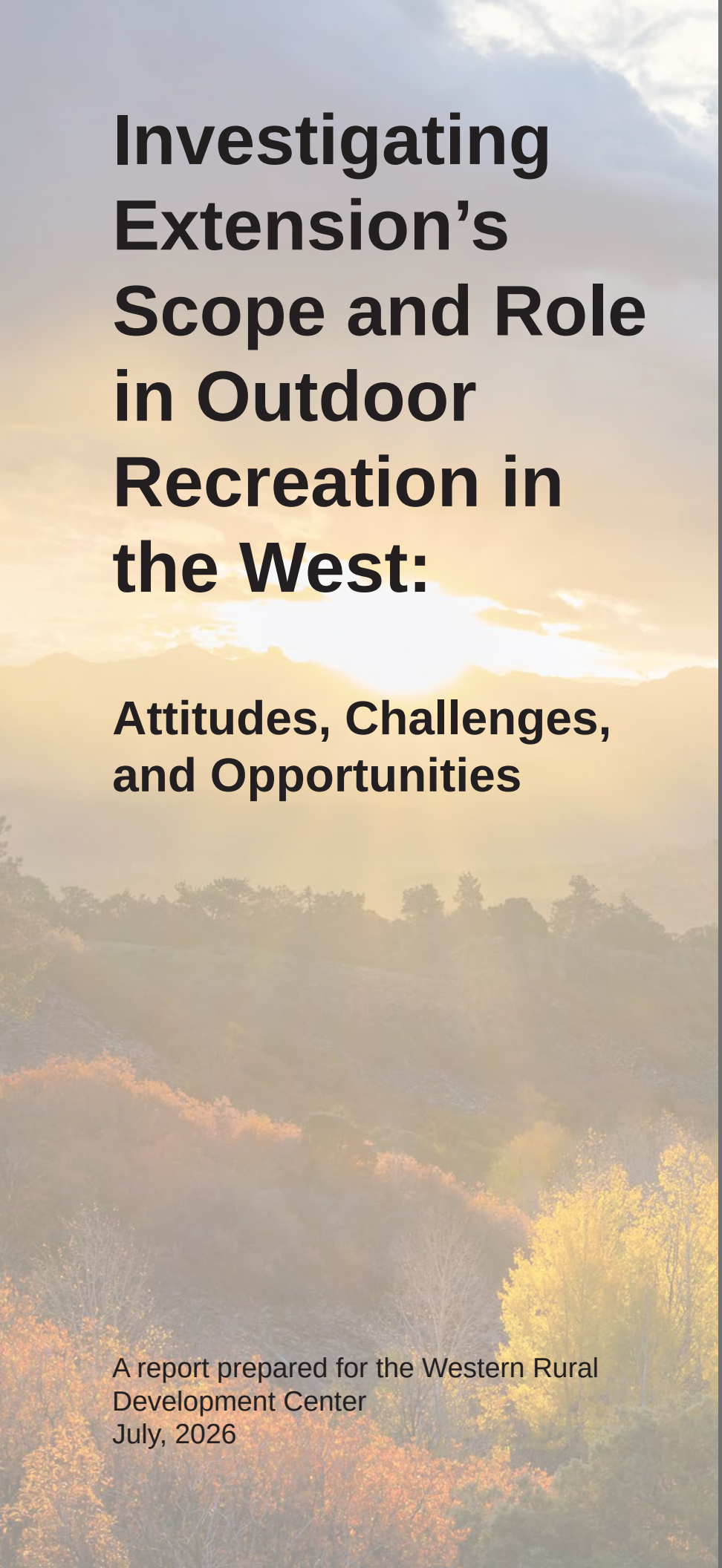
Investigating Extension's Scope and Role in Outdoor Recreation in the West:

Attitudes, Challenges, and Opportunities



A report prepared for the Western Rural Development Center
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

General Overview

In the broadest sense, this project explores the question, “Is outdoor recreation an emergent regional initiative worthy of additional resources and significantly increased effort?” If so, what are Extension programs across the Western Region currently doing, what could be done, and what challenges limit Extension’s involvement and what opportunities remain unrealized?

The results of this research project paint a picture of the extent outdoor recreation and tourism influences the region through comparable metrics. More importantly, it establishes a snapshot of the attitudes of both Extension leaders and outdoor recreation and tourism leaders in each state and island region.

This snapshot was created by inviting Extension leaders and outdoor recreation and tourism leaders in each state to share the current state of outdoor recreation and tourism Extension programming in their state. State outdoor recreation and tourism leaders were interviewed to understand how Extension is currently engaged in outdoor recreation and tourism in each state and to better understand how these leaders perceive Extension’s role in the sector moving forward. These insights are then paired with interviews from state Extension leaders regarding their state’s Extension program’s current involvement in the sector and general attitudes toward their Extension program becoming more involved in the outdoor recreation and tourism sector.

The resultant comparisons were used to generate a series of regional and state specific “key takeaways” that help readers contextualize the attitudes and challenges related to the sector and recommendations for how Extension can engage in and enhance its impact in the outdoor recreation and tourism space.

Findings contained in this report are intended to help Extension Directors make informed decisions on staffing, funding, and program development related to outdoor recreation and tourism. The project represents the first regional effort to begin crafting a roadmap for Extension’s involvement in an emerging sector that impacts traditional Extension program areas from home and community, natural resources, and agriculture to community development and beyond.

Interviews with Extension leaders and outdoor recreation and tourism leaders from across the region reveal several common challenges as well as several regional opportunities. The following summary is organized accordingly.



Regional Challenges

Among outdoor recreation and tourism leaders interviewed there was a general interest and in many cases excitement about the potential for Extension to engage more intentionally in the outdoor recreation and tourism space. However, the project team observed that a "bidirectional hesitancy" exists in most states and island regions. This bidirectional hesitancy refers to a commonly observed situation where outdoor recreation and tourism organizations conveyed a capacity need or gap and expressed an interest in collaborating with Extension to address the stated needs. Conversely, Extension leaders recognized the growth and impact of the recreation and tourism sector in their state and expressed an interest in working with outdoor recreation and tourism leaders if there was a need but were waiting for an explicit invitation from sector leaders and entities. Interestingly, in most cases where this situation occurred, both parties were waiting for the other party to initiate contact and relationship building. Any mutual benefits cannot be realized until Extension leaders reach out and forge the partnerships needed to unite state specific needs with Extension's expertise and resources and the institutional commitment needed from both parties.

Across the region, engagement with outdoor recreation remains largely informal, reactive, and under-resourced. Furthermore, outdoor recreation and tourism efforts across the region are often dependent on individual champions rather than institutional structure and support. Many partnerships and programs with outdoor recreation and tourism partners exist because of relationships with specific Extension employees, making programs vulnerable when those individuals retire or leave. This person-dependent model does not build the trust needed for long-term collaboration. Outdoor recreation and tourism leaders are hesitant to invest in partnerships that may disappear. In contrast, states that have invested in instructional infrastructure and staffing have developed stronger, durable partnerships, that are those interviewed acknowledged are making important impacts.

Not surprising, nearly all Extension leaders identified a lack of funding to support dedicated staff as a primary challenge. Within the budget constrained academic space this challenge is real and ever present. However, interview responses revealed that budget constraints are typically the first and most obvious layer of a series of interrelated challenges that include leadership priorities, institutional structures, governance complexity, and the absence of organized advocacy comparable to traditional agricultural stakeholders.

The final challenge identified across the region were related to a general lack of visibility of Extension within the outdoor recreation and tourism sector. Most outdoor recreation leaders associate Extension primarily with agriculture and 4-H, and many have little understanding of its broader mission. As a result, they fail to perceive Extension as a relevant partner, despite their general recognition of Extension's inherent strengths, including its local relationships and trust, its research expertise, and its existing community presence and awareness that these strengths could greatly benefit their efforts and address current and future capacity needs. Extension's agricultural identity remains so dominant that many outdoor recreation and tourism leaders struggle to imagine its role in outdoor recreation beyond agritourism or youth programs.



Regional Opportunities

Broadly, many leaders believe Extension must adapt to changing rural economies, where outdoor recreation and tourism increasingly rival or exceed agriculture in economic importance. Outdoor recreation leaders were remarkably consistent in describing how they believe Extension can contribute to the sector. Leaders see Extension as a trusted provider of unbiased research, a potential partner in workforce development, credentialing, and a locally relevant source of youth education, and community stewardship programs. Extension is viewed as uniquely positioned to act as a neutral facilitator capable of bringing together competing interests such as ranchers, recreationists, public land managers, and community members to address complex issues using data-driven approaches. Universally, tourism promotion is something leaders did not see as an appropriate role for Extension now or in the future.

Across the interviews, leadership emerged as the most important factor influencing Extension's involvement in the sector. Significant advances have occurred when governors, university administrators, or Extension leaders intentionally prioritized outdoor recreation or tourism programming. Without high-level institutional commitment, goodwill among staff and individual, disparate programs alone have not been enough to create lasting engagement and impact.

Agritourism offers a natural entry point for Extension to enter the outdoor recreation and tourism sector. Agritourism is an uncharted and complex area of growth for many producers, providing a space for Extension to build on its existing agricultural relationships and leverage existing institutional expertise to bring needed resources into this space.

Several respondents suggested that regional collaboration among Western states, including shared specialists, multi-state projects, and coordinated advocacy, may be the most effective way to build sustainable outdoor recreation and tourism programming while maintaining Extension's relevance in a social and economic changing landscape.

In addition to these broad lessons learned, the project team encourages readers to review the key takeaways derived from both the outdoor recreation and tourism and Extension leader's interviews and state by state reports contained in the following pages.

BACKGROUND

Introduction

Outdoor recreation is a growing component of economic development, environmental conservation, and community well-being across the Western region. However, Extension's formal involvement in outdoor recreation and tourism varies significantly between states and island regions across the west, and its role remains undefined in many geographic areas. This report provides a baseline assessment of 1- the high-level extent and impact of the outdoor recreation sector across the region, 2- an overview of current Extension leader's attitudes, and perceived opportunities and challenges related to Extension's current and potential engagement in outdoor recreation and finally, 3 – the perception of statewide outdoor recreation and tourism leaders regarding Extension's current and potential role in the outdoor recreation and tourism sector.

Outdoor Recreation – Growing Sector, Influence, and Identity in the West

Outdoor recreation and tourism are a growing thread woven through the economies, communities, landscapes and people of the western United States. Tourism and outdoor recreation are also growing economic drivers, contributing billions annually to state economies and becoming increasingly important economic pillars for rural communities seeking to diversify their economic portfolio. [1,2]

However, beyond economics, outdoor recreation is a growing reason why many are settling in Western communities. The recreation-oriented lifestyle is openly marketed by many Western states to attract and retain businesses, visitors, and residents. Outdoor recreation and tourism's positive and negative impacts continue to extend into the people, businesses, communities, and landscapes of the west.[3]

At a national level, the growth and prominence of the outdoor recreation tourism sector have not gone unnoticed. In 2022, United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development (USDA-RD), Forest Service, and National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) outlining these agencies' desire to "build on existing collaborations and coordinate to support the sustainable development of the nation's recreation economy and the associated economies of gateway communities".[4]

The MOU states that the parties, several of which are already close partners with Extension, will engage in "jointly developing and delivering technical assistance to and training opportunities for state and local governments, Tribes, and other non-federal partners, such as planning assistance, conducting webinars, workshops, and information sessions, developing toolkits, and posting examples of successful projects on websites, on best practices for supporting sustainable growth of the recreation economy".[5] These objectives are squarely within the mission and expertise of Extension programs across the west. However, Extension has yet to collaboratively and strategically provide the services spelled out in this MOU with these partners on a regional or national scale.

Extension and Outdoor Recreation and Tourism

Extension is the organization in each state and island area charged with improving the lives, landscapes, and communities through conducting and disseminating applied research.[6] Extension programs are traditionally connected philosophically, and in perception with the agriculture sector. This is due in part to Extension's creation at a time when agriculture was a core thread that connected the lives, landscapes, and communities of much of the nation. In the ever-evolving sphere of modern Extension, agriculture is one of the many ways modern Extension is tooling itself to accomplish its lofty mission.

To meet its mission, Extension is tasked with continually assessing and responding to new areas of challenge and opportunity at the community, state, and national scale. Extension seeking to define its role within a sector beyond Extension's traditional areas of focus is not a new phenomenon. In 1992, the Cooperative Extension System organized a group of thought leaders to explore Extension's role in tourism, a sector often seen as symbiotic with outdoor recreation. The group published a report in 1993 entitled "Tourism Development: A Suggested Approach for the Cooperative Extension System".[7] The report concluded that Extension's efforts at that time were "lacking a central focus, being unevenly distributed among the States and offering only sporadic opportunities to share resources." Furthermore, the report explains that Extension's efforts were substantive, but not "at a level commensurate with the industry's economic importance and growing need for assistance." It could be argued that over three decades later, Extension's current involvement in the outdoor recreation sector can be similarly characterized.

In the broadest sense, this project explores the question, "Is outdoor recreation an emergent regional initiative worthy of additional resources and significantly increased effort?"

And, if so, what are Extension programs across the Western Region currently doing, what could be done, and what challenges limit Extension's involvement and what opportunities remain unrealized?

Methods

The goals of this project were four-fold. First, the project provides a broad regional snapshot of the extent of outdoor recreation in each state. Second the project explores how Extension leaders view their current and future role in the outdoor recreation and tourism sphere. Third, the project explored how leaders involved in outdoor recreation and tourism but not directly involved in Extension, perceive Extension's current and future roles. Finally, the project seeks to share this information with Extension professionals, leaders, across the region in formats that can be readily adapted and shared. To accomplish these goals the project team organized each goal into a distinct task.

Task 1: Gather publicly available data for each state to share comparable metrics across each state.

The project team searched and curated publicly available data that captured metrics such as visitation, economic impact, number of national and state parks, which were organized by state and stored in a shared spreadsheet with applicable references. This data was recorded for each state and island region within the Western Rural Development Center's region.

Tasks 2 and 3: Understand how other Extension leaders and state level organizations responsible for delivering, managing, and/or promoting outdoor recreation at the individual state-level perceive Extension's current and potential roles in the outdoor recreation and tourism sector.

Because this task cannot be completed with qualitative data alone, the project team endeavoured to interview both Extension program leaders and outdoor recreation and tourism leaders from each state. The project team began this task by initiating an Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol through Utah State University's IRB Board. This process established protocols for outreach, interview procedures, and data management for each phase of these tasks.

After receiving approval through USU IRB process, the project team used publicly available state and institutional websites to gather the email addresses of Extension leaders and leaders from state-level offices of outdoor recreation, tourism, or equivalent departments for each state and island territory within the Western Rural Development Center's region.

The project team then sent an introductory email introducing the project and inviting the contact to participate in an interview. This email invitation and subsequent follow-up emails were sent three times. If the candidate did not respond to any of these invitations, the candidate was not contacted again. The project team then identified an alternative contact leader within the same institution, state organization, department, or within similar departments. The same invitation process was repeated with each of the different potential contacts. This outreach and invitation process continued until the project team contacted at least two or more different leaders from each state and received no response. States where no response was received after following the approved protocol remain in the report, but a no-response is noted in the state report section.

Candidates who responded to the invitation scheduled an interview with a project team member and were provided the interview questions and an informed consent form to review, sign, and return prior to the interview. After receiving the participant's signed informed consent form, a member of the project team interviewed each participant using the online meeting platform Zoom. This was selected to allow convenience across distances and time zones as well as the ability to securely record the interview and generate an interview transcript.

During the interview, participants were asked a series of pre-determined questions that were collaboratively developed by the project advisory team for both the Extension leaders and state level outdoor recreation and tourism leaders. The following interview questions were posed to participants in a semi-structured interview format:

Extension Leaders Questions:

- Can you tell me about how Extension in your state is engaging in the outdoor recreation and tourism sector?
- Does that engagement come from Extension faculty and staff with appointments/job titles/role statements that specifically have them working on outdoor recreation, or is it assigned some other way?
- In your state, how does outdoor recreation impact the people and communities Extension works to serve?
- Do you see your state's Extension programs engaging more or less with the outdoor recreation and tourism economy?
- Please describe the role that you see Extension playing in the outdoor recreation economy moving forward and any plans your Extension program has with regard to engaging the outdoor recreation and tourism sector in your state.
- What circumstances would need to be in place for you to create a dedicated outdoor recreation and tourism specialist or dedicate other faculty or staff FTE's to outdoor recreation and tourism in your state?
- What are the primary barriers or limitations to your state's Extension program engaging more in the outdoor recreation sector?

Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Leader Questions:

- Please help me understand how your state's Extension program currently engages with the outdoor recreation and tourism economy. Can you provide some examples of programs or partnerships in your state?
- What role do you think your state's Extension program could or should play in the outdoor recreation and tourism sector in your state?
- Are there opportunities, gaps, or programs that you wish your state's Extension program would get involved in, focus on, or develop now or in the future?
- What are the primary barriers or limitations to your state's Extension program engaging more in the outdoor recreation sector in your state?

Interviews were conversational in nature, and most interviews lasted 30-45 minutes. Project team members took notes during the interview and had the freedom to ask clarifying and follow up questions as part of the semi-structured nature of the interviews. In some instances, multiple individuals representing the same organization attended the interview. In this situation, all individuals were invited to share their insights on each question and the interview was conducted within a single recorded interview. In some other instances, individuals from the same organization responded to the request to be interviewed at different times in the process. When this occurred, the project team conducted individual interviews with each willing participant, resulting in multiple individual interviews from the same state, island region, or organization.

State/Island Region	Extension Leader Interviewed	Outdoor Recreation/Tourism Leader Interviewed
Alaska	Yes	No
Arizona	Yes	Yes
California	Yes	Yes
Colorado	Yes	Yes
Hawaii	No	No
Idaho	Yes	No
Montana	No	No
Nevada	Yes	No
New Mexico	Yes	Yes
Oregon	Yes	No
Pacific Basin - American Samoa	No	No
Pacific Basin - Guam	Yes	No
Pacific Basin - Federated States of Micronesia	Yes	No
Pacific Basin - Northern Marianas Islands	No	No
Utah	Yes	Yes
Washington	No	No
Wyoming	Yes	Yes

Qualitative Analysis

After the interview, the recording, transcript, and interview notes were saved to Utah State University's secure online file management system. The transcript was then reviewed by a project team member while listening to the interview recording, any discrepancies between the recording and the transcript were corrected to ensure the transcript accurately captured the content of the interview.

The research team then reviewed the anonymized interview transcripts to identify and categorize themes, patterns, and recurring ideas expressed by participants using qualitative coding.[8] The team used both the transcripts and interview notes to develop an initial unified codebook for reviewing the interview transcripts. The team also utilized an AI software package subscription to review all of the interviews to establish an initial set of preliminary codes and associated themes. These suggested codes and themes were then collaboratively reviewed by the project team to assess their relevance, clarity, and accuracy. The suggested codes and themes were then adjusted, combined, or eliminated based on the team's individual review of the transcripts to establish a single, unified coding strategy.

This unified coding strategy was then used to review each of the interview transcripts to identify cross-cutting "key takeaways" within each state as well as meta takeaways from across the region. These key takeaways are reported regionally as well as by state in the following report.



Regional Takeaways

The following section is organized to report key takeaways first from the interviews conducted with outdoor recreation and tourism leaders and then from interviews with Extension leaders.

Outdoor Recreation Leader Interview Takeaways

Outdoor Recreation and Tourism in Extension is Being Held Together by People, and That's Risky

Across the region those outdoor recreation leaders interviewed who have, or currently work with Extension expressed a deep appreciation for the work of Extension in their area. However, in contrast to many flagship Extension programs that have robust staff and long-term institutional support, outdoor recreation programs across the region were all identified by those interviewed based on their relationship with an individual.

Those interviewed know Extension outdoor recreation and tourism programs and resources because of a personal relationship with a single individual, not the institution. While this individual, trusted relationship has allowed several programs to be highly responsive to the needs of outdoor recreation leaders, it also creates a point of concerning weakness. In several states when the individual changed positions, retired, or left Extension, the lack of institutionalized support and longevity meant that even programs deemed valuable, and in some cases vital to outdoor recreation leaders disappeared quietly and completely.

Outdoor recreation leaders recognized the fragile nature of an entire state's outdoor recreation program resting on the shoulders of an individual, and several highlighted it directly. As one Extension leader explained, "[staff name] is just one person covering that sector, which is probably the number one industry of [state]. Outdoor recreation is an incredibly important part of [state's] economically, and lots of local towns rely on that revenue. [staff name] is just one person, and there are lots of other needs to fulfill that [staff name] can't."

Without a long term, institutional structure supporting existing outdoor recreation and tourism programs, state outdoor recreation leaders simply do not dare develop meaningful institution to institution partnerships beyond individual relationships. In states where Extension has invested in the institutional infrastructure necessary to demonstrate long term viability, the outdoor recreation and tourism sector is creating long term, meaningful partnerships with Extension.

Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Leaders Agree on Extension's Potential Roles

One of the interesting findings from the interviews is how clear and consistent outdoor recreation leaders articulated what they want from Extension. Those interviewed almost universally saw Extension as an important source of trusted, non-bias, applied research, and data.

Most leaders shared that workforce development and credentialing within the outdoor recreation and tourism sector was an obvious opportunity that fits within programs and work already happening in Extension. Additionally, several states mentioned the opportunity for Extension's youth development programs to provide outdoor education and stewardship to fill a void frequently left in some states by other declining youth organizations. Leaders acknowledged their organizations' own limited capacity in these areas and expressed a desire to have a partner like Extension to assist them in accomplishing their missions in these areas.

One other consistent theme from outdoor recreation and tourism leaders was that Extension should not be a tourism promoter or duplicate the efforts of state offices or local destination management or marketing organizations.

Interviewees acknowledged that Extension is well tooled for acting as a neutral third-party facilitator that can bring ranchers and recreationalists, community members, and public land managers together to have hard conversations and collaboratively seek the data needed to inform a mutually beneficial outcome for all parties.

The outdoor recreation and tourism leaders interviewed are asking Extension to fill the gaps that no other institution is well positioned to fill, the academic, analytical, educational, and community-embedded work that requires exactly the kind of credibility and presence that Extension already enjoys.

When Someone at the Top Decides It Matters, Everything Changes

Across this entire dataset, the most consistent enabling condition for Extension to engage in the outdoor recreation and tourism sectors is a simple one: when a leader with authority decides that outdoor recreation is a priority and that Extension should be part of the response, things change.

Wyoming's decade of engagement traces directly to one governor's task force. California's new outdoor recreation advisor positions trace directly to a Vice President's decision to act after a few meaningful conversations. Many of the significant advancements of Extension's efforts in this sector were traced to a handful of meetings that finally put the right people in the same room.

The inverse is also true, in states where no political or institutional leader has made those connections or made institutional commitments, Extension remains largely absent from the sector regardless of how much goodwill exists at the staff level. While bottom-up partnerships are valuable, these interviews show that they are not sufficient for durable institutional engagement.

The outdoor recreation sector is growing; and rural communities are being reshaped by it. The outdoor recreation leaders interviewed expressed that the need for a trusted, research-grounded, community-embedded partner has never been greater.

Extension's public identity remains agricultural, not recreational

Outdoor recreation leaders across the region arrived at the interviews with a limited understanding of their state Extension system. Nearly everyone's understanding of Extension was dominated by its traditional agriculture focused programs, and research. While most interviewees were able to connect Extension with their state's "flagship" programs like 4H, several of those interviewed could not explain what Extension is or does within their state. This lack of awareness means that many outdoor recreation leaders don't see Extension as an asset relevant to their sector in their states simply because they don't know it exists, and if they do, they don't see it relevance beyond agriculture. This pattern repeated across nearly all of the state leaders interviewed: Extension has tools, reach, and institutional credibility that the outdoor recreation sector genuinely needs — but the sector isn't looking for Extension because it doesn't know Extension is there. The interviews revealed that the foundational problem isn't resistance from state leaders, it is invisibility.

While a lack of universal identity recognition remains a known universal challenge for Extension at large, the impacts of this lack of brand identity hinders viable partners from identifying Extension as a potential partner or resource even in sectors that exist parallel to Extension's historic areas of emphasis. It is noteworthy that those interviewed who were aware of Extension recognized its legacy as the foundation for its continued, localized trust. It was clear that state leaders recognized the value this trust brings to potential outdoor recreation Extension efforts.

Unfortunately, the perception among those interviewed that Extension will remain confined to agriculture focused programs into the future seemed to limit their ability to imagine the breadth of Extension's possible role in outdoor recreation, unless it remained connected to agriculture. For example, when outdoor recreation leaders were asked to imagine Extension's future role in the outdoor recreation sector, responses such as agritourism research and support, and expanding youth 4H programs with an outdoor recreation focus dominated the responses. State leaders who cannot untangle Extension's past with its potential future are unlikely to recognize the potential collaborative, mutually beneficial partnerships needed to advance Extension's role in the outdoor recreation and tourism sector.

As one Extension leader explained, "I think folks are seeing that across Extension, that things are changing — both the way that people want to engage with Extension and what we need to be extending. Historically, Extension was incredibly ag-focused, and now, as landscapes shift in the country and people have different needs, how does Extension pivot to address those? I think that's still kind of a question that's up in the air."

If Extension programs across the region desire to expand into growth sectors beyond agriculture, concerted efforts must be employed internally and externally to convey Extension's expansive mission, one that reaches beyond agriculture. In particular, *Extension leaders* must strategically connect with partners across the outdoor recreation and tourism sector to communicate Extension's capacity, localized trust, and demonstrate a willingness to develop long term partnerships.

Extension Leader Interview Takeaways

"Outdoor Recreation" Means Something Different Depending on Where You Are

This takeaway arose most clearly in the Pacific Island regions and Alaska, but variations of the theme arise throughout the dataset. In the Pacific Islands, outdoor recreation isn't really a category unto itself; "it's just life". Fishing, farming, enjoying nature, stewardship of those resources, and sharing that love and care with others have deep roots in the island culture. Similarly, in Alaska rural communities and people are integrally tied to the land. Fishing, hunting, riding ATVs and snowmobiles are part of the daily routines of many Alaskans and untangling "outdoor recreation" from many of the acts considered daily living is a difficult, if not impossible endeavour.

Alternatively, outdoor recreation and tourism in states like Utah, Wyoming and Colorado require a delicate balance that recognizes how these sectors influence lifestyles, may clash with traditional land uses, and create user conflict at the individual, community, and regional scale. Other states face unique challenges navigating the interplay between federal, state, and private lands. In Nevada, for example, over 80% of the land is federally managed, which influences who Extension can and should work with and how. The sector looks very different depending on the landscape, the culture, and the politics of each place.

Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Engagement is Happening on the Periphery of Extension, not by Design.

Across nearly every state, Extension is touching outdoor recreation and tourism in some way, but it is not strategic. This engagement is happening because a motivated individual decides to step into the space, or because a recreation or tourism related community crisis landed on a county agent's desk. It's rarely planned, rarely in anyone's job description, and rarely resourced.

Across the dataset, outdoor recreation and tourism exist largely at the edges of Extension's institutional identity, and it is largely being engaged by individuals through goodwill and informal interest, not through formal structure. This pattern reflects both a lag in institutional adaptation and a fundamental tension between Extension's agricultural identity and the shifting rural economic landscape.

Despite this lack of focused engagement, multiple interviewees acknowledged that outdoor rec and tourism have grown significantly as a share of state GDP and these sectors are having a significant impact on the communities within their states, yet extension programming doesn't yet reflect that. Leaders in California noted the irony that California, with its massive outdoor recreation and tourism economy, had essentially zero dedicated Extension presence in this space until very recently.

A part of this issue is what the research team identified as a "bidirectional hesitancy." In several interviews it was obvious that Extension leaders were waiting for the state to call for help, while state offices, with clear needs, were unsure who to contact or whether they would get a response, and vice versa. In many cases even though both sides expressed to the interviewer a desire to connect with the other group, neither had reliably reached out to each other.

Finally, many of Extension's core programs are guided by, and supported financially by agricultural commodity groups with long established relationships with university advancement and Extension. Conversely, the outdoor recreation and tourism industry does not have an equivalent organized constituency with that same tradition of guiding Extension's institutional priorities or advocating for additional focus on a specific area of the sector. Without that external influence, Extension's historic partners may be getting the most attention because they are the only partners that know how to get to the table.



The Barriers Go Beyond Funding

Funding came up in every interview as a barrier, and for many institutions facing budget cuts these constraints are especially pertinent. While funding is the universal first answer, closer investigation across the interviews reveals a cluster of co-occurring barriers that go beyond the budget: administrative intentionality, absent advocacy, other urgent priorities like wildfires and food insecurity, governance complexity, and leadership instability, that together explain why investment fails to materialize even when desire exists. One interviewee highlighted that the fee-for-service, contract-to-contract funding model is a structural barrier itself. This common funding model makes consistent, long-term Extension programming nearly impossible to sustain due to the lack of a long-term commitment beyond a funded project. So putting more funding into a system that does not support long-term investment doesn't fix the real issue.

Multiple interviewees also described a tension between the desire to engage and the instinct to wait until there's sustained funding before committing. One interviewee acknowledged their Extension program needing "administrative intentionality," not just money to prioritize the outdoor recreation and tourism sector within Extension.

Another Extension leader explained that Extension has been brought into other non-traditional sectors in the past like emergency management where it took a crisis (wildfires, floods, etc.) to justify Extension building that programmatic area, and outdoor recreation and tourism may need a similar tipping-point moment to push Extension into re-prioritizing outdoor recreation and tourism.

Outdoor Recreation Is Big Business but Complicated for Communities

Every leader we talked to acknowledged that outdoor recreation is economically important. In many states, it's now the dominant rural economic driver. However, for the rural agricultural communities Extension has historically served, outdoor recreation and tourism is quickly becoming a complicated issue. More visitors means more traffic, more land use conflict, more pressure on water, roads, and grazing land. For those who live in Alaska, the pressing question is a logistical question not regarding how to grow tourism, it is how communities can maintain control over whether and how tourism happens to them.

Extension leaders did not express any anti-recreation sentiment, they are seeing a complicated picture of how it is impacting rural American, and still trying to identify where Extension fits in.

There's a Path From "One Passionate Person" to an Actual Program

Interviewees from states that have made the most progress didn't get there through a master plan. They got there because the right person, partnership, or political moment aligned at the right time. Interviewees highlighted a VP who saw the opportunity, an external organization that brought resources and asked Extension to partner, or a legislative investment that created a budgetary line item. The pattern across the dataset suggests there's a recognizable development path from informal, person-driven engagement to something more durable.

What exists right now are people who care, connected to other people who care. What Extension needs to connect to the potential impact of the sector are institutions that are structurally committed, partnership focused, and willing to extend the land grant mission of Extension beyond their traditional boundaries to create moments of opportunity rather than reacting if they happen. The gap between people who care and structural, institutional commitment is where the most important work remains to be done.

Agritourism Is an On-Ramp

Across the dataset, the most commonly mentioned entry point into and tourism work is agritourism. Fee hunting, fee fishing, farm stays, winery trails, farmers markets, these are the places where Extension's existing relationships with agricultural producers naturally intersect with the tourism economy. For many states, agritourism isn't just where they started; it may be where they have the most credibility and the clearest path to doing more.

An Opportunity to Build Extension's Relevance

Running beneath many of these conversations is a bigger question: what should Extension role be in states where outdoor recreation outpaces agriculture in GDP? A few leaders named it explicitly. If Extension doesn't adapt to where the economy is going, it risks becoming less relevant to the communities it's supposed to serve. Several Extension leaders saw engagement with outdoor recreation not just as a programmatic opportunity, but as a chance to demonstrate Extension's essential role in rural life in a changing West. For many leaders, this isn't just about adding a new program area, it is about demonstrating institutional adaptation and relevance amid change.

A Regional Approach May Be Needed

Multiple leaders, independently of each other, raised some version of the same idea: no single state has the capacity to build a full outdoor recreation and tourism Extension program on its own at this point, but the Western states and island regions might. Shared specialists, multi-state projects, regional webinar series, collective advocacy to federal funders — these ideas came up in at least five of the state interviews.

This dataset has revealed that although each state and island region has its own nuance, many of the barriers and challenges are common across the region. There are multiple lessons to be learned from states that are at the spear tip of advancing outdoor recreation and tourism Extension programming, adding dedicated FTE's connected with the sector, and making strategic investments in outdoor recreation and tourism programming. Regional organizations such as the Western Rural Development Center and the Western Extension Directors Association can play a critical role linking institutions across the region to share information, resources, and lessons learned. It is encouraging that the Western Extension Directors Association's Western Agenda 2.0 already provides a platform for these kinds of regional coordination opportunities.







State Reports

ALASKA

OVERVIEW & TAKEAWAYS



24,458
OUTDOOR RECREATION JOBS[1]

16
NATIONAL PARK UNITS

156
STATE PARKS

60.9%
OF THE STATE THAT IS FEDERAL PUBLIC LAND

13
OUTDOOR RECREATION DEGREE PROGRAMS

$3.8B
VISITOR SPENDING[9,10]

STATE OVERVIEW

Due to its large size, isolated geographic location, and diverse populations, Alaska has several unique challenges other Western states don't face. Outdoor recreation makes up a significant 5.3% of Alaska's economy. Travel and tourism related employment is the 4th largest employment sector in the state. Much of that employment and economic activity is driven by the cruise industry, over 50% of visitors come to the state via ship. That said, hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation activities drive much of the non-cruise traffic, and those activities are often included in cruise visits as well.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Alaska's Extension program is small and operates within Alaska's uniquely complex context; serving a vast geographic area and a diverse population, including multiple Alaska tribal nations. While outdoor recreation and tourism are significant economic drivers in Alaska, they are not currently a priority for Extension. University of Alaska Fairbanks Extension programs primarily focus on agriculture and food security. Those interviewed for this project explained that significant challenges and opportunities in outdoor recreation and tourism exist within the state, and the program did previously support some rural tourism publications, however, they discontinued these efforts due to staff turnover and the loss of expertise. While recreation and tourism expertise does exist at the University of Alaska Fairbanks more broadly, it currently sits on the research side rather than within Extension. Currently Extension leaders acknowledge the potential for outdoor recreation and tourism to be an influential aspect for If additional resources became available, leadership indicates that wildfire response and food security would take precedence over outdoor recreation Extension programming.

INTERVIEW QUOTE:

"...like in some of our coastal areas of our state, like Juneau, for instance, you bring a cruise ship in there and Sitka as well, and the population of that cruise ship doubles the population of that town. And so, there's a lot of back and forth in those communities about the capacity to support tourism, and what it does, how it impacts the town, especially when you have a town that is reliant on fragile supply chains. So often those communities are reliant on, like, barges, or air traffic to bring in food and other necessities. So, if your tourists come in and eat all your food, it's frustrating."

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

*Note: No outdoor recreation or tourism leader responded to the multiple interview requests provided; thus, no interview data is available from this stakeholder sector.

- Alaska is unique due to its geographic isolation and size
- The cruise industry is a major player in Alaska's recreation and tourism ecosystem, with over 50% of visitors coming via ship.
- The cruise industry creates unique, acute, localized impacts on Alaska's communities. In some small coastal communities, a single docked cruise ship can more than double the population size of the town rapidly, on a frequent basis. This occurrence puts unique strains on limited local community resources and already scarce, imported goods.
- Winter tourism is growing, especially in Fairbanks. One leader stated, "Winter is outnumbering our summer which has never happened before. We've always been a predominantly summer destination." This growth is driven by growing interest in seeing auroras and unique adventure activities found primarily in Alaska, like dogsledding, etc.
- The Alaska Extension program is relatively small, with financial constraints being the primary barrier to growth.
- Extension leadership acknowledges there would be ample work for an outdoor recreation/tourism specialist within Extension, however it's not the highest priority for the program, falling behind food security and fire specialist.
- The current hierarchy of program needs within Alaska's Extension system highlights the real challenges Extension administrators face when working to align program areas to pressing state wide needs.

FUTURE EXTENSION OPPORTUNITIES

- Alaska has a rapidly evolving outdoor recreation and tourism ecosystem that has many unique and interesting nuances ripe for the localized research, translation, and application that Extension is known for.
- Providing training to local Extension professionals located in highly impacted tourism and recreation destinations may provide an opportunity for Alaska Extension to better engage in locally important issues that are interconnected with, and affecting other Extension priorities and program areas.

ARIZONA

OVERVIEW & TAKEAWAYS



118,672
OUTDOOR RECREATION JOBS[1]

19
NATIONAL PARK UNITS

33
STATE PARKS

38.6%
OF THE STATE THAT IS FEDERAL PUBLIC LAND

9
OUTDOOR RECREATION DEGREE PROGRAMS

$25.5B
VISITOR SPENDING[11]

STATE OVERVIEW

Outdoor recreation represents a smaller part of Arizona's GDP (2.7%), however outdoor recreation and tourism are still a significant and growing economic force. The sector supports over 118,000 jobs and travel-related employment is Arizona's 9th highest employment sector. However, as visitation grows, so do the management challenges facing communities, agricultural producers, public lands, and natural resources across the state.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Extension leaders interviewed explained that there have not been any substantive efforts within the Arizona Extension system regarding the tourism or outdoor recreation sector, nor has there been a desire voiced from their stakeholders. While some local specialists have worked on agritourism in the past, there hasn't been outdoor recreation or tourism focused work at a programmatic level.

As the sector grows, specialists see more conflict between agricultural users and recreators, especially in the OHV use area. At times Extension has acted as a neutral third party and data provider in local public lands and recreation conflicts and a new Extension faculty member has started working on economic valuation of recreation and may add additional capacity to Arizona Extension's outdoor recreation efforts.

State leaders in outdoor recreation voiced a lack of a current working relationship with the University of Arizona and admitted that most collaboration between state agencies is happening through Arizona State University. That said, state recreation leaders expressed a desire to create a relationship with Extension. They recognized that there are many state initiatives focused on youth engagement and local workforce development, both of which would lend themselves well to Extension's 4-H capacity and county-based roles, especially given Extension's existing strengths in facilitation, natural resources, and community engagement.

INTERVIEW QUOTE:

"Arizona tends to have its eyes set on the distant future. The work we do today affects what comes next .... So, it's really about bringing people into the outdoors in a way that builds a genuine connection, taking that curiosity and giving it direction....In a nutshell, I want an Extension program to help tell that story and help people get involved, because a lot of things after that just fall into place naturally."

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

- A notable barrier identified by those leaders interviewed is a bidirectional hesitancy between Extension and the state to connect and build the personal and institutional relationships needed to build a program that would be impactful for both entities.

- Outdoor stewardship and connection among youth was identified as a pressing need by state leaders, and Arizona's 4-H program is a natural partner for building programs that would address this need. However, Extension leaders noted that Arizona 4H staff have not yet had the bandwidth to pursue exploring it.

- Arizona's outdoor recreation sector is broadly recognized as an asset, but rapid growth in visitation – particularly OHV use – is creating new on-the-ground challenges and user conflicts.

- Although Extension has played a neutral third party and data-provider role in rangeland conflicts between agencies and ranchers, Extension faculty have only been involved in a limited capacity in a few regional collaboratives that have touched on recreation. Interviewees highlighted a similar need and potential role in recreation related conflicts.

- There is a need for public education efforts aimed at helping out-of-state recreationists understand Arizona's sensitive landscapes, why livestock are present on public lands, and how recreationist behavior affects both wildlife and ranchers. Extension is well-positioned to manage and facilitate connections between groups like these, while allowing others already doing direct programmatic work to continue.

- Agritourism is on the radar for some Extension staff, but it remains largely informal and individual rather than programmatic.

- The Arizona Office of Outdoor Recreation does not currently have a strong relationship with the University of Arizona and Extension. The office does partner frequently with Arizona State University, primarily due to their formal Outdoor Recreation program. They are currently co-developing a Mapping Arizona's Outdoor Learning Ecosystem initiative, a statewide gap analysis of outdoor learning opportunities. This effort will help identify areas where Extension and others could plug into the outdoor recreation ecosystem.

- The state office also leads ACORN (Arizona Collaborative Outdoor Recreation Network), a cross-sector convening of federal, state, and municipal land manager directors, and had explored an "Arizona Outdoor Academy" concept — a certification-based program to improve how people recreate.

- Workforce development is a top concern for the state office. There is urgency around building a pipeline of qualified professionals before the sector outgrows its talent supply.

FUTURE EXTENSION OPPORTUNITIES

- Extension should explore its role as a neutral third-party and/or data provider in local, multi-party outdoor recreation conflict settings.

- Pursue state partnerships with 4-H to build outdoor stewardship values and recreation pathways for youth across Arizona's counties.

- Use outcomes from the Mapping Arizona's Outdoor Learning Ecosystem gap analysis as an entry point for further state relationship building

- Extension leadership should connect with the state of Arizona's offices that oversee outdoor recreation and tourism to explore partnering in the Arizona Outdoor Academy concept.

- Consider approaching agritourism in a more programmatic and strategic way to build off of existing work being done on the ground.

CALIFORNIA

OVERVIEW & TAKEAWAYS



589,354
OUTDOOR RECREATION JOBS[1]

28
NATIONAL PARK UNITS

280
STATE PARKS

45.4%
OF THE STATE THAT IS FEDERAL PUBLIC LAND

41
OUTDOOR RECREATION DEGREE PROGRAMS

$157.6B
VISITOR SPENDING[12]

STATE OVERVIEW

California has the biggest outdoor recreation economic output in the country, generating $87.9 billion in value added, and supporting nearly 590,000 jobs. That said, it only makes up 2.2% of the state's GDP. While California's diverse economy means outdoor recreation competes with many other major sectors for attention, it remains the dominant economic force for many rural communities impacted by the fact that 52% of the state's is federally or publicly managed.

Over the past few years University of California Agricultural and Natural Resources (UC ANR) has been investing in building a new program and hiring outdoor recreation focused staff to assist the growing outdoor recreation and tourism sector. The unique structure of UC ANR has allowed UC ANR to tap into state initiatives and strategize around the sector in unique and innovative ways.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

UC ANR is among the most actively expanding Extension programs when it comes to outdoor recreation. The program is moving deliberately from informal participation to structured, resourced programming, with significant support from both university and state leadership leading to a formalized partnership with the Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development. The program already has outdoor recreation specialists in the Sierra region and is in the process of hiring a state wide outdoor recreation specialist and at least one additional dedicated regional advisor. While Extension leadership acknowledged that the direction surprised many within the system, there is confidence that the model will prove its value and grow.

INTERVIEW QUOTE:

"The extension advisor can be that capacity to help organize and support — they can bring analytical tools and research support, and help identify resources for rural areas that are wanting to grow their outdoor recreation sector but just may not have enough people."

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

- Several interviewees note that UC ANR's expansion into outdoor recreation was largely catalyzed by a Vice President at the University, whose background in rural economic development and relationships with state government enabled partnerships with the Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development to secure funding for new positions.

- State leadership highlighted Extension's geographic footprint as a key asset — advisors embedded across the state are positioned to serve as "holistic eyes and ears," identifying what's working in one region and connecting it to efforts elsewhere while also providing capacity to rural communities that lack sufficient staff to advance outdoor recreation economies on their own.

- Extension nationally has a USDA Interagency Outdoor Recreation memorandum that includes the Forest Service, Rural Development, NRCS, and several other entities. These structures have helped open doors and formalize a lot of the collaboration that was already starting to happen in California.

- UC ANR is also changing how they approach 4-H youth advisors, with one leader sharing "They used to be generalists. Now we're trying to have advisors specialize in a subject — livestock, nutrition, robotics, leadership, career readiness — and distribute different specialties around the state, so we have real depth of expertise rather than everyone being a generalist." Under this new model, there is hope for an outdoor recreation specialist in 4-H as well.

- California does not have a dedicated Office of Outdoor Recreation. In its absence, coordination has happened through entities like the CalRec Vision Working Group, which produced a statewide outdoor recreation strategy in 2021. While extension has not been formally embedded in these structures in the past, interviewees noted recent movement is beginning to change that.

- UC ANR's California Naturalist program represents another growing intersection between Extension and outdoor engagement. With a large participating non-profit base, it builds public literacy around nature and science while encouraging outdoor activity.

- California's advisor model is unique among Extension programs: advisors are full academics and expected to do research as part of their merit and promotion. This positions UC ANR to contribute rigorous, credible research alongside its extension work — something state leadership explicitly values in the partnership.

- UC ANR has been developing agritourism resources for many years, and agritourism remains one of UC ANR's most established touchpoints with the tourism sector. A statewide agritourism coordinator is in place, and a statewide agritourism summit is being organized.

- UC ANR helped develop the recent "Economic Value of California's Working Landscapes report". The 2025 report covered 9 different sectors, one of which is outdoor recreation. The report highlighted outdoor recreation's economic contribution across 13 state regions and is being used to make the case to policymakers for greater investment in the sector.

- Partnerships were listed as a key necessary ingredient to spur this work, with leadership noting "It wouldn't serve us to have [a local specialist] in this space if they didn't have partners to work with. So one thing we've been doing over the last several years is really expanding partnerships — at the local, regional, and state level. Convention and tourism bureaus, statewide outdoor rec organizations, local economic development corporations — all of them are partners in this, some more than others."

- Funding constraints remain the primary limitation, though UC ANR has been actively diversifying its revenue base through a newly established foundation contributions, contracts, and a grants group, reducing dependence on state appropriations alone.

FUTURE EXTENSION OPPORTUNITIES

- Continue building on the new specialist and advisor positions and continue to establish UC ANR as a recognized research and technical assistance hub for California's outdoor recreation economy, particularly in rural and remote communities.
- Embed Extension more formally in the implementation phase of California Jobs First regional strategies.
- Leverage the California Naturalist program as a platform for outdoor recreation education, stewardship messaging, and public engagement at scale.
- Connect the agritourism coordinator role and resources into a programmatic framework that connects farm-based recreation and tourism to the larger outdoor economy.
- Use Extension's geographic distribution to create a statewide knowledge-sharing network among advisors, to share lessons learned across regions, accelerate implementation, and avoid duplication.

INTERVIEW QUOTE:

"In California, almost 50% of our geographic landscape is federally managed or publicly managed lands. And I think that's a point that is sometimes overlooked when looking at the western U.S. and outdoor recreation.... California, on the surface, doesn't appear to be as dependent on recreation as its sole economic driver, the way some of these other states might be. However, in California, recreation serves as a significant driver for much of our rural part of the state. And it's there that we have, I think, an opportunity to really help elevate the value that outdoor recreation and tourism brings to those rural areas, and also work collaboratively with those rural areas to help enhance their assets, enhance the visitor experience, and actually grow their outdoor recreation economy in their particular community, county, or region. And I think that's what's in front of us here in California — how do we message a little better the value of the outdoor recreation economy out here in the state?"



COLORADO

OVERVIEW & TAKEAWAYS



137,762
OUTDOOR RECREATION JOBS[1]

13
NATIONAL PARK UNITS

42
STATE PARKS

36.2%
OF THE STATE THAT IS FEDERAL PUBLIC LAND

30
OUTDOOR RECREATION DEGREE PROGRAMS

$28.5B
VISITOR SPENDING[13]

STATE OVERVIEW

Outdoor recreation in Colorado is a serious cultural and economic force, with rural communities being especially economically dependent on it. Outdoor recreation and tourism are also key components of the lifestyle and external image of Colorado. Recent efforts by individuals in the Colorado State University (CSU) Extension system are beginning to situate CSU Extension as a new, impactful player in the outdoor recreation sector in Colorado.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

CSU Extension has been engaging in outdoor recreation for several years now, although not strategically. At a state level, they have trained their county agents in facilitation techniques to help have productive discussion among different user groups like agricultural landowners, recreators, and/or public land agencies in their communities. At the county level, a few individual county agents have developed resources for landowners looking to engage more in the sector. Extension has also started to develop relationships with state leaders over the last few years, some of which are starting to yield results and resources for Colorado communities. One example is the Rural Technical Assistance Program (RTAP), as well as an online outdoor recreation asset map currently being developed.

Most of these efforts have come from individual extension faculty members who have seen needs in their communities, as opposed to a strategic effort on state Extension's part. However, outdoor recreation was highlighted as a programmatic need to the Colorado Extension Advisory Council within the last year, and both state and Extension leaders highlighted the needs and potential growth for this area.

INTERVIEW QUOTE:

With tourism, with federal partners and private landowners, and where those lands collide with trails — That always ends up on a local county extension person's plate, helping be a mitigator and coming up with creative ways to address the challenges of having both things on the landscape."

"We've always dabbled in the space of how "do we make the relationships between private landowners and tourists function better"... we want the best experience for our tourists and for our private landowners.

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

- Outdoor recreation intersects with all of Extension's traditional focus areas and programmatic landscapes: Ag, NR, Youth Development, and more.
- Extension has never had a topic or focus on outdoor recreation, but because of its statewide importance, agents across the state have always been engaged with it in one way or another, especially the tourism aspect of it, because that impacts every county in the state.
- At the university level, outdoor recreation is a priority for the current University president. This has created a renewed interest and many students and faculty are doing work in that space. New partnerships, funding opportunities, and events are beginning to surface thanks to this renewed institutional interest.
- In the past, Extension has dabbled in outdoor recreation through thinking about the relationships between landowners, tourists, and special interest groups (e.g. wildlife, trails, municipalities) and helping them work together better. This has been done primarily through training and stationing county agents as neutral parties during those discussions.
- CSU Extension has explored finding ways to help landowners with extra revenue generation through outdoor recreation, such as flyfishing, or private lands hunting. Some county directors have developed resources for local landowners such as signage, videos, etc.
- County agents have also seen an increased request from county commissioners to help address recreation and tourism issues such as added traffic on their county roads, too much dispersed camping, and conflict facilitation. Agents are getting involved with these issues primarily from a community development space.
- The biggest barrier to expanding more in this area is capacity. Leadership are asking questions like, "do we have the personnel to carry out a lot of the industry and community needs around this?"
- Extension leadership doesn't see outdoor recreation becoming a stand-alone programmatic area, it intersects with too many of the other programmatic areas. To develop this out, more energy would need to come from the state. There is a big state need, so there needs to be state level coordination. One leader shared, "In emergency management, it rose to a big priority for the state and when funds became available that was where some of our funds went to, so that person could coordinate across multiple positions. Outdoor rec could be like that, people could create work teams across disciplines."

FUTURE EXTENSION OPPORTUNITIES

- Hire an Extension outdoor recreation specialist to connect efforts happening across the counties in the state and continue expanding state partnerships.
- Continue cultivating state outdoor recreation relationships
- Continue growing and improving their conflict facilitation training, for both county staff and faculty, and the public.
- Find and strategize around the intersections where outdoor recreation bridges across existing programmatic areas.
- Highlight the Rural Technical Assistance Program (RTAP)'s unique model and provide adequate support to help grow this program.

GUAM

OVERVIEW & TAKEAWAYS



No comparable metrics were available for this Island Region

STATE OVERVIEW

Guam is the largest and southern most island in the Marianas Island chain. Despite Guam's isolated location and the strong influence from the military base, it is an island nation with long history of tourism. The island has seen spikes and lulls in visitation over time and current visitation is trending down, creating a challenging economic impact on the communities of Guam.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

While Guam's Extension program does not explicitly focus on tourism or outdoor recreation currently through dedicated staff titles or assignments, a small group of staff work on topics that reside at the intersection of community development, community health, agriculture, tourism, and outdoor recreation. Although not the driving force for these projects, outdoor recreation and tourism are themes that extend these projects beyond their initial focus areas and provide additional impacts.

While many projects and programs were developed as a response to nutrition and community health, other organizations have realized the potential of the tools and resources that were created. There exists an opportunity for Guam Extension to invest in leverage historic partnerships to identify needs Extension is already well tooled to address that exist at the intersection of community development, agriculture, tourism, and outdoor recreation.

INTERVIEW QUOTE:

"One opportunity that land grants have is to document and research. Often times people don't know there is a problem or there is no funding behind the program without data. I think that is where we have an opportunity to demonstrate what the problem is."

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

*Note: No outdoor recreation or tourism leader responded to the multiple interview requests provided; thus, no interview data is available from this stakeholder sector.

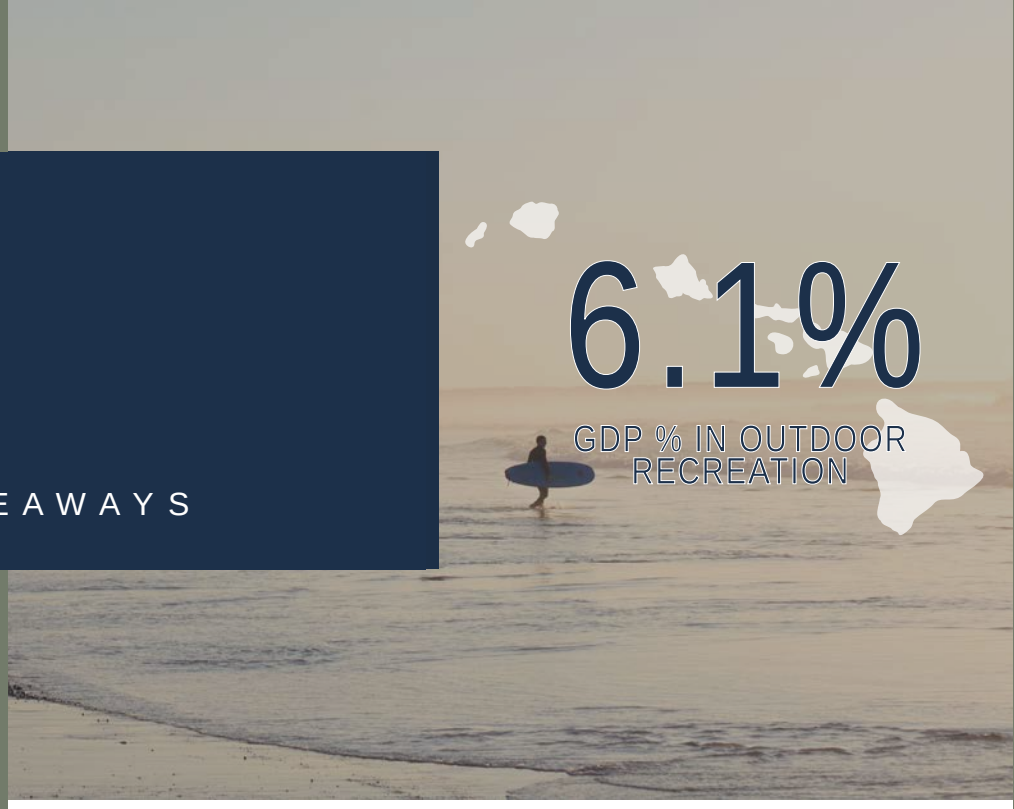
- Guam Extension has engaged with the tourism industry for decades, as it has continued to be a significant economic sector.
- While tourism has been a priority, Extension has not been involved directly in outdoor recreation independent except on rare occasions. These occasions happened when outdoor recreation and tourism were explicitly connected.
- Currently Guam Extension's focus is agritourism programing that assist agricultural producers promote their local products to the tourism industry. Extension has worked to assist and promote events like farm tours, or culinary experiences that link agricultural producers with chefs on farms to create meals that attract tourist groups. While these have been successful isolated events, they have not been formalized into a long-running program.
- Tourism assessments have been a way Extension has helped the island understand needs and desires of tourists.
- Extension has also found a role uniting community health, walkability, and community recreation through several programs that organized walking cohorts and grew to address and improve inadequate community recreation infrastructure. These programs now provide community members and visitors with new opportunities for community exercise. Although not directly outdoor recreation focused, these programs demonstrate the possible interconnectedness of outdoor recreation with community health and development.
- No faculty members within Guam's system have a direct title or defined role in tourism or outdoor recreation, most are involved because they have an interest in tourism or outdoor recreation, or there is a community need, a specific grant opportunity, or colleague that draws them into a project related to the topic.
- Extension has demonstrated its ability to act as a trusted, neutral convener of stakeholders on important topics across the island. Furthermore, it has the expertise to link the community issues that come up in meetings with research and resources.

FUTURE EXTENSION OPPORTUNITIES

- Build on the previous success of prior projects and continue to build a stronger relationship with the Guam Visitors Bureau.
- There appears to be a need for more assessments focused on the needs and desires of tourists and attitudes of visitors.
- In partnership with the Guam Visitor's Bureau, identify needs the bureau cannot fill that fit within Guam Extension's work plans.
- Agritourism is an obvious on-ramp for Extension to begin intentionally assisting agriculture producers connect with tourism.
- Extension has a history of being a catalyst across many sectors in Guam. Extension can be an immediate resource by bringing stakeholders and communities together to identify issues, gathering and sharing data, assessing tradeoffs, and facilitating community capacity, and acquiring outside resources to advance tourism and outdoor recreation related needs.
- Guam's connection to the sea provides a unique opportunity to influence water based outdoor recreation and tourism and ocean stewardship. While the University of Guam's laboratories and research stations are not currently open to visitors, a portion of these facilities could be adjusted to allow for visits by tourists seeking education and stewardship training.

HAWAII

OVERVIEW & TAKEAWAYS



51,118
OUTDOOR RECREATION JOBS[1]

7
NATIONAL PARK UNITS

50
STATE PARKS

20.2%
OF THE STATE THAT IS FEDERAL PUBLIC LAND

0
OUTDOOR RECREATION DEGREE PROGRAMS

$28.6B
VISITOR SPENDING[14]

STATE OVERVIEW

Outdoor recreation and tourism are critical parts of Hawaii's economy. At 6.1% of state GDP, Hawaii's outdoor recreation GDP is the highest of any state in the country, and travel and tourism are the #1 employment sector in the state. The island geography makes the impacts of external tourism and outdoor recreation acute and palpable on locals and tourists, and the management of these impacts unique.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

While the University of Hawaii has multiple programs related to hospitality and tourism, there are currently no programs specifically related to outdoor recreation. Based on online research, the University of Hawaii at Manoa Extension program website highlights programs that touch on community resiliency and economic development, but nothing explicitly framed as outdoor recreation or tourism. The Economic & Community Development page emphasizes building community assets (physical, human, social, financial, environmental, cultural) to support quality of life and economic resilience, and that frame could encompass tourism and outdoor-recreation-related enterprises (e.g., agritourism, small rural businesses), but they are not named directly.

Hawaii's tourism and recreation economy exerts an outsized influence on the lives and communities of the state. Hawaii's Extension program has an opportunity to engage in an industry that has an enormous impact on the lives and communities of Hawaii.

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

The research team used publicly available contact information to invite Extension and State level outdoor recreation and tourism leaders to be interviewed. The team contacted these leaders per the protocols established through the USU Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval process. If initial contacts did not respond to the multiple interview invitation emails, an alternative potential interviewee was contacted using the same IRB approved process in an effort to obtain interviews from each state and island region.

In the case of Hawaii, none of the multiple contacts from either the Extension leadership nor the outdoor recreation or tourism leadership sectors responded to the multiple interview requests provided, thus no interview data is available from these stakeholder groups.

IDAHO

OVERVIEW & TAKEAWAYS



39,228
OUTDOOR RECREATION JOBS[1]

5
NATIONAL PARK UNITS

30
STATE PARKS

61.9%
OF THE STATE THAT IS FEDERAL PUBLIC LAND

9
OUTDOOR RECREATION DEGREE PROGRAMS

$5.9B
VISITOR SPENDING[15]

STATE OVERVIEW

Outdoor recreation is a growing part of Idaho's economy, with 3.5% of state GDP coming from it. However, outdoor recreation remains a lower priority for Idaho Extension, which continues to orient primarily around its ranching, farming, and natural resource base. Agriculture and natural resource industries remain a significant and critical industries in the state, and the traditional areas of emphasis for Idaho Extension. Currently travel related employment is the 11th ranked employment sector in the state — the lowest of any Western state.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

University of Idaho Extension does not have a dedicated outdoor recreation or tourism specialist, and leadership was candid that the sector is not a current programmatic priority. One newer faculty member is beginning to explore outdoor recreation programming, primarily through 4-H and youth engagement but this is currently not reported as a formal assignment.

Idaho Extension's most realistic onramp into the recreation and tourism sector runs through its existing agricultural relationships. Outdoor recreation frequently occurs on the same rangelands and working lands that Extension already serves, creating known friction points and potential programming expansion opportunities. These new programmatic areas may include land use training, public land management coordination, responsible recreation education, and providing information to assist in the coexistence between livestock and recreationists.

Agritourism is also the one area where leadership expressed genuine interest. Engagement in formal outdoor recreation programming beyond agrotourism is contingent on two conditions: dedicated funding earmarked specifically for the sector, and a demonstrated, community-identified need, and Extension leadership reported that they felt neither of those conditions are currently present in the state.

INTERVIEW QUOTE:

"Would engage in outdoor recreation only by request, or if it was an identified need."

"Outdoor recreation is not a top priority in Idaho. It is of interest, but we are not involved in the outdoor recreation and tourism sector currently."

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

Note: No outdoor recreation or tourism leader responded to the multiple interview requests provided; thus, no interview data is available from this stakeholder sector.

- University of Idaho Extension has no dedicated outdoor recreation or tourism faculty position. Leaders reported that some faculty members are experimenting with outdoor recreation programming on the side, with a particular focus on youth and 4-H — but this is not their primary assignment and has not yet been formalized.
- Outdoor recreation is a topic of interest, but not a priority. There has been no voiced desire from the state or local level.
- Outdoor recreation is intersecting with Extension's traditional base in ways that create both conflict and opportunity. Recreationists using rangeland without understanding how to care for it is a real and recurring concern for Idaho's ranching community. This is an area where Extension is already well-positioned to engage through education and outreach.
- Agritourism is the most likely near-term entry point for expanded engagement in the recreation and tourism sector.
- Idaho's vision for outdoor recreation engagement is one of coexistence rather than promotion — creating spaces where people, wildlife, livestock, and farmland can share the landscape responsibly, rather than marketing Idaho as a recreation destination. This positions Extension as a land stewardship and conflict mitigation resource rather than an economic development partner.
- Funding is the primary structural barrier, compounded by potential state legislative budget cuts to the University of Idaho. Without a specific budget line, expansion into this new area is unlikely to occur.

FUTURE EXTENSION OPPORTUNITIES

- Develop targeted programming around responsible recreation on working lands, addressing the real and recurring conflicts between recreationists and Idaho's ranching and farming communities.
- Explore agritourism resource development as a natural extension of current programming, building on existing agricultural clientele and the sector's growing presence across rural Idaho.
- Monitor state outdoor recreation funding opportunities and position Extension to respond quickly when dedicated resources become available.
- Include outdoor recreation explicitly in the next statewide needs assessment to test whether community demand could emerge, to create the evidence base needed for future programmatic investment.

MONTANA

OVERVIEW & TAKEAWAYS



32,094
OUTDOOR RECREATION JOBS[1]

6
NATIONAL PARK UNITS

55
STATE PARKS

29.0%
OF THE STATE THAT IS FEDERAL PUBLIC LAND

7
OUTDOOR RECREATION DEGREE PROGRAMS

$6.4B
VISITOR SPENDING[16]

STATE OVERVIEW

Outdoor recreation is an integral part of Montana's identity, economy, and external image. Montana has the third highest share of state GDP from outdoor recreation among western states at 4.9%. Locals understand this significance, and in 2019, 96% of Montanans say that the influence of outdoor recreation is important to the economic future of the state.[17]

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Based on the team's research from publicly available resources, Montana State University Extension doesn't currently explicitly engage in outdoor recreation. That said, they do have several programs out of their Community Vitality arm that could impact outdoor recreation tangentially, such as their "Reimagining Rural", Big Sky Big Leadership, or Local Government Center programs. These efforts help Montana's rural communities build local leadership capacity, better processes, and economic development efforts. They also have a faculty member who has done work in agritourism in the past, specifically through creating a Montana Agritourism Fellows Program.

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

The research team used publicly available contact information to invite Extension and State level outdoor recreation and tourism leaders to be interviewed. The team contacted these leaders per the protocols established through the USU Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval process. If initial contacts did not respond to the multiple interview invitation emails, an alternative potential interviewee was contacted using the same IRB approved process in an effort to obtain interviews from each state and island region.

In the case of Montana, none of the multiple contacts from either the Extension leadership nor the outdoor recreation or tourism leadership sectors responded to the multiple interview requests provided, thus no interview data is available from these stakeholder groups.

NEVADA

OVERVIEW & TAKEAWAYS



60,742
OUTDOOR RECREATION JOBS[1]

4
NATIONAL PARK UNITS

27
STATE PARKS

80.1%
OF THE STATE THAT IS FEDERAL PUBLIC LAND

1
OUTDOOR RECREATION DEGREE PROGRAMS

$63.0B
VISITOR SPENDING[18]

STATE OVERVIEW

In Nevada, travel and tourism-related employment are the #1 employment sector in the state. Though this ranking is heavily dependent on the casino industry, which is highly localized to a few notable cities, outdoor recreation still makes up 3.3% of the state's GDP. Nevada also has the highest percentage of federal public land of any state, with 80% of the land in the state being federally managed.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

While a new campus at Lake Tahoe has spurred the University of Nevada, Reno broadly to more heavily engage in tourism and outdoor recreation, Extension leadership were candid that outdoor recreation and tourism are not a current programmatic priority given resource constraints. Those Extension leaders interviewed were not dismissive of the opportunity for future growth in the outdoor recreation and tourism sector and they particularly noted the potential for Extension to have a possible role in data analysis and community-level economic development. However, Nevada's communities have not asked for this kind of support from Extension, and those interviewed reported that the lack of community demand is what would need to change even if funding was not an issue. Additionally, those interviewed didn't know of a statewide effort focused on expanding outdoor recreation that would be easy for Extension to plug into and play a role in. One interviewee explained that the lack of that kind of statewide program " wouldn't stop [us] from being involved, it just means that it's a little bit harder to understand where to start." Some engagement in the area is happening on the periphery, and faculty and staff are dabbling in the outdoor recreation and tourism space when opportunities arise. Examples like Extension's fire science work with the communities around Lake Tahoe provides an example of an impactful Extension program with indirect connection to recreation and tourism.

INTERVIEW QUOTE:

"Quite frankly, Nevada and our frontier lands also has a little bit of a cultural thing where people don't want others coming to visit them — they want to be out alone in the desert, so don't mess with them. That's probably some of the reason why communities aren't asking those questions. So more communities saying this is something they want to pursue would be number one. That would then justify it to me, using our land-grant university mission, that this is something that needs to drive our programmatic needs and emphasis. And then, two — it's simply just finding the funding to bring in that position or positions."

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

- Because the vast majority of the state is federally managed, any Extension engagement in outdoor recreation would likely require some kind of federal partnership. This structural complexity adds additional coordination layers that Nevada Extension does not typically engage in and a challenge that doesn't exist for states with more private or state-managed land.

- Fire science is UNR Extension's closest current touchpoint with outdoor recreation. The program works extensively with BLM, state agencies, and communities, particularly in the Lake Tahoe area on fire-wise practices that are directly tied to protecting tourism and recreation assets that are key to the economic health of these communities.

- Lack of perceived demand is a serious barrier to expanding outdoor recreation and tourism Extension programming. Extension leaders don't feel that communities in Nevada are currently asking Extension for this kind of support at this time, and some rural communities are actively resistant to increased visitation. This can place Extension's localized trust born from traditional areas of emphasis that are widely accepted in rural Nevada in jeopardy in communities that do not view outdoor recreation and tourism development as a community development opportunity at all.

- Without a state-level entity encouraging programmatic growth in the area, building outdoor recreation resources would require Extension to create its own entry point, and this is proving to be beyond the current institutional desire and capacity.

FUTURE EXTENSION OPPORTUNITIES

- Extension's most natural future role appears to be in two areas: 1- bringing ideas, case studies, and examples to the table for small rural communities thinking about outdoor recreation as an economic strategy, and 2- conducting data modeling to help communities understand the long-term economic and environmental impacts of outdoor recreation investment.

- Leverage UNR's Lake Tahoe campus as a base for Extension engagement in outdoor recreation and tourism. Lake Tahoe is one of the state's highest-profile recreation communities and nationally recognized for its approaches to visitor management.

- Connect fire resilience and sustainability work to tourism and community development.

- While Nevada may not have the need to support a full role, leadership voiced the idea of sharing a "regional outdoor recreation specialist" across multiple WRDC and Western Extension Directors Association (WEDA) states. The recent Western Agenda 2.0 could be used as a platform for multi-state collaboration on shared interests. While outdoor recreation and tourism are not currently one of the six pillars, these topics could be conceived as a thread that connects across several pillars. A collective investment across several western states might be more realistic than any single state acting alone. WEDA and the Western Agenda 2.0 platform could advance a regional, multi-state approach to outdoor recreation Extension.

NEW MEXICO

OVERVIEW & TAKEAWAYS



31,454
OUTDOOR RECREATION JOBS[1]

15
NATIONAL PARK UNITS

35
STATE PARKS

31.7%
OF THE STATE THAT IS FEDERAL PUBLIC LAND

3
OUTDOOR RECREATION DEGREE PROGRAMS

$9.5B
VISITOR SPENDING[19]

STATE OVERVIEW

New Mexico's cultural heritage with significant Indigenous, Hispanic, and Anglo influences, gives it a unique history of diversity among Western states in the study. Outdoor recreation plays a smaller but still important role in the state's economy, at 2.5% of the GDP. However, the state's vast public land base, diverse cultures, and growing investment in outdoor equity and trail infrastructure are shaping a community-driven approach to outdoor recreation development.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

While New Mexico State University Extension doesn't currently have a dedicated outdoor recreation or tourism specialist, they have supported tourism specialists in the past and engagement in the sector continues, although on the periphery of existing Extension positions. Leadership agreed that tourism and outdoor recreation was a growing area of interest for the program and specialists in areas like wildlife, range, water, and even turfgrass, touch on outdoor recreation in their current work. Current 4-H programming promotes many outdoor recreation related skills and natural resource projects, but does not explicitly incorporate outdoor recreation or tourism as a stand-alone curriculum piece. New Mexico State is home to a School of Hotel, Restaurant, and Tourism Management which would be a natural partner if Extension leans into outdoor recreation and tourism in the future.

New Mexico state's outdoor recreation and tourism leadership expressed a desire to explore workforce development partnerships with Extension, identifying it as a potential local resource and a provider of certifications and licensure for outdoor recreation and tourism careers. New Mexico's Outdoor Recreation Division has a deliberate focus on economic development, a sector familiar to Extension. Both Extension and state leaders acknowledge that strategic intentionality, not just funding will be required to advance a partnership focused on outdoor recreation and tourism in the State of New Mexico.

INTERVIEW QUOTE:

"Looking into the future — at least in the state of New Mexico, but I would say probably West-wide, there's been a perception shift to where outdoor recreation is really aligned and can directly impact community well-being. You're seeing the whole push within Extension, but more broadly with our clientele across the West, on the importance of health and mental health and wellness, and I think there's a great parallel with outdoor recreation and tourism type programs".

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

- State leadership reminded the interviewers that community readiness for outdoor recreation development in New Mexico is nuanced. It is shaped by cultural identity, historic land ties, and socioeconomic diversity.
- NMSU Extension does not currently have a dedicated outdoor recreation or tourism FTE, but the sector is connected with much of what Extension already does. For example a wildlife specialist runs a fee hunting and fishing program aimed at helping agricultural producers diversify their revenue.
- In the past, federal funds supported a "Rural Economic Development through Tourism" (REDT) program that funded 8-9 FTEs at NMSU focused on community tourism development. These positions are no longer funded or operational at NMSU.
- The New Mexico Outdoor Recreation Division is intentionally housed in Economic Development not Tourism, to emphasize community self-determination over broad promotional messaging. Its two primary programs, the Outdoor Equity Fund and the Outdoor Recreation Trail Plus Grant, focus respectively on diversifying who recreates and building the infrastructure to support them sustainably.
- Workforce development is the most natural near-term entry point for a New Mexico State Extension partnership. The Division is interested in exploring how Extension could provide certifications and transferable licensure to participants coming through their Outdoor Equity Fund programs that help translate early outdoor experiences into viable career pathways.
- Extension's absence from an existing relationship with the New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions was noted as a gap.
- New Mexico has a shortage of qualified trail professionals — certified trail designers and Professional Trail Builders Association (PTBA) members. State leadership described repeated frustration with firms that win trail contracts but lack trail-specific technical knowledge, resulting in substandard work.
- Extension leadership highlighted the health and wellness dimension of outdoor recreation as a compelling frame for Extension's future engagement — one that connects to Extension's existing community health programming and opens doors to new clientele Extension has never traditionally served, particularly in urban areas where demand for open space and recreational programming is growing.
- Funding emerged as the primary structural barrier, noting that Smith-Lever and Hatch funding has not kept pace with inflation for 20 years, and that new federal partnerships beyond USDA may be necessary to build the required capacity.

FUTURE EXTENSION OPPORTUNITIES

- Explore partnership opportunities between Extension and NMSU's School of Hotel, Restaurant, and Tourism Management, which already has faculty and coursework in tourism management. Connecting Extension's community-facing work with the school's academic expertise could accelerate programming without requiring new FTEs.
- Build on existing Extension efforts, like guidance for private landowners around fee hunting and fishing programs helping agricultural producers diversify revenue, that could be shared and replicated across the West.
- Explore opportunities to work with the New Mexico Outdoor Recreation Division, specifically around workforce development opportunities, funding, or 4-H engagement.
- Expand intentional engagement with urban county agents around open space, parks, and recreational programming in Albuquerque and Las Cruces, reaching new clientele Extension has not traditionally served.

OREGON

OVERVIEW & TAKEAWAYS



122,900
OUTDOOR RECREATION JOBS[1]

5
NATIONAL PARK UNITS

250+
STATE PARKS

52.3%
OF THE STATE THAT IS FEDERAL PUBLIC LAND

5
OUTDOOR RECREATION DEGREE PROGRAMS

$14.6B
VISITOR SPENDING[20]

STATE OVERVIEW

Oregon's outdoor recreation sector contributes $8.4 billion in value added (2.6% of total state value added) and supports an estimated 72,925 jobs. Tourism is distributed broadly across the state, with a wide variety of recreation and tourism opportunities extending from the coast to the mountains, to the Willamette Valley. This diversity of potential experiences make outdoor recreation and tourism a powerful cross-cutting economic force for both rural and urban communities.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Oregon State University Extension has some existing engagement in outdoor recreation and some notable programs that have garnered national attention, but system wide efforts remain fragmented. Leadership acknowledged that its investment in outdoor recreation may be underrepresented relative to the sector's economic importance. The Center for Outdoor Recreation Economy (CORE) was intended to be a connection to the sector, but personnel turnover has left it unfortunately under-resourced and largely inactive on the Extension side. It is now being re-envisioned within the College of Forestry, which has a stronger Extension core, which may create an opportunity for renewed momentum.

The most significant structural barrier to growth in the area was noted as the interdisciplinary nature of outdoor recreation itself. It spans multiple colleges with no single department positioned to champion new positions. Without an advocate making the case at the highest administrative level, new dedicated positions are unlikely to emerge, particularly in a climate of declining budgets.

INTERVIEW QUOTE:

"With declining budgets, we really need a justification for any new position... administration at the highest level would need to feel like something is missing — a crucial role that Extension needs to be filling."

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

Note: No outdoor recreation or tourism leader responded to the multiple interview requests provided; thus, no interview data is available from this stakeholder sector.

- OSU Extension has no dedicated outdoor recreation specialist, but it does have a Sea Grant position focused on coastal tourism, guide and outfitter trainings, and business development, an agritourism outreach program coordinator, and wildfire resilience staff who have taken on recreation recovery work through state legislative funding.

- The Center for Outdoor Recreation Economy (CORE), established in 2021 as a collaboration between Extension, the College of Forestry, and OSU Cascades had significant promise but stalled due to personnel changes. It is now being consolidated into the College of Forestry and re-envisioned.

- Oregon received dedicated state legislative funding to support wildfire recovery in the recreation sphere for socioeconomically vulnerable communities. OSU Extension's forestry team administers it, using an advisory committee and a rubric to allocate funds based on community readiness, socioeconomic vulnerability, and time since wildfire impact. Products are still rolling out, but the program represents a meaningful and creative intersection of Extension's existing strengths with outdoor recreation community needs.

- The absence of an advocate was identified as the single most critical barrier to growth. In agriculture, commodity groups come to Extension leadership requesting research and support. No equivalent entity exists for outdoor recreation and tourism. Without organized external pressure, administration lacks the evidence it needs to justify new positions.

- The interdisciplinary nature of outdoor recreation also creates an institutional coordination problem. Relevant work is distributed across the university. Because no single department owns it, which means no single department advocates for it.

FUTURE EXTENSION OPPORTUNITIES

- Reinvigorate CORE within its new College of Forestry home, deliberately connecting it to the TRAIL degree program, the Sea Grant coastal tourism position, and the broader Extension faculty network to create a coherent outdoor recreation Extension hub.

- Develop an advocacy strategy that connects Oregon's outdoor recreation industry, tourism bureaus, and economic development organizations to OSU Extension leadership, filling the gap left by the absence of a commodity-group equivalent for recreation.

- Build on the wildfire recovery and recreation funding model to establish a more permanent framework for Extension engagement at the intersection of natural resource resilience and outdoor recreation community development.

- Explore a combined agritourism and ecotourism specialist position — a concept that was previously discussed but not funded — given the growth of both sectors across Oregon's diverse geographic regions.

- Use CORE and the College of Forestry's research capacity to produce Oregon-specific economic and community impact data on outdoor recreation, giving administrators and policymakers the evidence base needed to justify further investment.

PACIFIC BASIN

NORTHERN MARIANAS AND SAMOA

OVERVIEW & TAKEAWAYS



No comparable metrics were available for this Island Region

STATE OVERVIEW

The Northern Mariana Islands are a U.S. commonwealth island region located north of Guam. The archipelago includes 14 islands known for their beautiful beaches and coral reefs.

Samoa is an independent island nation in Polynesia in the South Pacific Ocean. It is also known for its lush tropical landscapes, volcanic mountains, and strong cultural traditions.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Northern Mariana Islands unique combination of natural resources and U.S. territorial status makes international tourism a vital component of the local economy. The islands attract visitors with white-sand beaches, scuba diving and snorkeling sites, sport fishing, hiking, and historical attractions related to World War II. While the Extension program is relatively small, it has an opportunity to diversify into this growing economic sector.

Similarly, Samoa's outdoor recreation and tourism economy is centered on its natural beauty and rich Polynesian culture. Visitors are drawn to the island's beaches, coral reefs, waterfalls, rainforest hiking trails, and marine activities such as snorkeling, diving, fishing, and whale watching. Extension can play a role in linking tourism with community development and agriculture with conservation and eco-tourism efforts.

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

The research team used publicly available contact information to invite Extension and State level outdoor recreation and tourism leaders to be interviewed. The team contacted these leaders per the protocols established through the USU Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval process. If initial contacts did not respond to the multiple interview invitation emails, an alternative potential interviewee was contacted using the same IRB approved process in an effort to obtain interviews from each state and island region.

In the case of both Samoa and the Northern Marianas, none of the multiple contacts from either the Extension leadership nor the outdoor recreation or tourism leadership sectors responded to the multiple interview requests provided, thus no interview data is available from these stakeholder groups. During the course of the interview phase a severe tropical storm heavily impacted the region and the research team does recognize this may have impacted the availability of the targeted participants.

PACIFIC BASIN

FEDERATED STATES OF MICRONESIA

OVERVIEW & TAKEAWAYS



No comparable metrics were available for this Island Region

STATE OVERVIEW

The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) is a widely dispersed island nation comprising four states and hundreds of islands across the western Pacific Ocean. This island region is supported by the College of Micronesia - FSM Cooperative Research and Extension program. Instead of viewing recreation primarily as leisure or tourism, Micronesian communities often see outdoor activities as interconnected with culture, subsistence, education, conservation, and economic development.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

One of the most interesting takeaways from the College of Micronesia - FSM Cooperative Research and Extension program is how the cultural framing of recreation as an embedded part of the culture and everyday livelihood of the people changes how Extension approaches recreation and tourism through programming and strategy.

College of Micronesia - FSM Cooperative Research and Extension administration view recreation as an interconnected component of community life, allowing a more natural integration of the sector into traditional areas of Extension such as agriculture or community development. However, because of this integration, it is difficult to untangle tourism or outdoor recreation impacts from other programs.

This interview also highlighted that national discussions about outdoor recreation may overlook island and Indigenous perspectives where recreation, subsistence, and cultural practices are deeply interconnected.

INTERVIEW QUOTE:

"It's less about leisure and more about living — how people sustain themselves and connect to their environment. For the local people, we don't think of outdoor activity as a hobby or something just to enjoy. We connect it to the everyday things that we do — in the agroforestry system, or in the water when we go fishing. It's something we enjoy while connecting it to the activity of food, or fishing, or just taking care of the environment."

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

- Unlike many mainland Extension systems, outdoor activities are not viewed as leisure pursuits but rather essential components of peoples' livelihood, culture, and community sustainability.
- Although tourism is an important economic sector within the FSM, the College of Micronesia-FSM Cooperative Research and Extension program does not currently identify tourism or outdoor recreation as a distinct strategic focus area and does not have staff dedicated specifically to these areas.
- Many College of Micronesia-FSM Cooperative Research and Extension programs contribute to tourism outcomes through conservation projects, cultural preservation, environmental management, and community development.
- Tourism workforce development in FSM currently relies on cross-program collaboration between Extension education and entrepreneurship resources.
- Staffing capacity, time, and grant administration are more significant constraints than the availability of funding opportunities. The College of Micronesia-FSM Cooperative Research and Extension program receives viable funding announcements regularly but lacks sufficient personnel to pursue and manage them.
- Micronesia and other island region Extension systems experience a logistical burden of serving dispersed island communities. This includes multi-day travel between sites, limited airline service, and high transportation costs. These logistics require additional strategic planning when considering any program expansion.
- Climate change impacts will disproportionately affect island nations. In confronting this challenge, local community priorities must be carefully considered to ensure overall community sustainability in addition to tourism and recreation.

FUTURE EXTENSION OPPORTUNITIES

- Explore including outdoor recreation and tourism in future strategic planning efforts and subsequent staff expansion in this specific area to help address some of the expressed capacity limitations.
- The integration of outdoor recreation and tourism with agriculture, food security, and marine science could allow tourism and outdoor recreation programs to complement other conservation and economic resilience programs rather than becoming an isolated, standalone program.
- Giant-clam aquaculture and associated conservation activities were identified as a potential model through which Extension-supported research and conservation sites could contribute to ecotourism and environmental education.
- Integrating tourism-related knowledge and skills into existing youth programs could provide one possible pathway for future Extension engagement. Continuing programs that teach youth marine science, fishing traditions, environmental stewardship, and cultural knowledge and augmenting them with modules focused on developing tourism-based skills can prepare youth for careers as valued guides, educators, and community ambassadors.
- Investments in administrative capacity, grant support, and workforce development may yield greater returns than simply increasing funding availability.

UTAH

OVERVIEW & TAKEAWAYS



75,182
OUTDOOR RECREATION JOBS[1]

10
NATIONAL PARK UNITS

46
STATE PARKS

63.1%
OF THE STATE THAT IS FEDERAL PUBLIC LAND

11
OUTDOOR RECREATION DEGREE PROGRAMS

$13.7B
VISITOR SPENDING[21]

STATE OVERVIEW

Utah is home to the first state office of outdoor recreation in the country. Outdoor recreation continues to play a big role in Utah's economy and culture. It has also been credited with the state's appeal for business investment across various sectors, especially from the tech industry. Outdoor recreation and tourism recently surpassed agriculture's share of state GDP, marking a significant economic shift that could signal another way Extension could prioritize its resources and goals to align with a shifting state economy.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

USU Extension is among the more developed Extension programs in the West when it comes to outdoor recreation. Utah State University Extension's place in the outdoor recreation and tourism sector is anchored by the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism (IORT). Additionally, several Extension staff have developed programs related to trail stewardship, gateway community development, economic impact research, and regional planning. However, Extension leadership acknowledges that this infrastructure has not kept pace with the sector's growth, and outdoor recreation nor tourism has not yet emerged as a formal programmatic priority at the state or county level.

Aside from the staff described above, county faculty engage with outdoor recreation and tourism reactively and organically, rarely if ever as a primary focus. Agritourism is growing interest among some faculty, and indirect connections to the sector run through natural resources, water, wildlife, and community development programs. Leadership from both the state and Extension agree that the conditions for growth exist, and the infrastructure, the relationships, and the sector importance are all present, however, meaningful expansion into this sector will require new administrative priorities, legislative or agency funding, and stronger communication between Extension and state outdoor recreation partners.

INTERVIEW QUOTE:

"Outdoor recreation and tourism is a thread woven into so much of the lifestyle, livability, health, wellness, community vitality, and economic growth of the state. It's maybe not the single thread, but it is woven into so much of that stuff that when you start to tug on outdoor recreation, it shakes so much of the larger web Extension is involved in."

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

- The Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism is a genuine asset and a relatively rare structure among western Extension programs, but its legislative line item has held flat since the 1990s, constraining the ability to hire additional FTEs or build programs with long-term stability. Leadership described it as an incubator for early-stage programs, like the GNAR Initiative and the Dark Sky Collaborative.

- Outdoor recreation's impact on rural Utah communities is experienced as a double-edged sword and county faculty in rural areas often experience the sector through conflict and management challenges rather than economic opportunity and some county commissioners in rural counties are more focused on protecting traditional industries than promoting recreation.

- Despite the sector's economic significance, outdoor recreation has not surfaced as a formal programmatic priority through Extension's statewide or county-level needs assessments.

- Multiple interviewees pointed to the indirect ways Extension already touches outdoor recreation: citizen science water quality monitoring, snowpack and climate research tied to ski season viability, and wildlife and human-wildlife interaction monitoring. These programs don't carry outdoor recreation in their titles but are relevant to the sector.

- State leadership identified workforce development and career pathway awareness as the most significant gaps Extension could help immediately fill. Those interviewed highlighted several potential roles Extension could play, building awareness among young Utahns of how to recreate responsibly, help them plan for entry into outdoor recreation careers, and providing training and technical skills to build and maintain the trails that land management agencies need. They also highlighted 4-H as a natural pipeline to outdoor recreation specifically, noting that 4-H and FFA youth are often well positioned to pursue outdoor and land management careers.

- Outdoor recreation leaders noted that early conversations between 4-H and the Division of Outdoor Recreation around the "Every Kid Outdoors" program represent a promising partnership, one that both sides see value in, but haven't yet been formalized.

- Extension leadership offered an idea for how Extension could scale its outdoor recreation role without waiting for new legislative appropriations: identifying existing instances where state agencies could contract with Extension to deliver research-based education that the agency couldn't produce internally. This model has been successful in providing valuable resources and partnerships within other areas of Utah's Extension system and could be a realistic near-term pathway for the Division of Outdoor Recreation to deepen its relationship with Extension.

FUTURE EXTENSION OPPORTUNITIES

- Pursue more explicit connections between 4-H and the Division of Outdoor Recreation's "Every Kid Outdoors" program.

- Pursue a contract or MOU with the Utah Division of Outdoor Recreation modeled on Extension's existing state agency partnerships, positioning Extension as the research and education provider for programs the Division needs but lacks the internal capacity to build.

- Advocate for increasing the capacity for IORT to better serve the state's outdoor recreation and tourism needs. Press to increase the legislative budget line item to accelerate this capacity building effort. This ask could be a powerful return on investment for the state. This ask will likely require state agency partners to advocate for the request directly.

- Include outdoor recreation and tourism explicitly in the next statewide Extension needs assessment to generate data on community demand, which leadership identified as one of the key triggers for re-prioritizing programmatic areas.

- Explore the need for additional agritourism resources and partnerships with the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food.

WASHINGTON

OVERVIEW & TAKEAWAYS



129,088
OUTDOOR RECREATION JOBS[1]

9
NATIONAL PARK UNITS

140+
STATE PARKS

28.6%
OF THE STATE THAT IS FEDERAL PUBLIC LAND

2
OUTDOOR RECREATION DEGREE PROGRAMS

$26.5B
VISITOR SPENDING[22]

STATE OVERVIEW

At 2.7% GDP, outdoor recreation is an important part of Washington's economy, especially in rural communities. This importance is reflected in the fact that both the State of Washington Tourism organization and Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office offer a number of resources to help small and rural communities develop outdoor recreation and tourism economies. Washington State Extension, as both a land and sea grant university, also has several programs that engage in this space.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Based on the team's research of publicly available resources, WSU Extension has multiple on-the-ground programs focused on, or related to outdoor recreation, tourism, or public lands stewardship, with many county offices creating and offering unique programs. For example, Skamania County's Forest Youth Success program is a compelling program that links youth workforce development with public land stewardship and recreation trail maintenance, and the Yakima County 4-H program has a specific "Outdoor Adventures" focus area with several activities and curriculums for leaders to pull from. Additionally, there are a number of agritourism activities happening in the counties, with one good example being an agritourism "map" developed by Ferry County to highlight local producers and businesses.

While this is significant, Washington State Extension does not have an outdoor recreation or tourism specialist at the state or county levels, nor does it have those sectors as strategic focus areas for the larger statewide program. Programs that exist are county-driven and framed around stewardship, youth development, or science education, not tourism economy or recreation industry support.

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

The research team used publicly available contact information to invite Extension and State level outdoor recreation and tourism leaders to be interviewed. The team contacted these leaders per the protocols established through the USU Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval process. If initial contacts did not respond to the multiple interview invitation emails, an alternative potential interviewee was contacted using the same IRB approved process in an effort to obtain interviews from each state and island region.

In the case of Washington, none of the multiple contacts from either the Extension leadership nor the outdoor recreation or tourism leadership sectors responded to the multiple interview requests provided, thus no interview data is available from these stakeholder groups.

WYOMING

OVERVIEW & TAKEAWAYS



33,900
OUTDOOR RECREATION JOBS[1]

12
NATIONAL PARK UNITS

12
STATE PARKS

46.7%
OF THE STATE THAT IS FEDERAL PUBLIC LAND

8
OUTDOOR RECREATION DEGREE PROGRAMS

$5.0B
VISITOR SPENDING[23]

STATE OVERVIEW

Wyoming is one of the most outdoor recreation-dependent economies in the nation. Travel-related employment is the #1 employment sector in the state, and the outdoor recreation sector specifically makes up about 4.5% of the state's GDP. Because outdoor recreation is deeply woven into both Wyoming's economy and its cultural identity, it is a natural and well-established space for Extension engagement.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

University of Wyoming Extension has one of the most robust outdoor recreation and tourism programs in the West, specifically from the Jay Kemmerer Wyoming Outdoor Recreation, Tourism and Hospitality (WORTH) Institute. This relatively recently created program, combined with Wyoming's well-established state outdoor recreation office and its 10 regional collaboratives, gives Extension a meaningful and recognized seat at the table in Wyoming.

That said, the program's growth and impact is limited by its limited capacity: one small team of educators covering a large state quickly outstrips capacity. The J. Kemmerer WORTH Institute and the statewide Outdoor Recreation Summit, co-planned with the university, are evidence of a healthy partnership, but Extension leadership is candid that more resources are needed. The biggest question is not whether the work is valued, but whether sustainable funding can be secured to expand it without relying on short-term grants that build capacity only to lose it. The program has started to explore additional avenues like AmeriCorps to help fill this capacity gap, especially trying to get support on the ground in rural communities

INTERVIEW QUOTE:

"Outdoor recreation might be our number one or number two top industry in the state. It's an incredibly important part of our economy — and a lot of our cities and towns depend on revenue coming from that sector."

"Finding a sustainable source of funding that keeps a person in place and gives them a career trajectory — not just a short-term couple of years — that's the challenge."

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

- The partnership between UW Extension and the Wyoming Office of Outdoor Recreation is active and reciprocal. Extension participates in the annual Wyoming Outdoor Recreation Summit, co-planned with the university. The Office of Outdoor Recreation engages Extension when working with communities on grants, studies, and stakeholder engagement, and Extension reaches back out when community projects call for state involvement. State leadership described it as a "joint mutual outreach" relationship that has developed organically over roughly a decade.

- UW Extension has one dedicated outdoor recreation, tourism, and hospitality educator, who is described as the "tip of the spear" — listening across the state, assessing needs, and building relationships.

- The WORTH Institute serves as the academic anchor for outdoor recreation work at the university level — bringing stakeholders together, facilitating conversations, and providing the research and convening capacity that the state office identifies as essential but outside its own lane.

- Wyoming's 10 regional outdoor recreation collaboratives were launched by the state office, convene federal agencies, municipal leaders, NGOs, advocates, and nonprofits four times a year across the state. Extension is periodically engaged in these collaboratives for academic support.

- Workforce development was consistently named an Extension opportunity, but also described a two-sided challenge to help outdoor recreation and tourism businesses find workers with the right skills, and help workers develop those skills. Extension is working to connect businesses to the university's new outdoor recreation degree program and offering career readiness training for those already in the industry.

- Peer-to-peer learning convening is identified as a core and scalable Extension strength. An ongoing regional webinar series in collaboration with Colorado State was mentioned as a model — bringing together professionals to share best practices.

- Conflict facilitation emerged as a notable future opportunity. Extension is well-positioned to help communities navigate, bringing competing interests together before conflicts escalate, rather than after.

- State leaders also identified capacity as the primary limitation from the state office's perspective, noting that if the WORTH institute had a larger team, Extension could do significantly more. Both interviewees pointed to the mismatch between the sector's importance to Wyoming's economy and the small team currently in place.

FUTURE EXTENSION OPPORTUNITIES

- Secure a sustainable, recurring funding source for the WORTH educator's position and pursue additional employment lines.

- Deepen engagement with Wyoming's 10 regional outdoor recreation collaboratives, positioning Extension as a consistent research and facilitation partner rather than an occasional contributor.

- Continue and consider expanding the peer-to-peer learning webinar model across more topics and regions, building on the existing series as a replicable, low-cost mechanism for workforce and business development.

- Develop a formal conflict facilitation role at the intersection of outdoor recreation and agriculture or energy land use, leveraging Extension's trusted neutral-party reputation in communities navigating these tensions.

- Work with the J. Kemmer WORTH Institute and the university's outdoor recreation degree program to build a stronger talent pipeline — connecting students with industry partners and helping businesses articulate the skill sets they need.

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