

3/24/2021

Minnesota Outdoor Recreation Task Force Recommendations

Executive Summary

The Minnesota Outdoor Recreation Task Force (Task Force) recommends creating, funding, and staffing an independent Outdoor Recreation Office (Office) within the State of Minnesota. Minnesota will join 14¹ other States that have already established outdoor recreation offices.

The Minnesota Outdoor Recreation Task Force (ORTF) was formed in 2020 by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Explore Minnesota to consider how to bring measured growth, increased and equitable access, and a higher quality of outdoor recreation opportunities to Minnesotans and visitors. This 21-member group, representing diverse constituencies in Minnesota's outdoor recreation sector, met virtually throughout the year, collectively putting in hundreds of hours to generate these recommendations. The Task Force encourages the MN DNR, Explore MN and legislators to consider these recommendations as critical to Minnesota's long-term economic health and the well-being of its residents, as they seek to mitigate the economic impacts resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest.

Why does Minnesota need an Outdoor Recreation Office?

Contrary to common perception, outdoor recreation is a significant business and economic contributor in Minnesota, and as such, has growth potential with billions of dollars being left on the table. Outdoor recreation in Minnesota currently generates 2.4% of the state's GDP (\$9.1 billion)². Minnesota needs to create an office of outdoor recreation to ensure that Minnesota's outdoor recreation economy stays strong and grows over time, while improving access to the outdoors for everyone. The Task Force proposes the office focus on the recommendations outlined below.

It is important to note that the Task Force recognizes that while they may engage in some of these activities, they are NOT the primary responsibility of the Minnesota Department of Resources (DNR), nor Explore Minnesota. We believe it is important to create a new Office to focus exclusively and deliver upon:

1. **Increasing Participation** - Improve access, safety, and peace of mind to enjoy the outdoors for all Minnesotans of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. The Task Force had lengthy conversations about the best way to do this. There was overwhelming support for developing strategies that seek to engage Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and other populations of growing minority stakeholders and users.
2. **Uniting Minnesota's Outdoor Recreation Community** - Create the path for Minnesota's stakeholders/users, industries, and businesses to work together to create even more outdoor recreation opportunities and simultaneously reducing user group conflict to ensure the investments made in Minnesota's outdoors serve a greater purpose than meeting the needs of one specific group.

¹ <https://outdoorindustry.org/advocacy/state-local-issues/state-offices-outdoor-recreation/>

² <https://apps.bea.gov/data/special-topics/orsa/summary-sheets/ORSA - Minnesota.pdf>

3. **Unifying Communications Amongst MN's Varied Outdoor Recreation Sector** – Develop a shared narrative about the health, economic, and other benefits that can be enjoyed by Minnesotans and visitors by engaging in outdoor recreation across the state. Highlighting Minnesota's welcoming and inclusive outdoor culture will support growth of engagement in outdoor recreation activities of all kinds.

Mission

The Minnesota Office of Outdoor Recreation will serve as the united voice of Minnesota's outdoor recreation stakeholders/users, industries, and businesses. The Office will create outdoor recreation-centered efficiencies between Minnesota's stakeholders/users, industries/businesses, Explore Minnesota, the Departments of Natural Resources, the Department of Health and the Department of Employment and Economic Development, and other public and private entities. The Office will amplify, make better known, and help improve the plans, policy, access and economic development of outdoor recreation created by these stakeholders.

Accountability

The Minnesota Office of Outdoor Recreation, in collaboration with all of Minnesota's stakeholders/users, industries, and businesses, will be accountable for increasing Minnesota's economic growth through the above three recommendations.

Efficiency

It is NOT the intention of this Task Force for the Outdoor Recreation Office to create outdoor policy. NOR will the Office create tourism marketing or advertising. This Office will focus uniquely on ensuring the inclusion, access, policy, and marketing/advertising of the State of Minnesota are in position and alignment to best drive the outdoor recreation economic engine and serve the goals of Minnesota's complete outdoor recreation stakeholders/users, industries, and businesses.

Diversity is an economic asset

The Task Force sees an opportunity for immediate economic growth in the outdoor industry by actively engaging Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Hmong and other people of color (BIPOC) who are a growing part of Minnesota's population in rural, urban, and tribal communities. As Minnesota's current stakeholders/users continue to age, and (prior to COVID-19) DNR operational generating fee-based permits purchases continue to descend; BIPOC, those with disabilities, and gender identity populations are growing communities currently under-invested in and underserved by Minnesota's outdoor recreation community. The state of Minnesota loses an estimated \$16 billion³ a year in GDP due to racial disparities. This clearly demonstrates there is a significant amount of participation and economic growth potential in Minnesota and outdoor recreation to focus upon and improve for Minnesota residents and visitors.

³ https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/MNT_032514.pdf — Pages 26/27

We the Task Force believe the Office will make the voice of Minnesota's outdoor stakeholders/users, industries, and businesses to be better heard, understood, and will create enhanced access and inclusion, and improved policy for all. In turn, this will strengthen Minnesota's outdoor recreation economic engine, while being aligned with conservation imperatives directly connected to our State's long-term fiscal and environmental health.

Introduction and Background

The Minnesota Outdoor Recreation Task Force (ORTF) was formed in 2020 by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Explore Minnesota to consider (1) how to bring measured growth, increased and equitable access, and a higher quality of outdoor recreation opportunities to Minnesotans and visitors and (2) how to organize and implement this collaborative work going forward. In response to this charge, the Task Force has drafted a set of recommendations for the Minnesota DNR and Explore Minnesota intended to improve accessibility, inclusivity, collaboration and promotion of outdoor recreation across multiple sectors as well as build a stronger outdoor recreation community in Minnesota.

Given sufficient time, resources and both public and private support, members of the Task Force believe these recommendations can help “transform Minnesota into a major leader in outdoor recreation that is known as a world-class destination that welcomes everyone to enjoy its outdoor recreation resources.”

How the recommendations were developed

The 21-member Task Force drafted recommendations they believe will positively impact Minnesota's residents, visitors, outdoor recreation assets, businesses and the state's economy. The recommendations were developed by the Task Force over a series of virtual meetings that began in April 2020. The Task Force began by focusing the discussion around the key areas of access, coordination, economic development, promotion and public awareness, and stewardship and conservation. Using these focus areas as a lens, the Task Force completed a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis of outdoor recreation in Minnesota. These analyses guided and focused the work of the Task Force, which informed these recommendations.

Participants and Conveners

Task Force Members

Reinaldo Aponte, The Loppet Foundation

Lynnea Atlas-Ingebretson, World Savvy

Mary Bauer, Registered Nurse

JR Burke, Polaris

Elliot Christensen, Lower Sioux Indian Community

Megan Christianson, Visit Grand Rapids

Katy Friesz, Winnebago Industries

Matt Gruhn, Marine Retailers Association of the Americas

Aaron Hautala, Cuyuna Lakes Mountain Bike Crew

Breanne Hegg, Girl Scouts River Valleys
Joe Henry, Lake of the Woods Tourism
Hansi Johnson, Minnesota Land Trust
Greg Lais, Wilderness Inquiry
Perry May, All-Terrain Vehicle Association of Minnesota
Sarah Milligan-Toffler, Children and Nature Network
Mark Norquist, Modern Carnivore
Stephen Regenold, GearJunkie.com
Mollika Sajady, University of Minnesota Health
Naomi Sam, Mille Lacs Band Department of Natural Resources
Asha Shoffner, Fiwygin Outdoors
Steven Voltz, REI

Agency Leadership

Randolph Briley, DNR, Task Force Co-chair
John Edman, Explore Minnesota, Task Force Co-chair
Sarah Strommen, DNR, Honorary Chair

Public Engagement

The Task Force shared the draft recommendations with the public through a formal stakeholder engagement process. The recommendations were out for public review through the Minnesota DNR's engagement website from January 25th through February 15th. The engagement included a public input form, where in total, 209 people submitted input. In addition, the Task Force received 30 comments over email and 4 letters from organizations.

Recommendations Details

The draft Task Force recommendations call for the creation of an Office of Outdoor Recreation (Office) with the following charge:

- Increase Participation by Advancing Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity across MN's outdoor recreation sector
- Unite Minnesota's Outdoor Recreation Community
- Unify Communications amongst MN's diverse outdoor recreation sector

Major themes that emerged from the Task Force's conversations include fostering a welcoming outdoors culture in Minnesota; increasing participation in outdoor recreation, especially by people in underrepresented populations; and improving coordination among all of Minnesota's diverse outdoor interests to enhance the profile of the outdoor recreation sector in the state. Balancing increased participation with effective stewardship of our natural resources in the state will be critical to the long-term sustainability of outdoor recreation in Minnesota.

Many of these recommendations overlap with each other. This is a product of both the recommendation development process and the general interconnectedness of the themes, and serves to reinforce key points. Moreover, many of the recommendations share similarities with those found within existing plans such as the [Parks and Trails Legacy Plan](#), but further expand upon or update those previous recommendations to address today's outdoor recreation needs.

Create and fund Minnesota's Office of Outdoor Recreation

The Task Force's vision is for a Minnesota Office of Outdoor Recreation that champions an inclusive outdoor recreation culture and creates barrier-free pathways for all Minnesotans to benefit from Minnesota's outdoors. Driven by our "Only in Minnesota" difference, an Office of Outdoor Recreation should fuel increased outdoor opportunities for all residents and visitors, economic development for all businesses, stewardship of our state's natural environment, as well as increased attention to the cultural value of the outdoors. Below are recommendations to advance this vision.

Office creation

- Create a non-partisan, independent, representative and inclusive entity to facilitate collaboration and relationship building amongst Minnesota's people to advance outdoor recreation and equity in Minnesota, and fund and staff this entity appropriately.

Office purpose and goals

- Within Minnesota's collective outdoor recreation storytelling, bring together all user groups, all voices, and information on the total economic impact of the sector to present one unified story, one unified need, and one unified return on investment.

- Understand and develop economic development tools to build the economy of Minnesota’s residents, communities, businesses and industry.
- Help explore and define best practices for outdoor recreation communication for DNR and Explore Minnesota. Clearly identify the communication path through the eyes of the resident or visitor, not the state departments.
- Ask what the Minnesota public feels they are missing in outdoor recreation and then collaborate with other state departments, residents and businesses to make it happen.
- Create and maintain a public-facing database of outdoor recreation stakeholders and users.
- Review outdoor recreation trends and use patterns of residents and visitors as gathered and provided by the DNR, Explore Minnesota and other agencies. Help communicate and amplify the message to residents, visitors and businesses.
- Bringing people together to address the state's backlog of deferred recreational infrastructure needs.

Core Activities of the MN Office of Outdoor Recreation

1. Increase participation by advancing equity, diversity and inclusivity

The importance of equity, diversity and inclusivity were prominent in Task Force discussions. Use, services, support, and access barriers in outdoor spaces and recreation impede Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) communities, women, people with disabilities, veterans, and people with low- or no-income and is a serious concern that Minnesota needs to address. One overarching theme from the Task Force is to build a culture of the outdoors so that Minnesota is known as THE place where EVERYONE is welcome to enjoy Minnesota’s natural resources. The majority of population growth in Minnesota is happening in communities of color. State, regional and local governments, businesses and nonprofits need to strive and partner for proportional representativeness in services and supports for these populations to ensure the success of outdoor recreation in our state. In addition, there is a huge potential for growth in outdoor recreation from untapped users in BIPOC and other historically underrepresented communities referenced above. Minnesota needs to promote culturally relevant outdoor recreation and conservation communities in Minnesota.

There is a growing familiarity with Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) efforts. The Task Force included “justice” in the first group of recommendations below. The Task Force expressed concern that there are isolated and privileged outdoor spaces and recreation activities where racism, sexism, and homophobia have been present with limited recourse and respite for those that experience these types of injustice and harassment. In the Task Force’s conversations, it was acknowledged that not enough work has been done to support underrepresented populations' outdoor groups and clubs, or individual customers; or to address barriers unique to their lived experiences that limit their participation in outdoor recreation and outdoor spaces.

Below are recommendations to advance equity, diversity and inclusivity.

Justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) planning

- Ensure all users are safe and protected from injustice in outdoor recreation and outdoor spaces in Minnesota by directly acknowledging, investigating and creating targeted interventions; this work must be done by government agencies, industry and law enforcement.
- Bring together Minnesota outdoor recreation stakeholders in a way that includes BIPOC, LGBTQ+, women, people with disabilities, and people with low- or no-income—to develop a shared strategy to build community, improve cultural relevance, foster relationships, and facilitate an inclusive and safe outdoor recreation tradition for *all* in Minnesota.

Marketing and business practices

- Create and implement a united marketing strategy to coordinate across public and private entities that welcomes historically underrepresented populations into the outdoor recreation community.
- Welcome and integrate underrepresented populations as customers, owners, employees and vendors of outdoor recreation agencies, groups and businesses. This includes increasing diversity, equity and inclusion in the hiring and retention practices of both private and public outdoor recreation sectors.

Improved access

- Identify and develop solutions to overcome current barriers such as cost and transportation, and create new pathways for accessing outdoor recreation activities including improving cultural relevance and increasing accessibility of outdoor facilities and equipment for all shapes, sizes, abilities and income levels.

Welcoming culture

- Promote and facilitate a culture of welcoming everyone outdoors by practicing inclusivity and ensuring that BIPOC, LGBTQ+, people with disabilities, and women are equally valued as tenants of Minnesota's experience.

Conservation

- Build awareness and understanding of the need for everyone to properly steward and conserve our natural resources as in integral part of outdoor recreation activities.
- Educate all Minnesotans about our impact on land, water, and native species and how we all can play a role in conserving them.
- Promote conservation strategies that connect diverse outdoor recreation groups under a unified mission.
- Become a national model for the inclusion of historically underrepresented groups as thought partners and leaders in advancing the health of Minnesota's natural resources.

2. Unite Minnesota's outdoor recreation community

Unifying Minnesota's fractured and disconnected outdoor community was a major theme in Task Force discussions. To do this, the Task Force recommends promoting more shared dialogue on challenges and opportunities and identifying new ways to promote outdoor experiences in Minnesota. There are many varied

groups and ways that people enjoy the outdoors, and these groups are not always well connected to each other or coordinated in their work for the outdoors. For example, stakeholder groups such as snowmobilers, hunters, ATVers, mountain bikers and skiers may not be talking with each other about their common interests in the outdoors. These outdoor interests are actually much more aligned than many realize across the outdoor recreation community in Minnesota. Bringing these groups and interests together for a unified outdoor recreation sector in Minnesota through improved public to public, public to private, and private to private collaboration, as well as working with the state's Tribal Nations is needed. Below are recommendations to advance these goals.

Improved coordination and communication

- Bring together users, government agencies, non-profit organizations, for-profit companies and Tribal Nations with an interest in outdoor recreation to build a united community, drive relationships, and facilitate a shared vision for outdoor recreation in Minnesota to create greater collaboration on behalf of our shared parks, forests, trails, transportation corridors and destinations.
- Identify stewardship and conservation priorities that will bring together diverse outdoor stakeholders around a common goal.
- Convene outdoor recreation stakeholders annually; including BIPOC, LGBTQ+, women, people with disabilities, and people with low- or no-income; and measure and share the benefits of coordinating at the annual event.
- Develop coordinated messaging and welcome new narratives for Minnesota's outdoors.
- Ensure all of Minnesota's varied geographies, landscapes and recreation opportunities are positioned as equal tenants within Minnesota's brand.

Partnership creation and growth

- Build, strengthen and grow public-private partnerships at local, regional, state, national and international levels to unite the outdoor recreation community.
- Use public-private partnerships to advance equity, inclusion and success in awareness, promotions, credibility, technology, industry employment and offerings.
- Encourage private sector partnerships to recognize the market potential of historically underrepresented audiences (including BIPOC, LGBTQ+, women, people with disabilities, and people with low- or no-income) and approach with an asset-based lens (i.e., value the skills, knowledge, connections and potential in these communities).
- Promote partnerships between communities, conservation and stewardship groups as well as outdoor user groups to maintain recreational infrastructure and preserve Minnesota's natural spaces.
 - This should include public to private, public to public and private to private partnerships, as well as partnerships with national/international organizations and initiatives.

Conservation, stewardship, and natural resources advocacy

- Encourage conservation and outdoor recreation groups to work together more for the common good.
- Identify and address conservation threats that the different outdoor recreation users of Minnesota can get behind to preserve our natural resources for all communities, such as water quality as a unified stewardship for fishing, boating, and hunting.

3. Unify communication, promotion and public awareness

Creating more unity in Minnesota’s outdoor recreation community must include better communication, especially by characterizing and honing a cohesive, modern and widely heard voice and identifying new ways to promote a more expansive outdoor experience. Doing so will grow participation in and stewardship of Minnesota’s outdoors. In addition, outdoor recreation is a big industry in Minnesota with significant economic impact across the state. Finding ways to better expand the importance and role of outdoor recreation in Minnesota will benefit not only the economy, but the health and wellness of Minnesotans. Below are recommendations to advance these goals.

Promotion

- Define and promote Minnesota’s unique value proposition as a world-class inclusive outdoor destination.
- Promote and facilitate a culture of “welcoming everyone outdoors” where Minnesota is a world-class destination not solely because of our outdoor recreation resources, but because of our inclusive outdoor culture.

Mediums and messaging

- Develop new communication mediums such as apps and mobile-first strategies to reach target audiences.
- Strengthen land and water stewardship messaging and education in order to grow public investment and attention from more people who will help steward Minnesota’s outdoor resources.
- Create tactics to amplify communication resources and to do more with less through communication partnership creation, and focus these efforts both in and outside of Minnesota.
- Measure and communicate the return-on-investment metrics of outdoor recreation investments, specifically focused on measurable economic, health, and wellbeing benefits.

Final thoughts on success

Success from the implementation of these recommendations would mean more use and stewardship of Minnesota’s outdoor recreation resources, which can translate into more spending, more traveling, more funding and more influence for the outdoor recreation sector in Minnesota, as well as positive impacts to Minnesota’s economy overall. Success will result in significant increases to the quality of life in Minnesota. Success in all these areas is dependent on success in expanding diversity, equity and inclusion in outdoor recreation, which is why this is a fundamental and cross-sectional feature of the Task Force recommendations.

In addition to the recommendation of creating and funding an Office of Outdoor Recreation, this Task Force also recommends other government agencies, non-profit organizations, user-groups and industries also advance these recommendations in concert with an Office of Outdoor Recreation in order to realize a more welcoming, inclusive, active and connected outdoor recreation community in Minnesota.