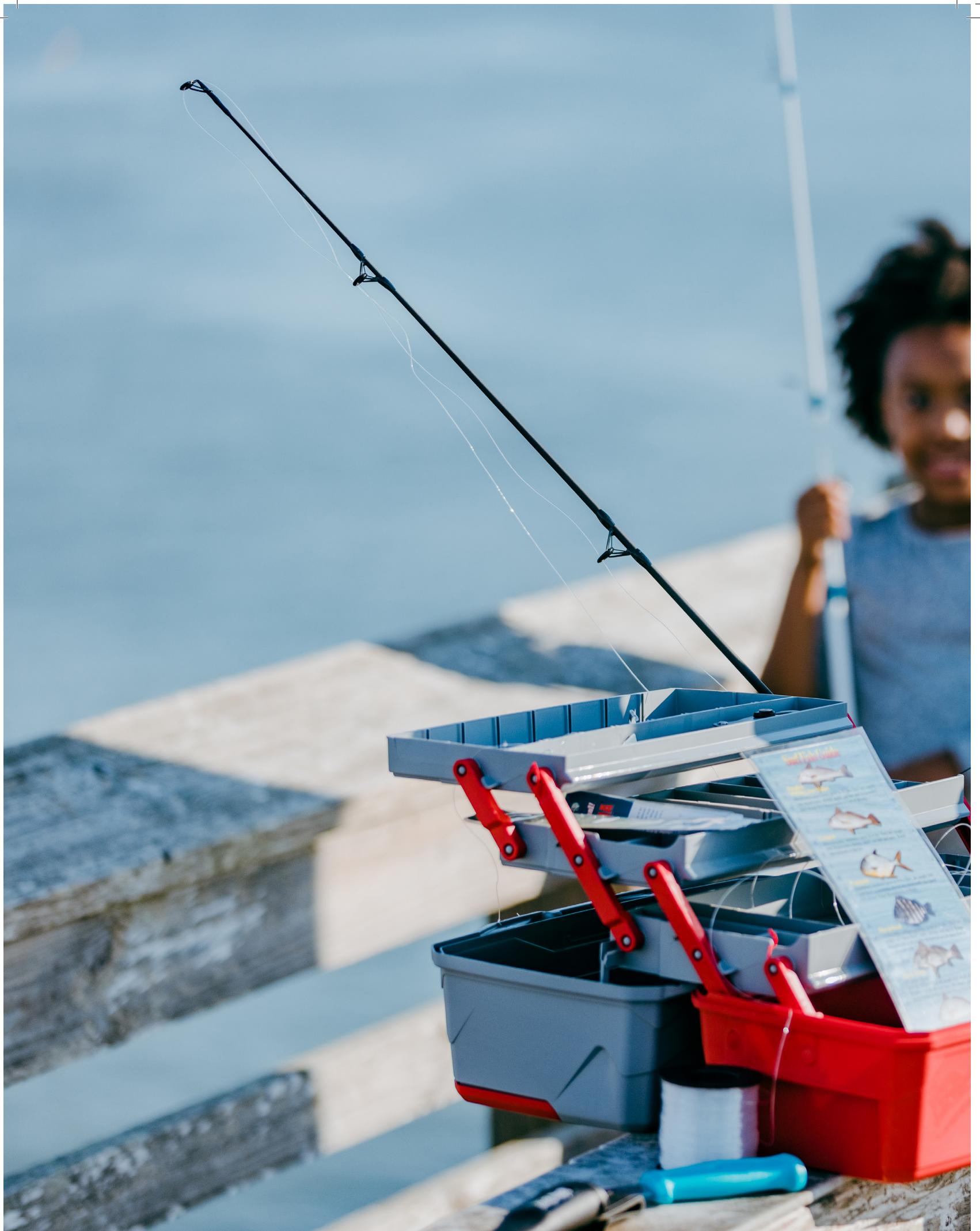




# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



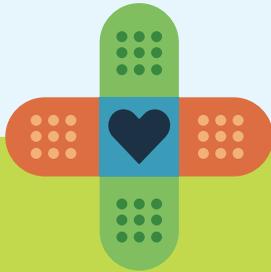


Visit NC



# 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



**2023**

The Year of the Trail

**2024-2025**

non-recurring funding support

**92%**

of participants express interest in engaging in recreation in the outdoors



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.



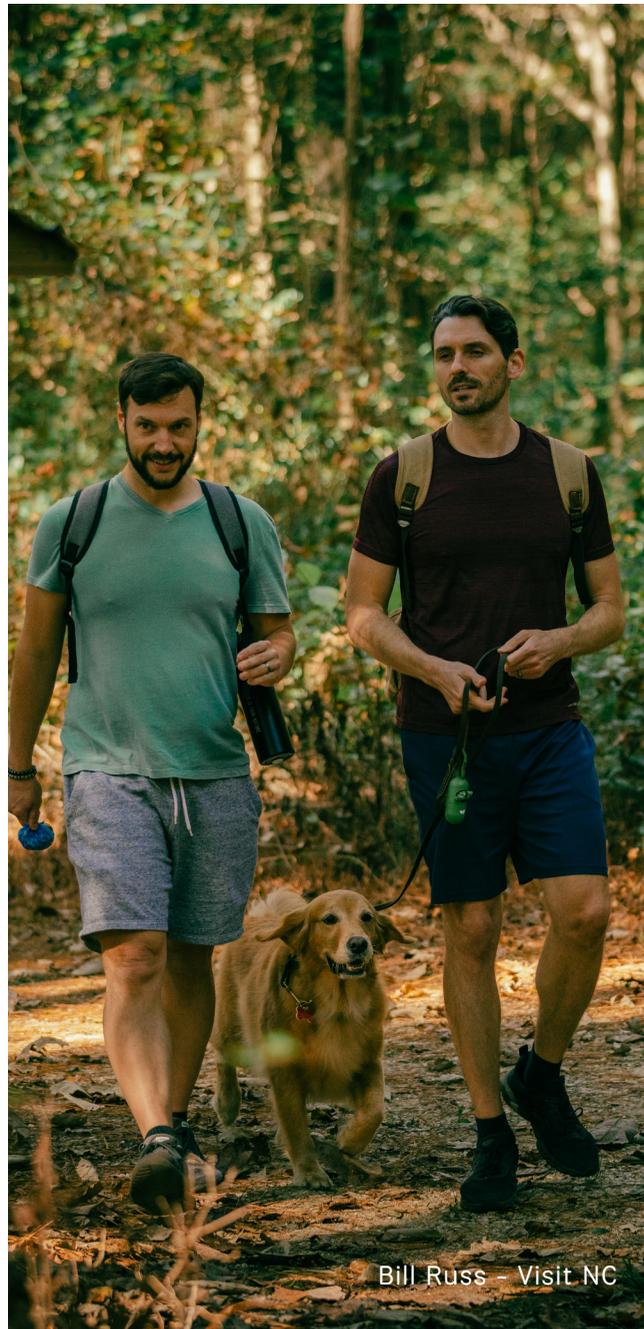
## Demographics Summary

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

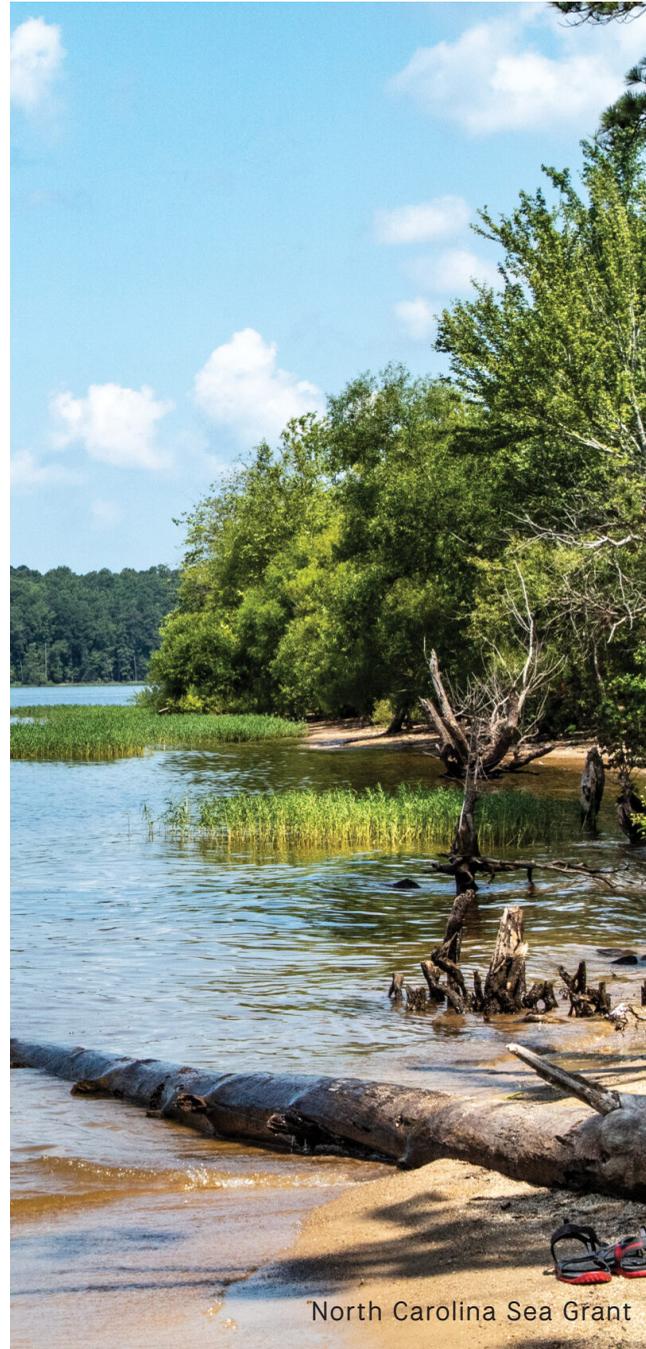


## Land Acquisition

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.



North Carolina Sea Grant

■ 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

 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.



North Carolina State Parks

**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<sub>2</sub>, 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.



The Great Trails State

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