominantly wet or inundated conditions are present. This means that not all wetland habitat is always underwater and wetland habitats include some areas that are only occasionally flooded (N.C Div. of Water Resources 2024).

## General Wetland Types in North Carolina

The following list of wetland types and their descriptions was taken from the NC Wetlands website hosted by the N.C. Division of Water Resources (https://www.ncwetlands.org/)

### Riverine Forest (Statewide)

Riverine forest wetlands occur extensively in North Carolina, other southern states, and even in other countries. They occur throughout North Carolina along the floodplains of rivers, receiving much of their water from floods, but they also receive water from rain, surface runoff, and/or groundwater at or near the surface. Bottomland hardwood forests and riverine swamp forests are two riverine forest wetland types that often occur in close association with each other and can be

difficult to tell apart. The size and vigor of these forests are tied to the condition of the river and its floodplain, so changing these systems can significantly alter the services these wetlands provide. Many valuable lumber species of trees are found in riverine swamp forests and bottomland hardwood forests including many species of oaks, elms, maples, and ashes. Water-tolerant trees like red maple, overcup oak, tupelo, cypress, American elm, and Atlantic white cedar constitute the majority of the plant cover, though shrubs and non-woody plants are also found in these wetlands.

Large swaths of riverine swamp forests are found in the Coastal Plain, but significant tracts are also found in the Piedmont area of North Carolina, especially adjacent to large lakes and in low-lying areas along large rivers that can be flooded most, if not all, of the year with typical rain levels. Very small areas occur in the lower elevations of the mountains. Beavers are a major contributing factor in swamp forest creation. Swamp forests are important habitat for many birds, fish, and mammals. They are important places for maintaining plant diversity and providing habitat for young fish and crayfish. Riverine swamp forests may transition into bottomland hardwood forests further away from a river. Bottomland hardwood forests occur along second-order or larger streams and provide good water storage. They may contain floodplain pools and they may transition upstream into forested headwater wetlands.

**Seep (Statewide)**

Seeps are located along slopes, ridges, or hillsides and kept semi-permanently to permanently saturated by groundwater. Seeps are usually forested, but the downslope portion of a seep may transition to a different wetland type.

**Basin (Statewide)**

Basin wetlands are those found in natural depressions surrounded by uplands, usually less than a few acres in size. Lime sink wetlands in the Outer Coastal Plain are a good example. Some may have fairly steep sides and some have gently sloping sides. Rainwater collects in these depressions and creates temporary or permanent pools. Many dry out for much of the year, but they provide important breeding areas for amphibians, as predatory fish typically don’t live there. Basin wetlands can look like marshes with no trees, or like swamps with trees and shrubs, depending on

factors like fire, water duration, and soil types. What makes them unique is their shape and setting within the landscape.

**Freshwater Marsh (Statewide)**

Freshwater marshes can be found in a wide variety of wet landscape contexts including along rivers, canals and estuaries, along lakes or ponds, along the base of wet slopes and in 'wet meadows' (relatively flat areas where the groundwater table is naturally close to the ground surface). Marshes generally do not have trees. They have a wide variety of small, non-woody plants like cattail, rush, sedges, and soft-tissued flowering plants with broad leaves. Many times, freshwater marshes are a result of disturbances, such as forest fire, utility line maintenance, or beaver activity changing streams to ponded areas. The deep organic and mineral soils are continuously saturated, if not flooded, enabling thick deposits of plant material to accumulate. Marshes are enormously important to our state, controlling flood damage during storms and hosting important wildlife including birds, mammals, and commercial fish species.

**Bog (Mountains**)

Bogs occur in western North Carolina. They are mountain wetlands found in relatively flat spaces at the base of slopes, where long-term ground saturation makes an ideal situation for a range of wetland plants, many of them unique non-woody plants. Bogs are small; many are only one acre or less. The thick deposits of organic soils allow endangered plants like mountain sweet pitcher plant, green pitcher plant, swamp pink, and bunched arrowhead to grow, as well as unique wildlife like the endangered bog turtle. Bogs also support extensive mats of sphagnum moss, in accumulations not found in other natural landscapes. Walking in a bog feels like walking or bouncing on a wet sponge. Only 20% of North Carolina's prehistoric bogs still exist in their unaltered condition, because many have been ditched or filled for farming.

**Pocosin (Coastal Plain)**

Pocosins are unique to the southeastern portion of the Atlantic coastal plain with the majority of them occurring in North Carolina. "Pocosin" is an Algonquian native American term meaning "swamp on a hill." Pocosins develop in areas where ancient

river valleys were filled in with sand, silt, and clay from the eroding Appalachian Mountains to the west. Over thousands of years, dead plant matter accumulated in these wet, low places, building up in slightly hilly formations. Because of their landscape position, these areas do not naturally have streams flowing into them. Pocosins can be a very demanding place for plants to grow. The water is acidic, low in nutrients and only replenished by precipitation. Very few kinds of trees can survive in a true pocosin, one of them being the gnarly pond pine. Evergreen shrubs grow very densely in pocosins and include a variety of bays and ti-ti. Very few of the grass-like plant species or non-woody plants we are used to seeing in wetlands are found in pocosins, and the pocosins can be very difficult to walk through because they are so dense. Pocosins once covered much of the eastern third of our state but many of them have been converted to agricultural land by removing water through ditching.

**Non-Riverine Swamp Forest (Coastal Plain)**

Non-riverine swamp forests are in flat areas between streams and are dominated by trees (e.g., bald cypress, black gum, Atlantic white cedar, loblolly pine, and pond pine). They are usually inundated by groundwater, precipitation, and surface run-off, not by overbank or tidal flooding.

**Carolina Bay (Coastal Plain)**

Carolina bays are not a wetland type per se, but they are unique, mysterious, isolated, elliptical landscape features found in the Coastal Plain. There are many of them in North Carolina and, along with open water, they can also contain a variety of wetland types (e.g., pocosins, freshwater marsh, cypress swamp). The name "Carolina Bay" comes not from the location of the wetland in relation to water, but from the consistent presence of bay trees (loblolly bay, swamp bay, and sweet bay). These large and small oval depressions in the landscape are not associated with streams or other water bodies, and they are all oriented in the same northwestern direction. Their origin is a mystery, but many theories have been proposed. Their primary source of water is precipitation during the winter and spring months. In the summer, the water in the shallower bays often dries up, making these wetlands excellent habitat for amphibians and reptiles in particular. The temporary nature of the wetland reduces the number of predators and aids in the amphibian

reproduction cycle. In addition to amphibians and reptiles, many other species of animals find refuge in the wide variety of plant life in Carolina Bays. The plants, many of which are rare or endangered, benefit from the deep, rich soil. A large number of these wetland treasures have been severely altered and/or converted for farming.

**Pine (Coastal Plain)**

Pine Flats or Pine Savannas occur on very flat surfaces with poor drainage and high water tables. Pines grow well in their sandy mineral soils and so do many flowering species. These wetlands are often managed for pine production in plantations, which results in low species diversity.

**Estuarine Woody (Coastal Plain)**

Estuarine woody wetlands are found on the edges of estuaries and saltmarshes, occasionally flooded with ocean tides during storms; they are dominated by woody vegetation like pines, cedars, red maples, and sweetgums.

**Salt/Brackish Marsh (Coastal Plain)**

Salt/Brackish marshes are regularly flooded by salty ocean tides. The primary vegetation is grasses and rushes, mostly saltmarsh cordgrass and black needle rush. These wetlands are vital for lessening storm damage in coastal communities and hosting commercial fish and shellfish species.

## Wetland Functions and Ecosystem Services

### Wetland Functions

Wetland functions are the physical and chemical processes that take place in the wetland. Examples of wetland functions include:

1. Storage, filtration and purification of surface and groundwater,
2. Storage and absorption of precipitation and stormwater runoff,
3. Biogeochemical decomposition and cycling of plant material and nutrients,
4. Wildlife habitat,
5. Shoreline stabilization.

**Wetland Ecosystem Services**

Wetland ecosystem services are the benefits that wetlands provide to society based on their functions. Many wetland ecosystem services provide economic benefits, while others provide services in other areas, such as recreation and aesthetics (https://www.ncwetlands.org/learn/functions-benefits/).

*Clean Water*- Wetlands cleanse water passing through them before it reaches groundwater, streams, rivers, estuaries, and the ocean. In North Carolina, many cities and towns get their drinking water from rivers, so the economic value of wetlands is realized in the reduced cost of treating drinking water which has been cleansed of nutrients and pollutants by wetlands in upstream areas of the watershed.

*Water Supply*- Water supply is essential to living things. Wetlands help replace water in underground aquifers and reservoirs by holding it after rainfall and slowly infiltrating it into the groundwater. Groundwater recharge from wetlands also sustains the clean flow of water from groundwater to the baseflow of streams and rivers in times of drought.

*Flood Control*- Wetlands give rainwater a place to go – they hold water from heavy rain events and help prevent flooding in nearby areas. An acre of wetland can store 1 to 1.5 million gallons of floodwater.

*Erosion Control*- Wetlands reduce soil erosion by slowing the speed of the water passing through them when streams overflow into wetlands. Coastal wetlands alone provide storm protection valued at $25.6 billion every year.

*Food*- Wetlands are a good source of food production. Harvest of fish and shellfish that rely on wetlands produced $55 million in North Carolina in 2016 ($70.6 million in 2023 dollars). Nearly all (90%) of our commercially harvested fish and shellfish depend on wetlands, like trout, striped bass, pike, sunfish, crappie, crab, and shrimp.

*Habitat*- Wetlands are incredibly important to a huge variety of animals and plants that could not exist without them – plants, insects, amphibians, reptiles, fish, birds, and mammals. The Southeastern U.S. is a biodiversity hotspot in the world, in large part because of its many types of wetlands. Wetlands serve as homes for 31% of the United States' plant species. Up to one-half of North American bird species nest or feed in wetlands. Wetlands in North Carolina provide resting locations for migrating

birds like tundra swans, songbirds, gannets, and more. They also serve as important refuge for pollinating insects, which we rely on for pollinating most of our fruits and vegetables. More than one-third of the species listed as threatened or endangered in the United States live solely in wetlands and nearly half use wetlands at some point in their lives (US EPA 1995).

*Medicine*- Medicines have been developed from discoveries made in wetlands. The common willow tree which grows in wetlands is a source of salicylic acid, used in the manufacture of aspirin, a pain killer, and various skin treatments. Many plants such as stinging nettle, joe-pye weed, St. John's wort and cardinal flower are a few examples of plants used traditionally and by indigenous peoples to treat various illnesses and medical conditions.

*Recreation*- Wetlands are great places for recreation. Because of the variety of wetlands, and the plants and animals that live there, people like to visit wetlands to fish, boat, hunt, hike, camp, birdwatch, take pictures, and relax.

*Carbon Sequestration*- Wetlands support vegetation that stores carbon-long term and most wetland types store carbon in the soil, especially wetlands that have a high percentage of peat or decomposing plant materials in their soil profile. Pocosins for example can have two feet or more of peat in their soil profile, that has been deposited over many thousands of years.

*Aesthetics*- From mountain bogs to coastal marshes, wetlands are valued as beautiful landscapes which inspire art, appreciation for nature, relaxation and spiritual experiences for some indigenous peoples.

## National Wetland Status and Trends

*"High quality water is more than the dream of the conservationists, more than a political slogan; high quality water, in the right quantity at the right place at the right time, is essential to health, recreation, and economic growth."*

**Edmund S. Muskie–** former US Secretary of State; Senator from Maine; who introduced the Clean Water Act bill in Congress in 1971 (NPR 2023).

***"****Wetlands are important to our nation's heritage, economy and wildlife –especially when it comes to coastal communities, when a study shows that area four times the size of Miami is disappearing every year, it underscores the importance of*

*strengthening our collective efforts to improve wetland management, to reduce losses and to ensure costal infrastructure and resources are protected."—*

**Sally Jewell-** U.S. Secretary of the Interior 2013-17

Wetlands provide water quality protection and improvement, and habitat for thousands of species of aquatic and terrestrial plants and animals. Wetlands are valuable for flood protection, shoreline erosion control, natural products, recreation, and aesthetics. Wetlands are among the most productive habitats on earth providing shelter and nursery areas for commercially and recreationally important animals like fish and shellfish, as well as wintering grounds for migrating birds. Coastal marshes are particularly valuable for preventing loss of life and property by moderating extreme floods and buffering the land from storms; they also form natural reservoirs and help maintain desirable water quality (U.S. Geological Survey, 2024).

Estimates by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) of the national rate of wetland loss indicate that the rate has declined rapidly from a high during the 1950-1979 period to 2009. However, the US Fish and Wildlife Service indicates that wetland loss rates increased by 50 percent over the decade from 2009-2019 and continue to disproportionally impact vegetated wetlands such as marshes and swamps. Approximately 670,000 acres of vegetated wetlands, an area greater than the land extent of Rhode Island, disappeared between 2009 and 2019 (Lang et al., 2024). In addition, loss of wetland function has been identified as another negative trend.

Dahl (2011) found that although all types of wetlands are being impacted, the most loss has occurred in forested wetlands, which are more difficult to restore due to the amount of time required. When forested wetlands are restored back to their original wetland type, it can take multiple decades to approach lost ecosystem function, so that the impacts of loss are protracted over a longer restoration period (Moreno-Mateos et al., 2012, National Research Council, 2001).

## Status of Wetlands in North Carolina

The USFWS estimates that there were approximately 11 million acres of wetlands in North Carolina in the 1790's, or about one third of the total area of the State (Dahl,

1990). The most recent estimates available indicate there are approximately 4 million acres of wetlands remaining in North Carolina, covering about 12% of the state (FWS 2020), with approximately 95% of them located in the coastal plain region. Based on these estimates, approximately two-thirds of North Carolina's wetlands have been lost.

Based on North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management (2024) population statistics, North Carolina's population grew by over 900,000 from 2010-2020, a 9.4% increase. It is projected that by 2030 population will increase by 1,268,269 people, a 12.1% increase. It is also projected that from 2030-2040 North Carolina's population will increase by 1,252,386 people, a 10.7% increase. The sustained rapid population growth projected in the upcoming years will undoubtedly result in expanding development, conversion of undeveloped land, and continued wetland loss.

## National Wetland Trends Affecting North Carolina Wetlands

In May, 2023 in the Sackett vs. the Environmental Protection Agency decision, the Supreme Court ruled that only wetlands that have a continuous surface connection to a relatively permanent body of water connected to traditional interstate navigable waters have federal protection under the Clean Water Act. This ruling means that isolated wetlands, which do not have a continuous surface connection to navigable waters, are no longer protected under the Clean Water Act. Isolated wetlands in North Carolina include wetland areas classified as seep, basin, marsh, bog, pocosin, non-riverine swamp forest, Carolina bay and pine savanna wetlands. Since mapping of isolated wetlands, as defined by the Sackett ruling has not been comprehensively undertaken, an accurate estimate of the area of isolated wetlands that are now unprotected and vulnerable to uncontrolled development is not known precisely, but it is estimated to be as high as one million to over three million acres by the Environmental Defense Fund (Raleigh News and Observer 2024) or approximately 25-75% of the total remaining wetlands in North Carolina.

Some states have laws in place to protect isolated wetlands, examples are California, Maryland, New Mexico, Washington and Wisconsin. Colorado and Illinois are in the process of enacting state legislation for protection. In North Carolina, the 2023 N.C. Farm Act made changes to the state's agricultural and wastewater laws. The General Assembly enacted the bill in June 2023, overriding Gov. Roy Cooper's

veto. One of the Farm Act's provisions clarifies the term "wetland," making it identical to the Sackett definition that a wetland must have a continuous surface connection to a relatively permanent body of water connected to traditional interstate navigable waters. The Farm Act therefore repealed the N.C. Dept. of Environmental Quality's isolated wetland permitting program which had protected isolated wetlands for decades, and a permit is no longer required for impacts to any isolated or other federally non-jurisdictional wetland.

What is known is that isolated wetlands are important and worthy of protection. "Isolated wetlands (IWs) are a vitally important aquatic resource in the North and South Carolina coastal plain landscape in terms of ecological value and hydrological and water quality function" (Baker et al., 2013).

## Wetland Types Which Should Receive Priority for Acquisition

The following components of priority wetlands for acquisition are consistent with Section 303 of the Emergency Wetland Resources Act of 1986 and the National Wetlands Priority Conservation Plan, prepared by the USFWS. Broadly stated, the plan's criteria for developing a priority system for acquiring wetland acreage should be based on three goals.

Consideration for acquisition of wetlands should be those wetland types that are:

- Rare or have declined rapidly within the state,
- Subject to loss or degradation by an identifiable threat, or
- Sites with diverse and important functions and values.

Under these broad goals of wetland protection, the USFWS has provided more details to what types of wetlands should be acquired through the National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program FY 2024 grant guidelines. The guidelines give eleven attributes for which a wetland acquisition for conservation and protection should include. The table below lists these qualities.

**Criteria for Determining Priority for Acquisition of Wetlands (up to date as of 10/24/2024)**

| Benefit | Acquisition Criteria |
|---|---|
| **Wetlands conservation** | Will the acquisition reverse coastal wetland loss or habitat degradation in decreasing or stable coastal wetland types? Will it conserve wetlands to prevent losses of decreasing or stable wetland types? |
| **Maritime forests on coastal barriers** | Will the acquisition significantly benefit maritime forests on coastal barriers? |
| **Long-term conservation** | Will the acquisition ensure long-term (at least 20 years) conservation of coastal wetland functions? |
| **Coastal watershed management** | Will the completed acquisition help accomplish the natural resource goals and objectives of one or more formal, ongoing coastal watershed management plan or effort? |
| **Conservation of threatened and endangered species** | Will the acquisition benefit any federally listed endangered or threatened species, species proposed for Federal listing, recently delisted species or designated or proposed critical habitat in coastal wetlands? Will it benefit State-listed species? |
| **Benefits to fish** | Will the acquisition provide, restore or enhance important fisheries habitat? |
| **Benefits to coastal-dependent or migratory birds** | Will the acquisition provide, restore, or enhance important habitat for coastal-dependent or migratory birds? |

| Benefit | Acquisition Criteria |
|---|---|
| **Prevent or reduce contamination** | Will the acquisition prevent or reduce input of contaminants to the coastal wetlands and associated coastal waters that are already contaminated? |
| **Catalyst for future conservation** | Will the project leverage other ongoing coastal wetlands conservation efforts in an area or provide additional impetus for conservation? |
| **Partners in conservation** | Will the acquisition receive financial support, including in-kind match, from private, local or other Federal interests? |
| **Federal share reduced** | Does the proposal significantly reduce the Federal share by providing more than the required match amount? |
| **Education/outreach program or wildlife-oriented recreation** | Is the project designed to increase environmental awareness and develop support for coastal wetlands conservation? Does it provide recreational opportunities that are consistent with the conservation goals of the site? |

Additionally, based on the recent Supreme Court Sackett decision and the 2023 N.C. Farm Act, isolated wetlands are left unprotected in North Carolina and based on the criteria above, should be considered a priority for acquisition.

## Tools to Manage Wetlands

The North Carolina Wetland Conservation Plan is a strategy for the state to achieve no net loss and other wetland management goals by integrating both regulatory and non-regulatory approaches to protecting wetlands. The North Carolina Division of Water Resources (NC DWR) with assistance from the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Wetland Program Development Grant crafted the original plan, approved in 2015. An updated plan published in 2021 addressed North Carolina's

wetland program development plans for the next five years (2021- 2025). It also listed seven informational and research projects undertaken with the original plan, five of which were funded with EPA grants, and incorporate all four core elements of the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Wetlands Program Framework (Monitoring and Assessment, Voluntary Restoration and Protection, Regulation, and Water Quality standards for wetlands). Below is a summary of the Wetland Protection Plan goals as listed in the 2021-2025 Plan.

*Monitoring and Assessment*

1. Continue collecting, analyzing, comparing and sharing baseline measurements for a variety of North Carolina wetland types.
2. Determine status and trends in *wetland* acreage, condition and functions.

*Regulations*

1. Provide a clear understanding of the jurisdictional scope of North Carolina's regulatory program.
2. Administer regulatory activities efficiently and consistently to enforce North Carolina's wetland requirements.
3. Evaluate regulatory activities to ensure regulatory compliance and intended environmental quality protection.
4. Work with North Carolina's citizens to wisely manage and restore the state's wetland resources.

*Voluntary Restoration and Protection*

1. Provide guidance and promote statewide voluntary wetland restoration and protection (including wetland acres, condition and functions).
2. Assist with public outreach and education for North Carolina voluntary restoration efforts.

*Water Quality Standards for Wetlands*

1. Support and provide consistency in applying the narrative wetland standards.

*Research*

In addition, from the NC Wetlands website (NC DWR 2024) "Scientists working for the

North Carolina Division of Water Resources during the past 20 years have completed over 20 major research projects – gathering information about and benefiting North Carolina's wetlands. Over 400 wetland sites have been studied, representing 17 different types of wetlands.

A wide range of parameters (e.g., water levels/hydrology, water chemistry, soil chemistry, plants, macroinvertebrates, amphibians, surrounding land use) have been measured depending on the research questions being addressed.

From a 2023 update presentation, NC DWR wetland monitoring and assessment scientists have monitored wetlands for over twenty years, completed over 25 major research projects and have collected state-wide wetland data at over 250 sites (NC DWR 2023). The information collected includes biological surveys of vegetation, amphibians, and macroinverebrates, water quality data, soils, hydrology, and rapid assessment technique evaluations. NC DWR also worked with the state's in Lieu fee program administered by the Department of Mitigation Services (DMS), mitigation bankers and others involved in designing, developing and managing mitigation projects to gather data about wetlands. For compensatory mitigation projects, monitoring and assessment reports are submitted on an annual basis for a minimum of five to seven years. DMS utilizes a watershed –based planning process, while working with state and federal agencies, private companies and land trusts to obtain the best possible return from their restoration, enhancement and protection projects. Since the late 1990's DMS has been monitoring the progress and success of its more than 580 projects aimed at conserving, restoring or enhancing around 30,000 acres of wetlands. In addition, North Carolina participated in the EPA's National Wetland Condition Assessment wetland survey in 2011 and is working collaboratively with South Carolina, Georgia and Alabama to apply a regional emphasis to wetland monitoring.

### *Voluntary Restoration and Protection*

Voluntary restoration and protection is more than ever a vital tool to maintain, increase and improve the acreage, condition and functions of North Carolina's wetlands. There are federal, state, local, and public-private partnership programs that assist voluntary wetland restoration and protection. At the federal level the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Wetland Reserve Program

offers incentives and cost-share funding for wetland protection on private property. The Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program is another program administered by the NRCS that protects wetlands on private property through incentives. Additionally, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service offers matching funds for wetland protection and rehabilitation through programs authorized in the North American Wetlands Conservation Act of 1989 which are landowner-friendly and foster public-private partnerships to protect wetlands and migratory bird habitat. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation also offers grants to States and municipalities for specific species and situations across the country, for which wetlands in North Carolina may qualify, such as the Five Star and Urban Waters Restoration grant program. Additionally, the America the Beautiful program provides grants for large-scale ecosystem conservation and restoration projects.

At the state level there are several state programs which provide opportunities for individuals or groups to aid in the state's goals of wetland restoration and protection. The Wildlife Resources Commission's Wildlife Conservation Land Program offers land management consultation and potential cost-sharing for qualifying Small Wetland Communities, a Priority Habitat with the program. Small Wetland Communities include some isolated wetlands. The NC Conservation Tax credit Program offers reduced property tax rates for qualifying properties. The N.C. Land and Water Fund provides grants to improve water quality, which could include wetland preservation and/or restoration and enhancement.

The N.C. Division of Coastal Management is a part of N.C. DEQ but it also receives oversight and part of its funding from the Office for Coastal Management, part of NOAA. Additionally, NOAA administers the Federal Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program (CELCP) that offers coastal states cost sharing for land conservation efforts, with funds provided through an annual competitive process among eligible states. The NC Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Plan provides an assessment of priority conservation needs and guidance for nominating and selecting land conservation projects.

The N.C. Wildlife Action Plan (2015) is a document produced by the N.C. WRC and it provides a wealth of information on wetland habitat types across the entire state and their priority for conservation. It serves as a state-wide guide for wetland

conservation and is due for an update in 2025.

Numerous advocacy groups such as The Nature Conservancy, North Carolina Coastal Federation, various land trusts and Ducks Unlimited strive to protect and restore water resources throughout the state. Various groups are often able to obtain and or sometimes provide funding sources for conserving and protecting these important ecosystems. A clearinghouse for granting sources is provided by the N.C. Resilience Exchange website (https://www.resilienceexchange.nc.gov/).

## Regulatory Framework for Wetlands and Streams

Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (CWA) is the overarching law that has governed surface water quality and wetland impacts in the United States since it was passed in 1972. Under Section 404 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) is responsible for oversight and enforcement of CWA regulations pertaining to wetland impacts.

Section 401 of the CWA provides States with the power to review Section 404 permits to ensure compliance with State water quality regulations. Coupled with Section 10 of the Rivers and Harbors Act, the CWA gives the USACE jurisdiction and administration over permit applications to impact wetlands and streams that are deemed waters of the U.S.

NC DWR enforces and coordinates Section 401 permitting/certification to ensure that the Federal Section 404 permitting process is compliant with State water quality regulations and standards, and before a Section 404 permit can be issued, a Section 401 certification from the State must also be issued.

The Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972 (CZMA) designates the North Carolina Division of Coastal Management (DCM) to have jurisdiction over permit applications to impact coastal wetlands in Areas of Environmental Concern under North Carolina's Coastal Area Management Program. The DCM works to protect, conserve and manage North Carolina's coastal resources through an integrated program of planning, education and research. As well as being subject to the Section 404/401 rules, development projects within one of North Carolina's twenty coastal counties must also acquire a Coastal Area Management Act (CAMA) permit.

### Compensatory Mitigation for Wetland and Stream Impacts

Compensatory mitigation is the restoration, enhancement, or preservation of aquatic resources for the purpose of offsetting losses of aquatic resources resulting from activities authorized by an USACE' permit. The process of how impacted wetlands are evaluated and how compensatory mitigation wetlands and streams are evaluated is subject to change as regulations and government policies change. This description of the compensatory mitigation process is current but can change in the future based on legal and legislative updates to the structure of the process.

When any project proposes wetland and/or stream impacts a Section 404/401 permit may be required, depending on the size of the impact (a CAMA permit may also be required if in one of the twenty coastal counties and within an Area of Environmental Concern, per the CAMA rules). Generally, if the wetland impact is more than 0.1-1 acre depending on the type of impact and wetland impacted, wetland mitigation is required to compensate for the wetland loss. If more than 150 feet of stream is impacted stream mitigation is required by NC DWR. Both an approved 404/401 permit and compensatory mitigation must be obtained before impacts are allowed. The amount of mitigation required is determined by an analysis overseen by the USACE and NC DWR to determine the number of mitigation credits required to compensate for wetland and stream area and functional losses, based on the impacted site's measured or observed characteristics. Currently mitigation credits for wetlands are characterized and categorized as being riparian, non-riparian or coastal. The Supreme Court Sackett decision mentioned earlier will likely affect these wetland categories. Stream credits are based on the level of stream restoration, enhancement or preservation achieved and the length of each type.

| **Sources of Compensatory Mitigation** | |
|---|---|
| Private mitigation bank | One or more sites approved by the Interagency Review Team where aquatic resources such as wetlands or streams are restored, established, enhanced and / or preserved for the purpose of providing compensatory mitigation in advance of authorized impacts to similar resources. |

| | |
|---|---|
| In-lieu fee program | A program that involves the compensatory mitigation of aquatic and related terrestrial resources through funds paid to a government or non- governmental natural resource management organization. In N.C. the Division of Mitigation Services, a state Department of Environmental Quality initiative offers four In-Lieu Fee mitigation programs designed to assist private and public entities comply with state and federal compensatory mitigation for streams, wetlands, riparian buffers, and nutrients. |
| Permittee-responsible mitigation | Individual projects constructed by permittees to provide compensatory mitigation for activities authorized by Corps of Engineers' permits |

## Standards and Classifications

Water Quality Standards

North Carolina's water quality standards for wetlands were implemented in 1996. The wetland standards contained in North Carolina Administrative Code 15A 02B.0231 and in 15A 02B.0201 are narrative in nature. They were designed to avoid degradation of water quality and to protect, preserve, restore and enhance the quality and use of wetlands, and other waters of the state, that are influenced by wetlands. Wetland uses protected in the rule include the following:

1- Storm and flood water storage and retention,

2- Moderation of water level fluctuations,

3- Hydrologic functions, including groundwater discharge that contributes to maintain dry weather streamflow and, at other locations or times, groundwater recharge that replenishes the groundwater system,

4- Filtration or storage of sediments, nutrients, toxic substances, or other pollutants that would otherwise have an adverse impact on the quality of other waters of the State as defined in 15A NCAC 02H .1002,

5- Shoreline protection against erosion through the dissipation of wave energy and water velocity and stabilization of sediments,

6- Habitat for the propagation of resident wetland-dependent aquatic organisms, including fish, crustaceans, mollusks, insects, annelids, planktonic organisms, and the plants and animals upon which these aquatic organisms feed and depend upon for their needs in all life stages and,

7- Habitat for the propagation of resident wetland-dependent wildlife species, including mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians for breeding, nesting, cover, travel corridors, and food.

The above uses are maintained and or enhanced through standards contained in the administrative code and provide NC DWR with the basic regulatory structure needed to protect wetlands from various detrimental activities not under USACE jurisdiction such as filling, ditching and draining. NC DWR has also utilized these standards to require some mining operations to maintain natural hydrology of surrounding wetlands that may be affected by groundwater pumping.

Wetland Classifications

In North Carolina all wetlands are classified as either freshwater wetlands or saltwater wetlands pursuant to North Carolina Administrative Code. The saltwater wetlands are defined to coincide with estuarine wetlands that are regulated by DCM. North Carolina also has a subclass Unique Wetlands which includes “wetlands of exceptional state or national ecological significance” and requires special additional regulatory protection to maintain existing uses.

## Wetland Recreational Opportunities Open to the Public

There are approximately 240 locations across the state managed by various municipal, county, state and federal entities that have publicly accessible wetlands. A comprehensive list can be found at the N.C. Wetlands website

(https://www.ncwetlands.org/table/). Among the more notable locations are the following:

Wildlife Refuges With Wetlands Managed by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Wetlands make ideal places for people to experience passive outdoor recreation. Hiking, birding, wildlife viewing, photography, canoeing, camping and other activities can all be enjoyed in a wetland.

U.S. Fish &Wildlife Service, National Wildlife Refuge Systems exist primarily to safeguard wildlife populations through habitat preservation and, as such, offer prime opportunity to view or photograph birds and other wildlife. Other recreational opportunities vary, as do development and accessibility.

**National Wildlife Refuges located in North Carolina**

| Refuge | Recreational Aspects |
|---|---|
| Alligator River | Primarily automobile touring, boating, fishing, hunting. Features two half- mile wheelchair-accessible nature trails: the Sandy Ridge Wildlife Trail, which is adjacent to 15 miles of paddle trails on Milltail Creek; and the Creef Cut Wildlife Trail, which also has a wheelchair-accessible fishing dock at its trailhead. Refuge Wildlife Drive offers opportunities to view a wide variety of birds, as well as black bears and red wolves. |
| Cedar Island | Primarily boating, saltwater fishing, waterfowl hunting. The refuge is predominantly a coastal marsh of 11,000 acres; there are two boat ramps. Concentrations of diving ducks, sea ducks, American black ducks, black rails, wading birds and shorebirds. Refuge is approximately 40 miles northeast of Beaufort via U.S. 70 and N.C. 12 at the confluence of Pamlico and Core sounds in Carteret County. |

| Refuge | Recreational Aspects |
|---|---|
| Mackay Island | Primarily bicycling, boating, fishing, hiking, hunting. Features a Charles Kuralt Trail observation site, an elevated platform with spotting scopes for views of the Great Marsh, plus seven miles of dikes suitable for walking or cycling. During fall and winter, tundra swans, ducks and large concentrations of snow geese congregate in the ponds south of the Great Marsh. Mackay Island is a portion of Knotts Island, which is accessible via private boat or free ferry at Currituck County Courthouse on N.C. 168 or via Princess Anne Road south from Pungo, Virginia. The refuge's Open Roads Days allow the public to drive the roads normally closed to vehicular traffic around the refuge impoundments at the end of Mackay Island Road. |
| Mattamuskeet | Primarily automobile touring, boating, fishing, hiking, hunting. Lake Mattamuskeet (40,000 acres) is North Carolina's largest natural lake. The refuge has significant wintering populations of ducks, Canada geese, snow geese and tundra swans. Concentrations of bald eagles and other raptors, wading birds and shorebirds occur seasonally. Features 3-mile entrance road and 5-mile drive along lake, and miles of grassed dikes criss-crossing the refuge. There are several observation decks and two state boat ramps. There are on-going plans to renovate the lakeside Mattamuskeet Lodge as a lodge, meeting site and museum. The refuge is 9 miles east of Swan Quarter by U.S. 264 and N.C. 94 in Hyde County. |
| Pea Island | Primarily boating, fishing, hiking. Features a visitor center, two wheelchair-accessible trails with an observation tower on one and an overlook on the other, a photography blind and 13 miles of beach. Concentrations of ducks, geese, swans, wading birds, shore birds, raptors, neotropical migrants are seasonally abundant on the refuge. |
| Pee Dee | Primarily automobile touring, fishing, hiking, hunting. Habitat for more than 180 bird species, including wading birds, migratory waterfowl and songbirds. Enter the refuge 7 miles north of Wadesboro on U.S. 52 in Anson County. |

| Refuge | Recreational Aspects |
|---|---|
| Pocosin Lakes | Primarily automobile touring, fishing, hiking, and deer and small game hunting. Features three-quarter-mile Scuppernong River Interpretive Boardwalk, the Walter B. Jones Sr. Center for the Sounds interpretive visitors center, and observation and photography opportunities for tundra swans, snow geese and ducks, as well as black bear and other birds and animals. The visitor center is adjacent to the Tyrrell County Visitor Center on U.S. 64 in Columbia. |
| Roanoke River | Primarily fishing, hiking, hunting. Concentrations of wintering waterfowl, nesting ducks, raptors, osprey and neo-tropical migrants are common. The largest inland heron rookery in North Carolina is on the refuge. Bald eagles nest on adjacent lands; river corridor is wintering area for bald eagles. The refuge consists of five tracts of land along 70 miles of the Roanoke River and two distant satellite tracts in other river basins. |
| Swanquarter | Primarily motorized boating, saltwater fishing, waterfowl hunting. Concentrations of diving ducks, sea ducks, American black ducks, wading birds and shorebirds. The refuge supports one of the northernmost populations of the American alligator. There are four boat ramps (one accessible only via a trail), and a fishing pier at Bell Island. Refuge land on the north shore of Pamlico Sound east and west of the village of Swan Quarter is only accessible by boat, except for trails in the Bell Island Unit (2 miles west of Swan Quarter by U.S. 264) in Hyde County. |

**National Forest Wetland Recreation Opportunities**

**The Croatan National Forest's** 160,000 acres support pine forests, saltwater estuaries, bogs and pocosins. Bordered on three sides by tidal rivers and the Bogue Sound, the forest is defined by water. A variety of recreational experiences are found in the Croatan National Forest such as hunting/fishing , camping, hiking, horseback riding, picnicking and biking. Moreover, visitors can enjoy the forest's wide diversity of wildlife- from deer, black bears and turkeys to wading birds, ospreys and alligators.

Canoeing and boating are popular on blackwater creeks and saltwater marshes. The Croatan is also home to the carnivorous Venus fly-trap, sundew and pitcher plant.

Other National Forests with more limited wetland recreational opportunities include Pisgah National Forest, Nantahala National Forest, Uwharrie National Forest and Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest.

**National Park Service Wetland Recreation Opportunities**

**Cape Lookout National Seashore** is a low, narrow, ribbon of sand running from Ocracoke Inlet on the northeast to Beaufort Inlet on the southwest. These barrier islands-56 miles long-consist mostly of wide, bare beaches with low dunes covered by scattered grasses, flat grasslands bordered by dense vegetation, and large expanses of salt marsh on the sound side of the islands. Lying closest to the sound--the body of water between a barrier island and the mainland--the salt marsh is one of the most diverse ecosystems on an island. Many visitors come to view wildlife and can find many species of birds in the marsh feeding on the insects, fish, crabs, and other invertebrates that live there.

**Cape Hatteras National Seashore**, the nation's first national seashore, was established to preserve significant segments of unspoiled barrier islands along North Carolina's stretch of the Atlantic Coast. It encompasses approximately 70 miles of the 125-mile stretch of barrier islands that make up the Outer Banks and is separated from the North Carolina mainland by the Pamlico Sound. A large portion of the park is considered a salt marsh where visitors can hike, view wildlife, kayak, crab or fish. The park also allows limited waterfowl hunting.

**North Carolina State Parks System Wetland Recreation Opportunities**

North Carolina has multiple parks where wetland features are a recreational component of the park. These parks include Dismal Swamp, Carolina Beach, Goose Creek, Hammocks Beach, Haw River, Lake Waccamaw, Merchants Mill Pond, Pettigrew and Jones Lake state parks (see table below).

**North Carolina State Parks with Wetland Features**

| State Park Unit | Wetland Features / Recreational Features |
|---|---|
| Dismal Swamp State Park | The Great Dismal Swamp is one of the largest protected swamp wildernesses in the eastern United States, with 38,000 acres in North Carolina and 82,000 acres in Virginia. The state park, which officially opened in March 2008, has a visitors center, a system of boardwalks, decks and gazebos, 16.7 miles of hiking and mountain biking trails, and bird watching and paddling opportunities.<br><br>The park is adjacent to the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge. In December 2013, the largest known forested wetlands restoration project east of the Mississippi River was constructed in the park restoring hydrology to 9,580 acres.<br><br>Funded by a North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant, the project restores habitat for over 200 species of migratory birds, helps to control wildfires, and sequesters mercury and atmospheric carbon. |
| Carolina Beach State Park | Three limesink ponds, each vegetated by a unique plant community, are found in the park. Cypress Pond, the most unusual limesink pond in the park, is dominated by a dwarf cypress swamp forest. Lily Pond is occupied by the broad, oval leaves and water lilies, which cover its waters in early summer.<br><br>Grass Pond, which dries out almost every year, is filled with a variety of aquatic sedges. Carnivorous plants thrive in the boggy soil around its edge and in the park's acidic, mineral-poor soil. The park offers boating, camping, education events, exhibits and educational facilities, fishing, hiking, and picnicking. |

| State Park Unit | Wetland Features / Recreational Features |
|---|---|
| Goose Creek State Park | This tranquil juncture of the broad, lazy Goose Creek and the Pamlico River is guarded by giant, old oaks draped with Spanish moss. The park offers boating, camping, education events, exhibits and educational facilities, fishing, hiking, picnicking and swimming. |
| Hammocks Beach State Park | Bear Island, an 892-acre barrier island has one of the most unspoiled beaches on the Atlantic coast and is accessible only by passenger ferry or private boat. Huggins Island, located just east of Bear Island in the mouth of Bogue Inlet, is a 225-acre island with a maritime swamp forest.<br>The 17-acre Jones Island became a part of the park in October 2007 and is managed as a state natural area. The park offers boating, camping, education and events, fishing, picnicking and swimming. The park also has a kayak, canoe and paddleboard rental concession |
| Haw River State Park | Located near the headwaters of the Haw River, Haw River State Park and the Summit Environmental Education Center are situated among piedmont forest, fields, wetlands and uplands on 1,374 acres in Guilford and Rockingham counties. The Summit is a retreat and conference center located on 210 acres in the park. The conference center includes eight meeting spaces, motel and dormitory-style sleeping facilities, indoor and outdoor common areas, a swimming pool, a six-acre lake, trails and a buffet-style dining room. |
| Lake Waccamaw State Park | One of the Carolina bays, Lake Waccamaw has species of animals found nowhere else on the planet, rare plants and endangered animals. The park offers camping, education and events, fishing, hiking, and picnicking. |

| State Park Unit | Wetland Features / Recreational Features |
|---|---|
| Merchants Mill Pond State Park | Coastal pond and Southern swamp forest mingle to create one of North Carolina's rarest ecological communities - an "enchanted forest," with primitive species of fish, towering bald cypress trees with massive trunks and luxuriant growths of Spanish moss. The park offers camping, canoeing and canoe rentals, education and events, fishing (including small craft with trolling motors), hiking and picnicking. Many areas and activities are accessible to those with disabilities. |
| Pettigrew State Park | More than 1,200 acres of land and 16,600 acres of water on Lake Phelps blend nature, history and recreation. The park offers bird watching, boating, camping, education and events, fishing, hiking and picnicking. Native American dugout canoes discovered locally and on display are among the longest and oldest known. In December 2005, the state announced the addition of more than 2,500 acres along the Scuppernong River, including about four miles of river-front land, to Pettigrew. Its potential future use includes camping, canoeing, hiking, fishing, picnicking and wildlife viewing. |
| Jones Lake State Park | Jones lake is a 2,208-acre park that contains two interesting Carolina bay lakes, Jones Lake and Salters Lake. Unique Atlantic white cedar wetlands occur on the borders of both lakes. Jones Lake State Park is open year-round and recreation opportunities include boating, hiking, camping, fishing and environmental and historical education. |

The state parks system also manages state natural areas, some that protect wetland-type habitats. Theodore Roosevelt Natural Area**,** a 265-acre nature preserve adjacent to the North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores, includes a self-guiding nature trail showcasing the barrier island ecosystem, containing maritime forest and marsh habitats. The marine habitat is a rich area for shellfish

and abundant birdlife.

Chowan Swamp Natural Area is located along the northern shores of the Chowan River, in Gates County. Bushy Lake State Natural Area, located in Cumberland County and managed by Jones Lake State Park, protects an area over 6300 acres of wet pocosin and Carolina bay forest. Pineola Bog, Beech Creek Bog and Sugar Mountain Bog are three state natural areas which protect almost 300 acres of bog habitat in the western mountains of North Carolina**.**

**North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission Game Lands**

Hunters of North Carolina are provided with more than two million acres of game land to which to hunt on that is managed by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC). Of that acreage, almost 500,000 acres spread over 44 preserves are located within the coastal plain and almost all of that land is considered wetlands. Equally abundant are the numerous boat launches located also in the coastal plain and are also managed by WRC which provide boat and canoe/kayak access to numerous bodies of water.

**Non-Government Agency Land Open to the Public**

**The Nature Conservancy**

Located in Columbus and Brunswick Counties Green Swamp Preserve contains some of the country's finest examples of longleaf pine savannas. The open savannas have a diverse herb layer with many orchids and insectivorous plants. Almost 13,000 acres of the preserve are comprised of pocosin (shrub bog). Federal Paper Board donated 13,850 acres of this preserve to The Nature Conservancy in 1977 and an additional 2,577 acres in the late 1980s. The Nature Conservancy has since purchased additional land in the preserve. The Green Swamp contains at least 14 different species of insectivorous plants, including: extensive populations of Venus flytrap, sundew, and four species of pitcher plant. The preserve is also home to many rare animals, including: American alligator, fox squirrel, Henslow's sparrow,

Bachman's sparrow, and Hessel's hairstreak butterfly. Visitors can hike, photograph wildlife and bird watch.

Boiling Spring Lakes Preserve covers approximately 5,000 acres and is owned by the State of North Carolina under North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services – Plant Conservation Program and managed by The Nature Conservancy. The preserve located in Brunswick County ranks highest in the state in rare plant species (112). The Boiling Springs Lake wetland complex contains a fascinating cross section of the Cape Fear region's natural communities. A series of parallel ridges and swales are the remnants of an ancient dune system. A large concentration of Carolina bays (elliptical wetland depressions) occur on the landscape. Fire-dependent natural communities, including high and low pocosins and longleaf pine savannas on the ridges and bay rims, form an intricate mosaic of habitat. Many opportunities exist for hiking, birding, and identifying wildflowers and rare plants.

**Local Governments**

Many local governments and municipalities in North Carolina have constructed multi-use trails in wetlands while expanding their greenway systems. For example, the City of Cary has completed restoration of the aquatic and riparian ecosystems along the White Oak Creek Greenway. Furthermore, the town is considering additional sites adjacent to Town greenway trails for restoration and/or stabilization.

Visitors to the Walnut Creek Wetland Center in the City of Raleigh can explore 58 acres of wetlands in downtown Raleigh. The Walnut Creek Wetland Center opened in 2009 to foster awareness of the importance of wetlands, wildlife habitat, hydrology, and human interaction with nature. McAlpine Creek Park in Charlotte is host to a wetland inside the park created by beavers where visitors can view beaver, turtles, ducks, and herons. Nearby in Union County Cain Creek Park trails take visitors through wetland areas for opportunities to see birds, reptiles and amphibians.

Other examples where cities or agencies, have created opportunities for recreation in wetland areas are the utilization of reconstructed wetlands for wastewater treatment. The City of Goldsboro constructed wetlands to "polish" the wastewater. Treated wastewater enters the constructed wetlands containing around 3 mg/L total nitrogen. The resulting "polished" water exits with about 1 mg/L total nitrogen

remaining in it prior to being discharged into the Neuse River. The wetland treats water year round, even in the winter when the plants are dormant, due to the microbial organisms in the soils and roots. The summertime is particularly beautiful in the constructed wetlands when visitors can enjoy the scenery. A large variety of flowering plants, such as the Blue Flag Iris, Fragrant Water Lily, Spatterdock, Pickerel Weed, and American Lotus fill the basins.

The recreational benefits of wetlands are also found at the North Carolina Zoological Park, near Asheboro. A constructed stormwater wetland is different from a natural wetland in that it is designed to capture runoff from the streets, parking lots and rooftops and cleans it before entering a larger body of water. The Constructed Wetland is an exhibit designed to help educate visitors about the importance of wetlands to the environment and to serve as a filter system for rainwater runoff from the Zoo's North America parking lot.

And finally, the City of Boone Clawson –Burney Park contains a constructed wetland to treat stormwater runoff. In addition, it provides a unique ecosystem for lots of different species of plants, birds, amphibians, reptiles, insects, and mammals. Wetlands are important bird habitats because birds use them for breeding, nesting, rearing young, a source of drinking water, resting, and social interactions. Wetland vegetation also provides shelter from predators and from the weather. Lastly, this wetland park within the town is an area for the community to enjoy. The trail around the wetland provides a great view to observe what's going on in the wetland. The trail is ADA accessible so that all may enjoy the sounds and surroundings of nature.

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