



Roadmap

For a 21st Century Outdoor Workforce



The Outdoor Workforce In Focus

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In recent years, outdoor recreation's visibility has grown to previously unseen heights across the United States. The industry, now valued at nearly \$1 trillion annually by the U.S. Department of Commerce, is at an inflection point with more Americans than ever before flocking to the outdoors. The engine behind this impact is the 4.5 million outdoor workers across the country who support outdoor recreation as a national economic driver and guarantee high-quality outdoor experiences on treasured lands and waters.

To ensure the sustained health of the industry, it is critical that we evaluate the state of the outdoor workforce and identify upcoming challenges and opportunities to solve together. Outdoor Recreation Roundtable (ORR), the nation's leading coalition of outdoor recreation trade associations and organizations representing over 110,000 businesses across the outdoor recreation economy, has spent several months soliciting feedback from industry stakeholders across sectors to understand how we can come together as a collective to identify key opportunities for further research, partnerships, and investment.

ORR aims to use its trusted place as a convener of leading partners from across the entire outdoor recreation spectrum to create a 21st Century Roadmap for the Outdoor Recreation Workforce which drives new initiatives, strategies, and policy solutions at local, state, and federal levels.

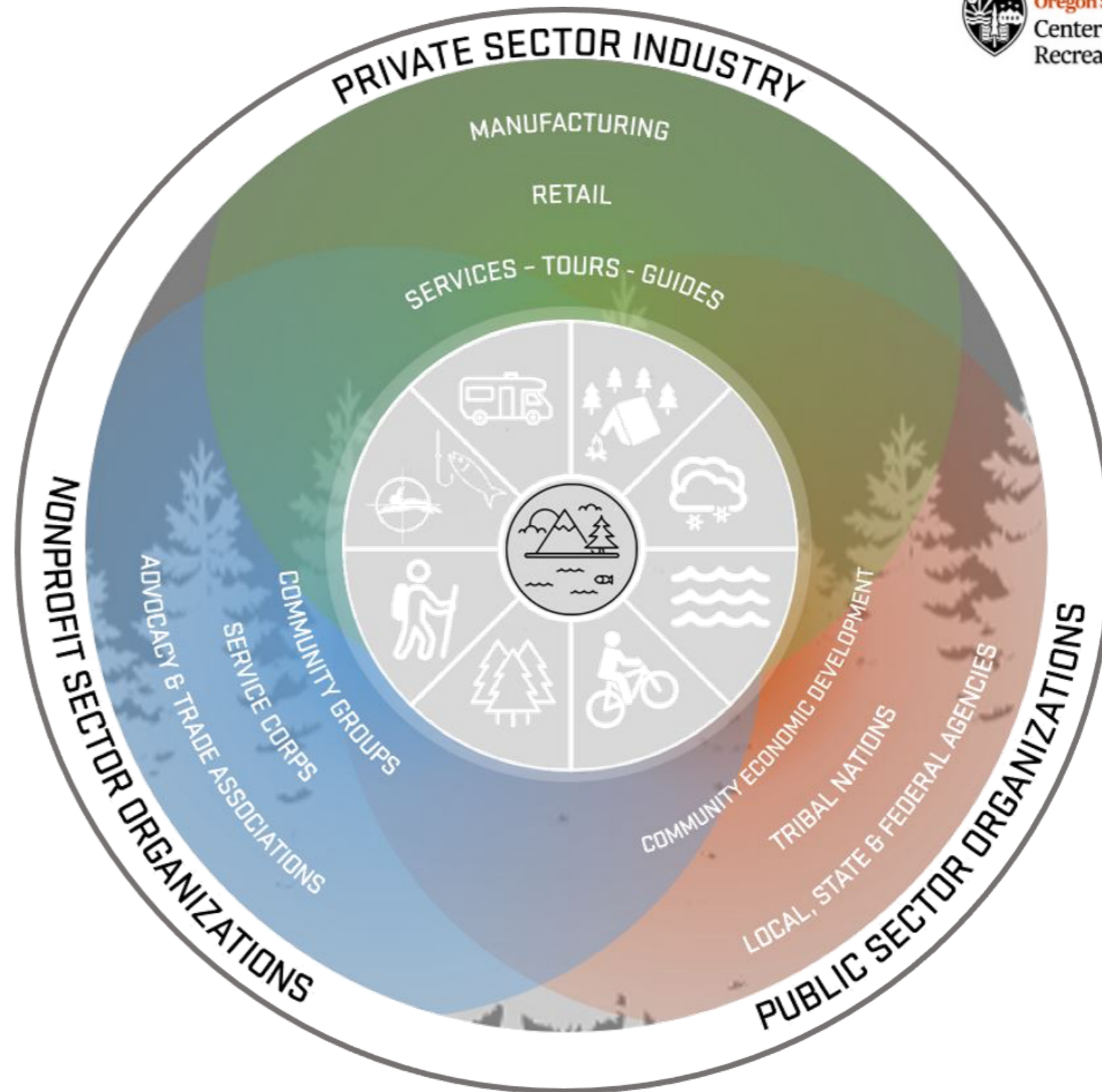
Based on a year of convenings, conversations, trainings, virtual webinars and a digital survey, ORR has identified four core areas of focus in order to invite more Americans into our workforce, dispel stigmas around outdoor careers, and set education institutions, businesses, and prospective employees up for success by connecting the dots between job skills needed by the industry (today and into the future) to what is being taught. Importantly, these efforts must emphasize the advancement of communities who have been historically underrepresented in the outdoor workforce.



The Outdoor Workforce In Focus

This graphic from the **Oregon State University Center for the Outdoor Recreation Economy** provides a useful breakdown of the types of organizations that exist within the outdoor recreation economy and employ talented professionals with wide varieties of talents in the trades, manufacturing, land and water management, infrastructure design, entrepreneurship, retail, public policy, and so many more.

Outdoor recreation includes all activities done for pleasure outdoors, including a wide spectrum of activities like hiking, biking, skiing, climbing, boating, fishing, hunting, camping, RVing, motorized use, horseback riding, scuba diving, and many more.



The Outdoor Workforce In Focus



Technical Specialists

These are people who love solving design challenges, working to build things, seeing the tangible results of their labor, and don't mind being behind the scenes.

- Powersports, Boat and RV Technicians
- Ski Lift Technicians
- Software Engineers and Web Developers
- Accountants
- Legal
- Biologists, Ecologists and Natural Resource Specialists
- Manufacturing/Engineering
- Trail, Infrastructure, and Facility Design and Construction
- Permitting and Planning
- Landscape Architects and Engineers
- GIS/Cartography
- Shipping Logistics
- Business Analytics



Public Engagement

These are people who get their energy being around other people, and like aspects of storytelling and interpretation to be involved in their work. They are most satisfied when people around them have great days in the outdoors.

- Sales and Customer Service
- Education/Interpretation
- Community Managers
- Cultural Storytellers
- Public Affairs
- Communications and Development
- Travel Advisors
- Event Planning
- Client Relations
- Concessions Operators
- Guiding and Outfitting



Integrators

These sorts of workers aren't easily captured in one box—they have aspects of public facing and internal work woven into their job. They like crafting plans for the future, solving challenges, and communicating with a diverse set of stakeholders about the importance of the outdoors.

- Land Managers
- Community Economic Development
- Environmental Justice
- Recreation Management
- Social Scientists
- Risk Management
- Product Design and Development
- Corporate Sustainability
- Outdoor Recreation/Conservation Policy
- User Experience/User Interface

Four Core Opportunities for the Outdoor Workforce

01 Define Outdoor Jobs and Close the Skills Gap

Opportunity Statement:

There is a growing gap between in-demand skill needs in the outdoor industry and the skill sets of the applicant pool.

This skill gap is not distributed equally among different organizations and segments of the outdoor industry—periodic research is needed to understand where needs are most acute.



How do we really harness the power of our educational institutions and pair them up with industry folks in order to build programs that are producing market-ready graduates and people who may not have had experience in the industry already, but having gone through this educational program, have the background and infrastructure to come in and take on a role within the industry?"

- Kristen Freaney, Founder, Path to Peak Consulting

"As I think about the hiring process at Vista, the most important thing are your hard skills. Your passion is also a driving factor - but it's not the clincher. So people who start their resume or begin their pitch talking about their favorite outdoor experience are burying the lede.

It's critical that you highlight the hard skills you have for the job first, and then secondly you make connections about passion and your love for the outdoors."

- Fred Ferguson, Vice President of Government and Industry Relations, Vista Outdoor



"We also need to do a gap analysis overall or in industry sectors to see where the need is/where it will be in the future and then plan curriculum, competencies and pathways to address these gaps. Understanding the gaps and needs is a critical part of planning for the future success of the outdoor industry."

- Mary Beth Long, VP of Communications, American Sportfishing Association

01 Define Outdoor Jobs and Close the Skills Gap: Next Steps

1a. For the benefit of prospective talent, academic and trade schools, and outdoor organizations alike, outdoor industry skills need to be clearly identified and correlated to certain roles.

Additionally, hiring organizations need to identify which skills are absolutely required versus nice-to-have and what skills/trainings/certifications may be needed in the future.



Create Skill Set Identification/ Career Modeling Tools:

Survey outdoor industry organizations to categorize common skills across outdoor roles and develop a skills taxonomy, similar to that which exists in healthcare and finance. This data will allow for development of skills-based career paths between roles and increased transparency of compensation and benefits aligned to certain skill levels and degrees/certifications.

This will also offer the opportunity to designate “must-have” versus “nice-to-have” outdoor industry skills and ensure that hiring/promotion decisions are made primarily on skills competence and alignment with defined needs. Lastly, it will allow the industry to show the evolution of a career in a particular field with clear entry points and what trainings are needed along the way to elevate positions.

Define K-12 Pathways:

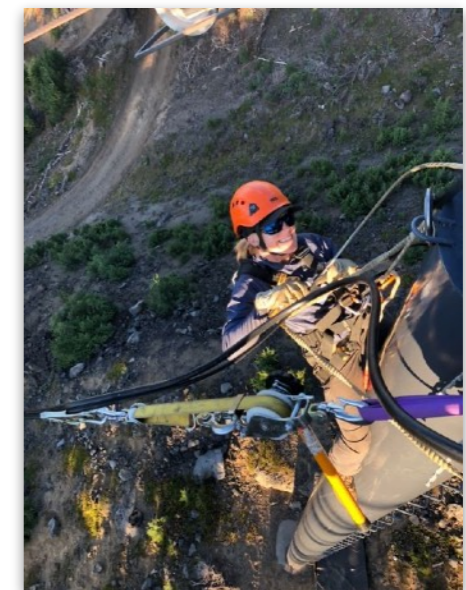
The industry should identify opportunities for prospective talent to engage with outdoor skill development at every age and provide examples of what careers are made possible through those skills.

Build Self-Assessment Tools:

Once required skills for outdoor jobs are identified and classified in a taxonomy, build self-assessment tools for prospective talent to identify skills they possess or would like to gain and identify possible job opportunities and point them to trainings and programs where they can develop those skills or degrees/certifications.

Create Marketing Collateral for Career Development Offices:

ORR and its coalition of industry partners could develop reference materials, websites, or tools for high school and college career counselors and students that point the way for the kinds of skills – both technical and interpersonal – that the industry is looking for in various roles.



Alicia Smith,
Lift
Maintenance
Electrician

01 Define Outdoor Jobs and Close the Skills Gap: Next Steps

1b. The outdoor industry needs a new system for timely and transparent communication with academic and trade partners to identify in-demand skills so that course work, technical training, certificates, and 2-4 year and advanced degrees align with open positions.

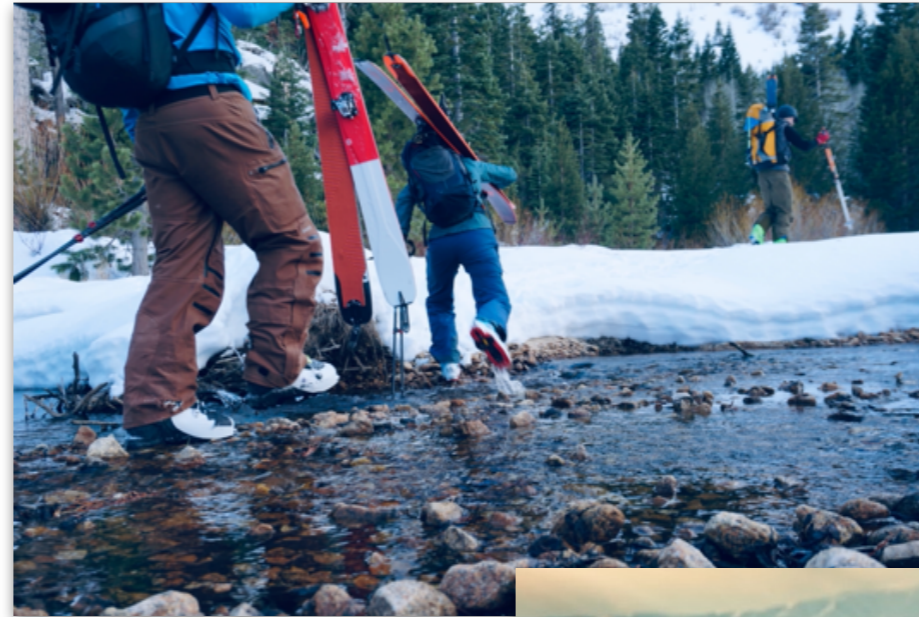


Periodic Reporting:

The outdoor industry should create a regular pulse survey on skill needs, broken down by skill set, for the entire industry to understand which segments need the most attention in filling available roles. The most recent survey between OSU/ORR/OIA is a good start. Care should be taken to ensure content alignment between national and state-level workforce surveys.

Defined Workforce Development Organization:

The outdoor industry needs an organization for employers (specifically H.R. staff) to communicate with academic institutions and trade programs about skill needs and provide continuing education, with input from prospective talent about what programs are most desirable. A defined organization such as this could also help clear red tape and bureaucracy within institutions around curriculum approval, hiring practices, and terminal degree requirements.



01 Define Outdoor Jobs and Close the Skills Gap: Next Steps

1c. To solve their workforce needs, outdoor recreation organizations need to invest in new workforce development initiatives, research, and upskilling opportunities.



Engage Workforce Investment Boards:

ORR and its coalition of industry partners could advocate for new investments from workforce investment boards into the outdoor recreation economy.

Outdoor Industry Workforce Development Fund:

Outdoor recreation organizations could invest in a fund for paid fellowships and internships to accelerate partnerships and diversity in outdoor careers. This fund could be facilitated by state Offices of Outdoor Recreation or other state workforce development organizations.

Invest in Off-Season Initiatives:

Many outdoor workers deal with job insecurity during the off-season when the demand for their work is lower. The outdoor industry needs to compile best practices to address the seasonality of outdoor work and share strategies to effectively retain and upskill workers during down times of the year. This will also help secure a more dependable workforce for outdoor businesses.

Federal Outreach and Community Assistance:

ORR and its coalition of industry partners could advocate for new federal funding, whether national or regional, through community-directed spending to develop workforce pathways into agencies, like those that already exist at U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Work-Based Learning Opportunities:

Outdoor recreation organizations with skill needs could partner with academic institutions and trade schools to provide work-based learning, partnerships, and internships to upskill prospective talent, particularly from underserved communities, to their specific skill requirements.

Connect to Veterans:

A recent report from the Government Accountability Office notes the opportunity to connect skilled military veterans to outdoor work through the benefits of the GI Bill. Outdoor organizations should better tap into this pool of talented applicants and develop specific programs and jobs that suit their unique experience.



At the Great Lakes Boat Building School, companies like Tiara Yachts pay to be part of the program and have preferential access to graduates.

Ideally, programs like these are targeted at communities who have historically been underrepresented in the outdoor workforce, and stable housing is guaranteed.



“Representation and inclusion in the outdoor workforce starts with positive early experiences in the outdoors. If we can engage diverse youth through culturally-relevant environmental education and outdoor recreation, and normalize their presence, stewardship, and leadership there, they then become aware of the world of opportunities for recreation, community, and possible careers in that space.



- Les Duncan, Executive Director, Greening Youth Foundation

Opportunity Statement:

Many prospective applicants are unaware that the outdoor industry provides a sustainable career path, or if they are aware, they only think of a limited subset of outdoor recreation jobs (e.g., seasonal, participant-facing, outdoor jobs).

Influential figures in career development, like parents, career counselors, and professionals are unaware of the wide variety of outdoor industry jobs across segments.

“I have worked for a number of years with Kentucky State University and I see that it starts much sooner than college--if young people don't come into college seeing career opportunities in those fields, they're going to already migrate into places, like STEM or agriculture, and they don't realize the connections to the outdoor recreation field those degrees might offer them. On the flip side, I don't see faculty having those connections to those fields and understanding.”

- Gae Broadwater, Principal, GB Facilitation and Training and Kentucky State University

I suggest understanding and thinking about the reputation of the industry and the stereotype that is connected with it. We often think about the outdoor industry or outdoor recreation industry as seasonal, unsteady or lower wage jobs, and limited to certain demographics. We have to turn that conversation around and know that there is a need for family wage/ steady jobs, and that this is a sophisticated industry.

You know undergraduates and graduates. They look at all possible careers, right? The outdoor recreation economy is competing with the automotive industry, insurance, finance, you name it. Part of that work and part of that conversation is really elevating that sophistication in those discussions as well as a visibility of those kinds of careers.”

- Joel Harter, Executive Director, Outdoor Recreation Economy Program, University of Colorado, Boulder

2a. Through consistent and widespread messaging, the outdoor industry can build broad cultural awareness of the complete outdoor recreation economy—and the jobs that exist within.



Let Real Workers Tell the Story:

The outdoor industry should utilize real workers from diverse parts of the industry, at different stages in their careers, to share about how what they do (whether indoors or outdoors) contributes to high quality recreation experiences and provides a fulfilling life. Include things like “Day in the Life,” “How I Got From There to Here,” salary/wages/benefits, and vertical movement, with an emphasis on behind-the-scenes roles to broaden awareness.

Spotlight talented professionals from communities who have historically been underrepresented in outdoor recreation leadership roles, including Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color, the disabled community, and LGBTQ+ individuals.

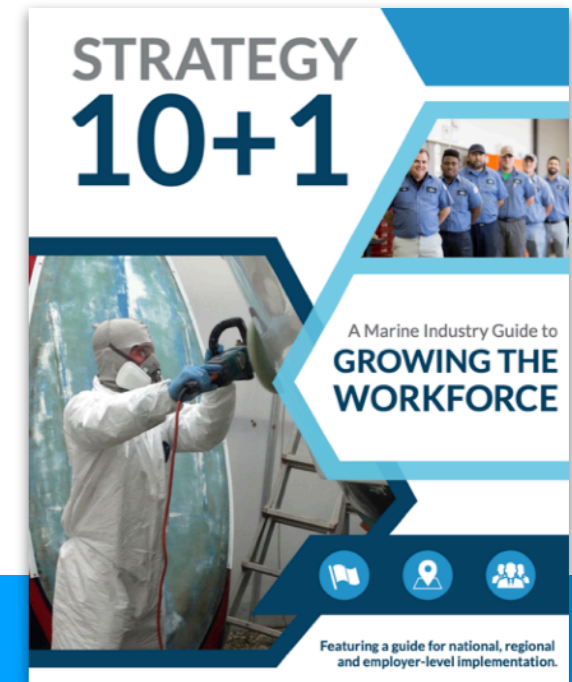
National Media Campaign:

The outdoor industry should develop marketing materials that engage with all types of media (educational, counseling, social, traditional print), reaching into all age groups, and distribute to career development offices, local affinity groups, and accredited organizations that provide workforce development opportunities. Highlight messages that many outdoor jobs do not require outdoor experience; in fact, many outdoor jobs take place indoors.

Emphasize content for young people (i.e., 6-18) who are at an age when career perceptions are often established and ensure that jobs represented are consistent with the Bureau of Economic Analysis definition of the outdoor recreation workforce.

Hit the Road:

Outdoor industry managers and HR professionals need to be on the ground building relationships with targeted audiences, especially high school and 2/4-year and career/guidance counselors in order to build trust with prospective talent and establish the quality of outdoor industry roles.



The Marine Retailers Association and National Marine Manufacturers Association [10+1 Strategy to Growing the Workforce](#) includes sections on cultivating the workforce pathway from middle and high school, including interactive career fairs, company-held trips and tours, after school programs, employers presentations, job shadows, and summer work experiences, among a wide variety of engagement strategies.

2b. The outdoor industry can improve its effectiveness within career development offices and families by identifying opportunities to improve its competitiveness with other industries by conducting better research on wages and salaries for different roles within the industry.



Complete Wage/Salary/Benefit Analysis:

The outdoor industry could conduct a complete wage/salary analysis for every role across every segment and sector in the industry.

Ultimately this is the best way to help prospective applicants make informed decisions about whether to work in the industry and to maximize both tangible and intangible benefits of outdoor industry work.



snews
WE KNOW OUTDOORS

OUTDOOR
SALARY SURVEY
March-April 2019

In 2019, SNEWS (now Outside Business Journal) conducted an outdoor industry salary survey which received over 1,400 responses on salary broken down by gender, race, age, geography, academic level, experience, job satisfaction, job type, and type of company. It found an average base salary of \$75,000.

This is a good start and can be **replicated to include all outdoor industry segments** as well as updated to ensure that responses reveal valuable trends for outdoor industry organizations and prospective workers alike.

03 Build an Outdoor Workforce for All

Opportunity Statement:

The demographics of the outdoor workforce do not match the demographics of the U.S. population, particularly in relation to race and ethnicity but also related to other factors like disability and socioeconomic status.

This is a result of legacies of exclusion and discrimination in the outdoors that have inhibited prospective talent from considering a career in the outdoors and reaching their full potential once inside.



NPS Academy, Grand Teton National Park (National Park Service)

“Recruitment is one way of increasing diversity in an organization or sector. Retention is less considered, but should warrants the same, if not more attention. In 2020, as America reckoned with racial injustices, diversity became front and center, and many organizations made it a priority to hire people of color. 3 years later, we’re now seeing that the great resignation disproportionately included many of those same people hired through diversity initiatives. Enough emphasis wasn’t placed on how to cultivate environments that keep diverse talent, encourage them to thrive, ensure they have adequate voice in decision-making, and address systemic racism that marginalizes and tokenizes them.”

- Les Duncan, Executive Director, Greening Youth Foundation

“The outdoor industry needs more diversity as it pertains to social identities. More companies should seek out college students for internship opportunities and jobs for recent graduates. The outdoor industry needs to build relationships and partnerships with local community colleges and universities and attend job fairs more often to connect with prospective talent. At the end of the day, our participants are looking for three things: education, access, and safety.”

- NaQuaina Moore, Assistant Director in Multicultural Student Life, University of Tennessee-Knoxville

Looking towards the future of the outdoor workforce, candidates from underrepresented communities should have access to fulfilling careers and positive experiences throughout the full employee lifecycle. When they are job seeking, they should be receiving genuine signals that they are welcome in the field. During the hiring process, they should be treated well and given a fair shot. And once they are hired, they should enter a supportive environment where they experience belonging and access to growth opportunities and advancement.

- Hannah Malvin, Program Manager of The Bridge Program & Workplace Culture Consultant

03 Build an Outdoor Workforce for All: Next Steps

3a. The outdoor industry should invest in and help scale up workforce development models for underrepresented communities that already exist.



Don't Reinvent the Wheel:

There are countless organizations already doing good work to connect communities who have historically been underrepresented in the outdoor workforce with its leadership—including [Greening Youth Foundation](#), the [Corps Network](#), [Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps](#), and [Rethink Outside](#), among many others like those collected in the [Together Outdoors Resource Hub](#). Outdoor organizations should invest in these models and watch them grow.

More State Outdoor Equity Funds:

These funds, established in states including Colorado, New Mexico, and California, direct state funding toward initiatives on the ground that create lifelong relationships with the outdoors for underrepresented communities. Initial sparks of interest like these are critical in the chain of events that lead to individuals considering outdoor careers.

More Cohorts:

Belonging and confidence are built among employees when they feel like they have other people like them in the workplace who understand their experience.

Outdoor industry organizations should build programs for cohorts of talent from underrepresented communities, with components like housing, travel, mentorship, resume support, and mock interviews to create shared onboarding experiences and help improve feelings of inclusion and belonging in the workplace.

Centralize Job Boards:

By some estimates, over 50 newsletters/sites boast jobs in outdoor recreation. Fewer, more useful job boards will better serve applicants from underrepresented communities.

Push Resources to Entrepreneurs:

The industry can replicate programs like REI's [Path Ahead Ventures](#), which specifically seeks to accelerate the success of founders of color (~1% of outdoor entrepreneurs) through a community network, capability & infrastructure, capital investment, and connections to customers.



The Bridge Program, a partnership between Greening Youth Foundation and Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards, is an innovative public-private partnership and equitable hiring pathway for the environmental sector focused on people of color and other underrepresented communities in the outdoors.

The Bridge Program trains both employers and candidates alike on recruitment and retention pathways, and in its inaugural year supported 300 candidates, trained 700 staff from 55 environmental organizations and 5 federal agencies in equitable hiring, and yielded 20 job placements. Candidates were placed in a wide array of jobs in law, human resources, communications, policy, development, membership, project management, operations, and many other roles.

03 Build an Outdoor Workforce for All: Next Steps

3b. The outdoor industry needs to evolve its current recruitment and retention efforts to better support communities historically underrepresented in the outdoors.



Incorporate Career Opportunities into Affinity Group Programming:

Many affinity groups receive funding from outdoor organizations to take youth and families outside on memorable and safe outdoor experiences. Facilitators should seek to conclude with content (even if brief) about how participants can work in the outdoor industry, ideally with partners present from the sponsoring company to talk about what they do and why they enjoy it.

Incorporate DEI in Metrics for Success:

As is often said, “you measure what you value.” For organizations to make meaningful progress in advancing workforce development for underrepresented communities, DEI should be incorporated into workplace evaluations and annual reporting (like in [this report from the VF Corporation](#), pages 12-15).

Elevate Accessibility:

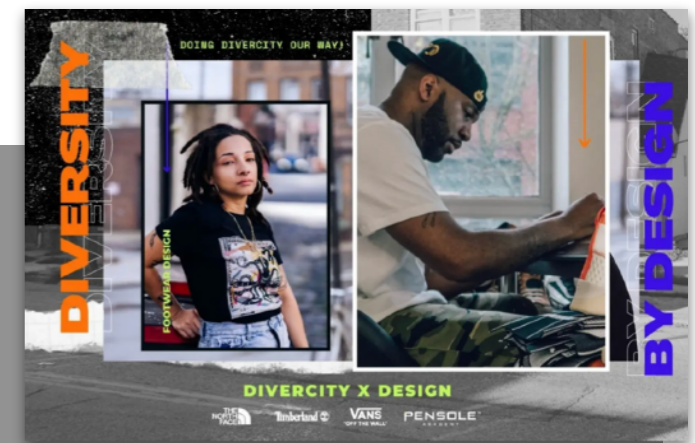
In conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion, access to the outdoor workforce for the disabled community is often an afterthought, and talent is being squandered because organizations are not thinking holistically about how to provide access for people with disabilities. Up to a quarter of adults in the United States have some type of disability (including physical, developmental, behavioral/emotional, and sensory-impaired disorders) according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

This [Best Practices Library](#) from Disability:IN provides effective strategies for businesses to implement in their quest for a more accessible workforce.

[DiverCity by Design](#), a partnership between VF Corporation and HBCU Pensole Lewis College, offers aspiring student designers a five-week online program to work on projects with VF brands while developing time management, professionalism, and leadership skills.

Research and Broadcast Best Practices for Hiring, Onboarding, and Retention:

Historically, workforce development efforts have focused on identifying new pools of talent and recruiting them to open roles. While these efforts should continue, hiring, onboarding, and retention strategies have not received the same level of attention. For future prospective talent from underrepresented communities to see themselves in outdoor careers, they will need to see more executive leaders from underrepresented communities. This is made possible through thoughtful hiring, onboarding, and retention efforts.



04 Address Affordability and Housing Issues



Community Housing Forum in Jackson, WY (Ryan Dorgan)

Opportunity Statement:

Many outdoor communities are becoming too expensive for recreation workers to live and contain insufficient housing supply/overwhelming housing demand to support the outdoor workforce.

“Ski areas are often the largest employers in our rural mountain communities. Getting fully staffed up is always a challenge for ski areas, but today’s housing shortages in many ski towns make that job even harder. Housing availability can certainly be a determining factor when it comes to recruitment and helping ensure that employees can live and work in the same community.”

- Geraldine Link, Director of Public Policy, National Ski Areas Association

“Another critical issue is the scale of pay for many jobs in outdoor recreation are typically low, with few or no benefits, and seasonal, so turnover in these types of jobs is extremely high with little stability. The largest of these pay equity challenges hit the smallest retail businesses the hardest and thus have witnessed waves of closures, bankruptcies, and unsuccessful attempts to sell retail bricks-and-mortar shops that largely built the local outdoor recreation economy.”

- Guy Trombley, Director of Advocacy and Industry Intelligence, Oregon Outdoor Alliance

“Lack of affordable housing is a big issue and results in many unfilled positions and thus reduced capacity. We in the Forest Service are working to find solutions to provide affordable housing and a living wage in recreation communities.”

- Brenda Yankoviak, National Trail Program Manager, USDA Forest Service

4a. The outdoor industry should play a meaningful role in housing and affordability solutions for the recreation workforce.



Bring Leaders to the Table:

The outdoor industry, state offices of outdoor recreation, and engaged university partners could convene policy solutions or forums on successful affordable housing strategies and policies in mountain, gateway, and destination communities.

Survey Recreation Workers to Understand the Issue:

Distribute a periodic housing and affordability survey to recreation workers to understand where needs are most acute and how they are changing over time.

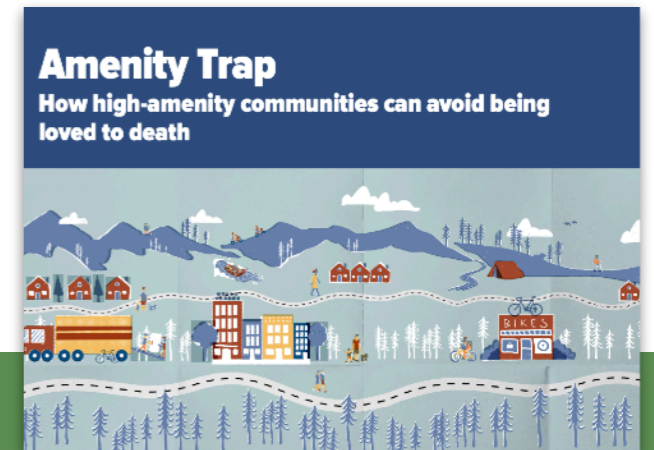
Compile Novel Solutions from Recreation Organizations:

Many recreation providers in gateway communities don't have the bandwidth to network with other organizations to understand how they are solving housing issues. The outdoor industry should compile solutions from various organizations, including flexible work arrangements for seasonal staff, financing and building company housing, pricing structures, new coalitions with local stakeholders, etc.

Take it to Congress:

Using transformative vehicles for housing programs in rural communities (like the Farm Bill) and/or community directed spending, the outdoor industry should continue to raise awareness of the \$862 billion recreation economy as an engine for American competitiveness and advocate for improved and accessible housing solutions to ensure that gateway communities continue to provide high-quality and sustainable recreation. Special care should be given to housing solutions through immigration and visa policy, as many recreation communities rely heavily on immigrant labor.

Additionally, there is legislation currently under consideration to use federal, state, or county-owned lands for development of affordable housing solutions—these bills should be considered with an open mind provided that there are no adverse environmental impacts.



The **Amenity Trap**, a May 2023 report from Headwaters Economics, profiles the challenges facing highly popular recreation communities seeking to sustain a local workforce.

On housing in particular, the report profiles novel solutions from communities around the country to increase housing supply and ensure more stable living situations for workers who provide an important foundation for these communities' prosperity.

Wrap Up

The rapid growth of the \$862 billion outdoor recreation economy around the United States offers the opportunity to take stock as an industry and build systems for continued growth and success in the years to come. Nowhere is this opportunity more evident than in the outdoor workforce, which provides the foundation for millions of Americans each year to enjoy high-quality outdoor recreation experience on lands and waters.

As a newly-established industry, many of the systems and structures across the outdoor recreation workforce are impactful yet disconnected from one another and the modern realities of the recreation workforce, where professionals may migrate across segments and sectors during the course of a career. Additionally, great care must be taken to ensure that outdoor careers are accessible to anyone regardless of background, no matter their identity nor whether they have grown up with significant outdoor experience. These opportunities drive our efforts to unify the outdoor industry across segments and sectors.

We hope that this Roadmap provides inspiration and direction for the outdoor industry to address some of these challenges and move together in its workforce development efforts as the industry reaches a new stage of maturity. ORR will utilize these suggestions in its discussions with federal and state policymakers and agencies and help unite industry leaders to create new partnerships and ensure shared understanding of opportunities to bolster the outdoor recreation workforce. We welcome feedback and ideas to help these priorities advance at orr@recreationroundtable.org.

The authors of this Roadmap wish to extend special gratitude to the **VF Foundation** for their support of this work and the outdoor workforce as well as the industry leaders who met both virtually and in-person to help outline the path forward.

