



# MAPPING A NEW TERRAIN:

A CALL TO ACTION

## Five Principles for Equitable Rural Outdoor Recreation Economies

- 1 Advance local, equitable, sustainable ownership** and control of outdoor recreation assets.
- 2 Build resilient infrastructure** that supports a flourishing community, including diverse outdoor recreation businesses and workers.
- 3 Work regionally** to build trust, achieve scale, and meet shared outdoor recreation challenges and opportunities.
- 4 Respect the local landscape, people, and culture** in the design and implementation of all development efforts.
- 5 Design for equitable access** to and participation in outdoor recreation activities.



## INTRODUCTION

### Doing outdoor recreation development differently.

In the wake of significant economic transformations, including industrial offshoring, energy transition, and the mechanization of agriculture, rural and Native nation communities across the US are looking at how they can use their plentiful natural assets to drive economic development and employment in their regions. Encouraged by [federal programs](#) and [philanthropic initiatives](#), many communities are turning to outdoor recreation as a primary economic strategy.

The outdoor recreation economy is one of the largest economic sectors in the United States, estimated at [\\$374.3 billion](#) in 2020, and recreation activities have a [powerful impact](#) on state and local tax revenue. While the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a [major challenge](#) for outdoor recreation communities, the rise of [remote work](#) and pent-up demand for vacation bode well for the sector's future.

Outdoor recreation economies can be an attractive option for rural communities seeking sustainable and stable alternatives to fluctuating and environmentally damaging industries like energy extraction. There are also health and wellbeing benefits of equitable access to outdoor recreation. However, the tourism sector has a history of [inequitable outcomes](#), including generating wealth primarily for outside investors, providing mostly low-wage and seasonal employment for local people, and putting unsustainable pressure on local systems and resources.

Rural and Native nation outdoor recreation communities have learned important lessons about the value of planning ahead to address these issues. For example, without plans or support for worker or community ownership options, local family businesses related to outdoor recreation are at risk of being sold to or controlled by outside interests. Without careful planning related to housing and transportation, outdoor recreation communities risk displacing workers and fixed-income residents (Aspen, Colorado, the original headquarters of Aspen Institute, has been [profiled as an example of this challenge](#)). And without careful attention to the overall impact of outdoor recreation development, destination communities risk becoming hollowed-out “showplaces,” designed to serve visitors rather than residents. This document amplifies the voices of rural thinkers and doers who have

“How can recreation create more jobs and local wealth for people in the community while not loving a place to death with overcrowding, loss of housing, or abuse of natural resources?”



**Juan Martinez**

experienced these challenges on the ground and have valuable insights to share about how outdoor recreation can drive equitable rural prosperity.

As new rural outdoor recreation economies take root, we have the opportunity to meet this moment by improving the way we do outdoor recreation development to better support rural families, businesses, and workers and to create more sustainable and equitable economic systems. As new rural outdoor recreation economies take root, we have the opportunity to meet this moment by improving the way we do outdoor recreation development to better support rural families, businesses, and workers, create more sustainable and equitable economic systems, and improve local health and wellbeing. Outdoor recreation development done equitably builds a sustainable



economic strategy based on local and regional natural assets like forests, riverways, seashores, mountains, and more and connects those assets into value chains that grow local business ownership and high-quality jobs. Sustainability in this context means both a durable economy that avoids the boom and bust cycles all too common in rural places and an equitable economy that strengthens and preserves the diverse assets essential to the long-term health of rural communities.

This Call to Action is part of a [series](#) that aims to equip local- and systems-level actors with equity-centered principles that will lead to equitable, healthy, and long-lasting regional economies in rural and Indigenous communities.

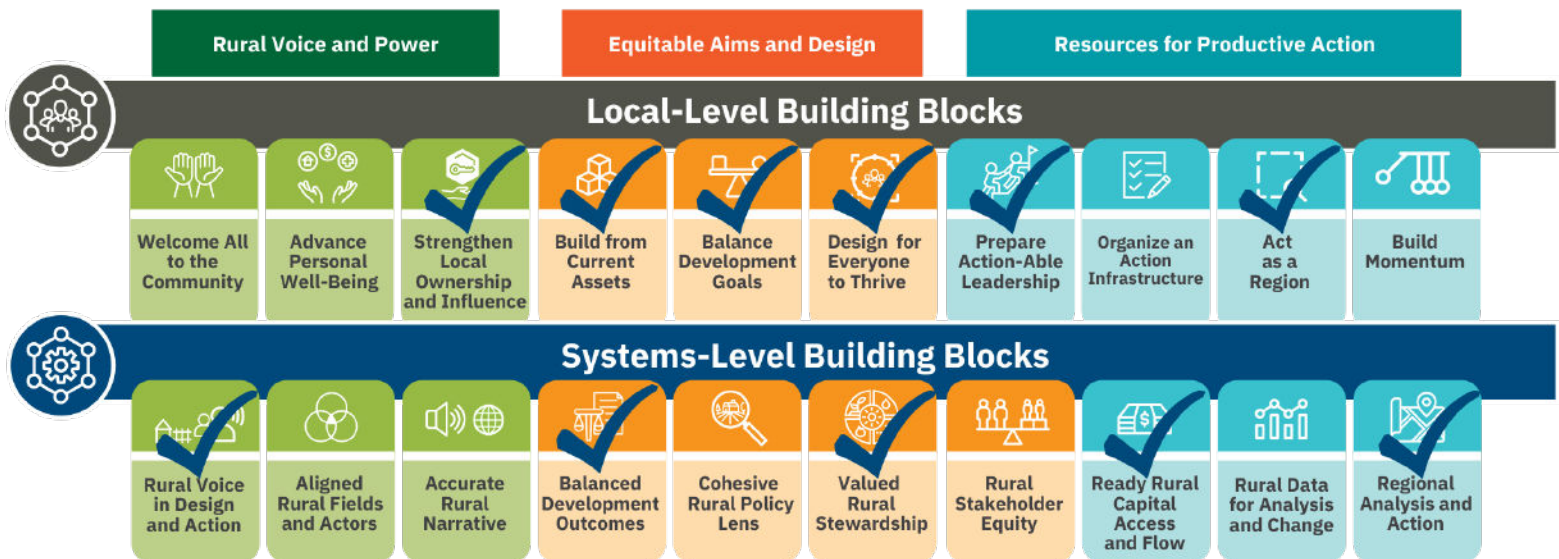
“Don’t just talk to elected officials. People in the community have ideas and deserve to be heard. In a lot of small towns, leadership isn’t exactly equitable, so we need to make sure that there’s representation in who we listen to.”



Stacy Thomas

This Call to Action is part of [Thrive Rural](#), which imagines a future where communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives. The [Thrive Rural Framework](#) provides both a shared vision and a line of sight into our current understanding of the local and systems conditions necessary to realize that vision — and this is true for tourism, outdoor recreation, and natural resource management.

## THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK BUILDING BLOCKS



**Foundational Element:** Identify and dismantle historical and ongoing discriminatory practices related to outdoor recreation economies that disadvantage rural people and places based on place, race, & class.



## ORIENTATION

The results of the TRALE discussions produced several core themes, highlighted as the Five Principles for Rural Outdoor Recreation Economies. For each principle, you will find:

- **A summary explaining the principle, background context, and why it is important to rural practitioners.**
- **Key quotes from TRALE participants that underline points in that discussion.**
- **A set of Call to Action recommendations for government, philanthropy, and rural practitioners on advancing that principle in their respective roles.**

## DEFINITIONS

The definitions below are terms and concepts used regularly in this Call to Action. These definitions should not be considered exhaustive or final but act as a baseline for readers to understand the issues discussed in this document.

**Equity:** fairness and justice in outcomes and impact.

**Equitable development:** development activities undertaken with a focus on fair and just outcomes, especially for communities and people affected by historical and ongoing structural discrimination.

**Equitable rural prosperity:** the ultimate outcome of the [Thrive Rural Framework](#) — communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.

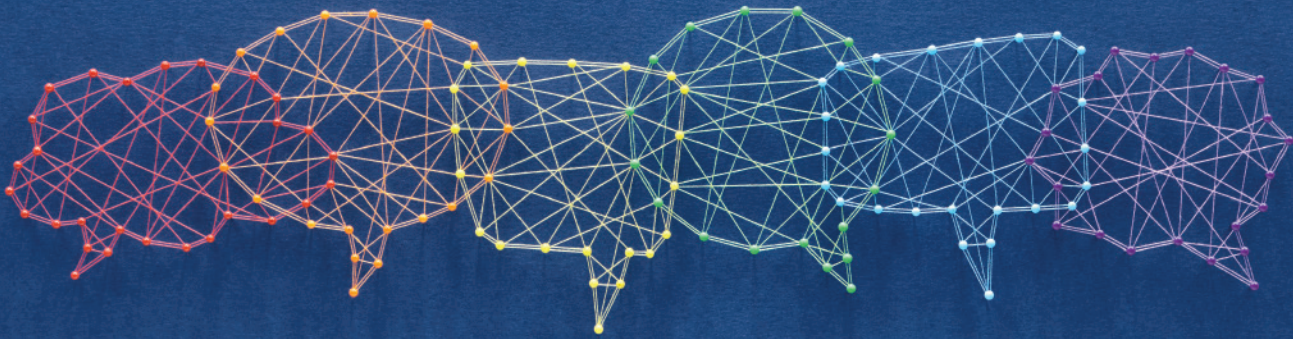
**Outdoor recreation:** all recreational activities undertaken for pleasure that occur outdoors (Bureau of Economic Analysis [broad definition](#)).

**Region:** an area involving multiple jurisdictions (e.g., counties, states) across which collaborative projects make sense for geographic, cultural, or other reasons.

**Sustainability:** the degree to which an economic activity is both durable, avoiding boom and bust cycles, and equitable, strengthening and preserving the diverse assets essential to the long-term health of rural communities.

**Tourism:** economic activity focused on providing accommodations, activities, and products to visitors.

**Value chain:** a [WealthWorks value chain](#) is a network of people, businesses, organizations, and agencies addressing a market opportunity to meet demand for specific products or services — advancing self-interest while building rooted local and regional wealth.



## THE TRALE PROCESS: STRUCTURE AND PARTICIPANTS

### TRALE STRUCTURE

This Call to Action results from [Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group](#) (Aspen CSG)'s Thrive Rural Action-Learning Exchange (TRALE). TRALE is a process that quickly taps on-the-ground insights and experiences to help generate breakthrough thinking about what works and what's needed to push rural policy and practice forward.

### TRALE PARTICIPANTS AND PARTICIPATION

For this TRALE process, Aspen CSG convened 27 rural economic and community development practitioners from rural and Native nation communities across the United States. These rural practitioners, advocates, and innovators shared their experiences and ideas to answer the question, **“What will it take for outdoor recreation economies to grow equitable rural prosperity?”**

Collectively, the diverse participants account for a high level of experience and expertise in rural economic development, outdoor recreation, housing, transportation, small business development, family asset building, development finance, grassroots community engagement and advocacy, and regional development. They are respected, committed leaders in their communities, representing many regions of the United States, from the Pacific Islands to the Southeast. *See page 23 for the list of TRALE participants.*

**“If we reframe Indigenous knowledge and see it as true scientific evidence made through rigorous testing over thousands of years and recognize the value of that knowledge practice the same way we recognize Western degrees, then we will have a huge economic shift.”**



**Janice Ikeda**

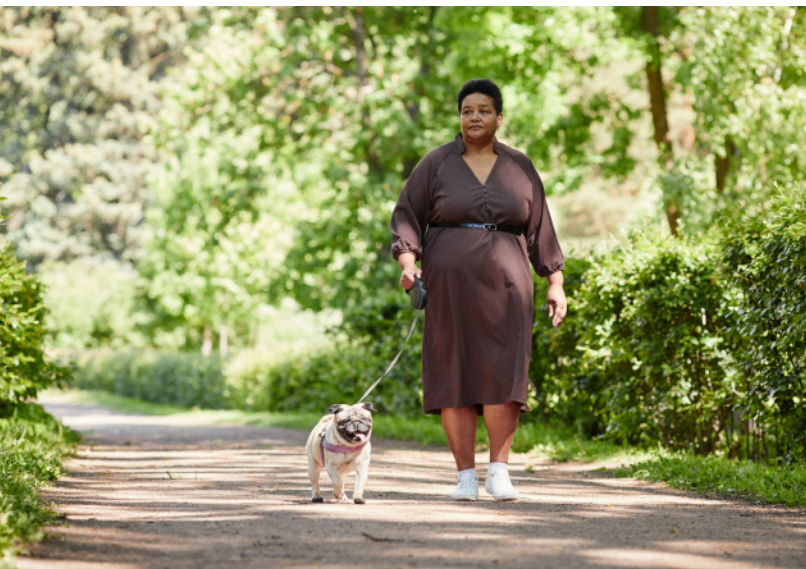


## CROSS-CUTTING RECOMMENDATIONS

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As TRALE participants explored outdoor recreation economies as drivers of equitable rural prosperity — a future where communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives — several overarching recommendations came up again and again. The cross-cutting recommendations apply to all five principles and all types of actors.

- **Plan early** to address and mitigate the community infrastructure challenges that can come with a successful outdoor recreation economy.
- **Engage everyone** within a community in project development, especially those whose voices are not usually at the center of outdoor recreation efforts.
- **Support system-building** to facilitate collaborative approaches to outdoor recreation challenges.
- **Create learning and sharing networks** among rural communities where solutions and challenges can be elevated and shared.
- **Support leadership development** and education to create the next generation of rural outdoor recreation leaders.
- **Uplift and share stories** of outdoor recreation development done well — in an equitable, resilient, and environmentally sustainable manner.
- **Promote ongoing and deep cultural competency, equity, and justice discussions** and workshops throughout communities within the region on an ongoing basis.
- **Value Indigenous knowledge** and experience in all planning, funding, and implementation processes.
- **Read recommendations for other types of actors** (e.g., government, philanthropy) to discover potential areas of collaboration and partnership in supporting this work.





## 1

**PRINCIPLE 1:**

Advance local, equitable, sustainable ownership and control of outdoor recreation assets.

**As rural communities move forward with economic development strategies based around developing outdoor recreation opportunities, front and center is the question of ownership and control of recreation assets like land, outfitters, restaurants, and hotels.**

Absentee ownership and control of assets contribute to “[leakage](#)” of funds from the local economy and introduce priorities from outside the region. An equitable development strategy prioritizes businesses, institutions, organizations, and resources critical to the outdoor recreation economy that are [owned locally](#) and/or directed and advised by the full range of community members who have a stake in their durability and success.

TRALE participants emphasized that local ownership keeps dollars circulating within the community, and equitable ownership of outdoor recreation assets allows more people to benefit from outdoor recreation activities, especially people who have faced [economic exclusion](#). Key to growing more equitable ownership of assets and businesses is better and [more equitable access to financial capital](#). Banks, CDFIs, and other lenders can do more to tailor their products to better serve rural recreation economy needs and to meet the needs of people not served or excluded by current systems. At the same time, philanthropy can provide collateral for loans, match for federal grants, and capacity-building operational grants that sustain local and regional non-profit organizations over time, especially rural development hubs. Robust and multifaceted [capital access](#) enables local organizations, landowners, and entrepreneurs to develop new programming, businesses, and recreation opportunities owned and controlled by the community.

Asset-based community and economic development strategies rest at the heart of an equitable outdoor recreation economy. Equitable recreation development should concentrate first on [identifying and building](#) on the area’s existing people, place, business, and organizational assets as a strategy to increase wellbeing and equity outcomes. Local and regional natural assets, from family-owned forests to public waterways, are the core building blocks for a recreation economy. Still, these natural assets must be developed and stewarded to provide recreational amenities that will attract visitors without overuse. Done right, an equitable and sustainable outdoor recreation economy preserves and protects working landscapes in a way that [conserves and stewards](#) them for future generations and for the health of the planet, while supporting people as they recreate and benefiting community member prosperity.

**“The Verdi River in Arizona was at one point known as “the dirty Verdi” because of the polluted conditions. The community really wanted to turn that around, so they started promoting the river, and people became concerned about it. It was outdoor recreation that helped with conservation of the river – it also led to its own challenges of overuse, but they had a better way to talk about it than before.”**



**Omero Torres**



**Roque Barros**

**“We must consider the long-term impact of land use, whether it’s recreation, agriculture, forestry, or climate change. Reports in the early 1960s said we needed to take measures to preserve the Salton Sea and yet we are still fighting for solutions to mitigate the health and environmental challenges the Sea presents. We must think differently. It’s critical to think: 100 years from now, what’s going to be the impact of decisions we make today?”**

**PRINCIPLE 1:**

Advance local, equitable, sustainable ownership and control of outdoor recreation assets.

As noted in Principle 2, it is important to recognize that the successful development of an outdoor recreation economy leads to gentrifying pressures on housing and land as well as greater interest from outside capital in owning businesses in the community to profit from the location's desirability. While the community may successfully develop and support locally owned businesses at the beginning, it is inevitable that owners may wish to sell over time as they retire or move on to new efforts. One important strategy to consider is to support the education and financing efforts that allow these businesses to become [worker-owned cooperatives](#). This way, the control and wealth of these business efforts stay in the community over the long term, and wealth creation is shared even further.

Developing an equitable outdoor recreation economy relies on activating rural land and water assets by allowing visitors and residents to access recreation opportunities. Landowners, including government agencies, have different visions of what constitutes adequate access and shared use and may have biases towards or against one or more types of recreation use. For instance, private landowners may prioritize access to their land for hunting and fishing and resist calls to allow hiking, biking, or riding in certain seasons. Additionally, tensions over motorized and human-powered trail or waterway use can create conflicts within a community. Special care must be taken to build consensus on fair access and [balanced use](#) to prevent community animosity towards a recreation-based economic effort.

Outdoor recreation economies privilege the use of land and water assets for recreation, but rural regions use land for other economic activities as well, for instance, mineral extraction, forestry, agriculture, manufacturing, and, more recently, clean energy generation. A diversified and equitable recreation economy [balances](#) land and water use for recreation with other uses within a region. In many cases, equitable development of the recreation and tourism sector can be part of a solution to the decline in legacy sectors due to automation, offshoring, and other macroeconomic shifts.







**PRINCIPLE 1:**

Advance local, equitable, sustainable ownership and control of outdoor recreation assets.

**PRACTITIONER VOICES**

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A culture shift is needed within conservation since it looks like private landowners grabbing land in the name of conservation. Land ownership itself is challenging for Indigenous people. “Conservation” defines our relationship with the land. Humans present themselves as saviors of the place, but humans are just animals. Over the long haul, there must be a shift to a reciprocal relationship with the land. Harms are done in the name of conservation, and large swaths of private land ownership is not equitable.”



**Megan Hess**

“If we don’t own hotels or rental companies, or have partial ownership of these things; if we do not keep the majority of the earnings here on the island; when visitors go home, their trash stays here in our landfill and ravines, and the money leaves. So we’re basically importing money and trash and only keeping the trash.”



**Susan Champeny**

“Hood River uses one-way trails and a lot of signage and education around areas for motorized users, limiting those areas of overlap where it’s a serious safety hazard. Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition works with forest collaborative groups on these issues relating to national forests and lands. It is important to have conversations where you have diverse interests coming together.”



**Emery Cowan**

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“If we’re going to break the cycle of poverty in low-wealth rural places, then we need some new capital tools that are specifically designed to do that — capital tools that are flexible, risk absorbing, way below market rate, and exclusively and explicitly designed to foster local ownership in places where people have struggled to be entrepreneurs.”



**Andrew Crosson**

“How do local businesses take advantage of recreation? How do you give a kickstart to the local community to benefit as opposed to those outsiders that have the capital?”



**Jordan Reeves**

“

There’s going to be a big transition of wealth over the next 15 to 20 years as boomers age out of business ownership. And in a lot of rural communities, sons and daughters are not interested in taking over these companies that are anchors in the community. If there was a model to transition that could create more cooperatives, it would give a new destiny and opportunity to the community as a whole.”



**Merald Hollaway**



**PRINCIPLE 1:**

Advance local, equitable, sustainable ownership and control of outdoor recreation assets.

## Recommendations

For All	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Outdoor recreation should be one part of a diversified economic strategy. Frame local ownership and control of outdoor recreation as a prioritized step towards a more diversified rural economy. Do not oversell the potential benefits of recreation; it is not a silver bullet.</li> <li>Develop a local entrepreneurial pipeline that is targeted and accessible to low-income people and communities of color to ensure small business creation will build wealth locally.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide opportunities for local people to work in and learn the management and ownership sides of recreation businesses. Create a local workforce pipeline through job training programs in partnership with education institutions.</li> <li>Establish Community Benefits Agreements for all outside investments or developments to ensure community goals and priorities benefit.</li> </ul>
For Government	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Set up or re-focus a tourism/recreation council with a clear mission to develop an equitable outdoor recreation economy. Develop and strengthen partnerships between tourism boards and local groups. These boards and councils can help local groups educate and inform visitors and part-time residents on the values of local communities and how to respect the land.</li> <li>Distribute state tourism dollars among counties with an equitable lens to prioritize efforts to steward natural resources sustainably, develop local ownership strategies, and invest in local infrastructure like affordable housing, transportation, and child care.</li> <li>Coordinate natural resource management and economic development efforts at the regional, state, and federal level to integrate planning, sustainable development, and equitable land use.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hire and support state and federal liaisons embedded within the region to inform community planning processes and work closely with local partners to align land management with local needs. To deepen connection and understanding, these local liaisons should live in the rural communities they serve.</li> <li>Build awareness within the recreation industry and user groups that recreation opportunities rely on rural communities as stewards of open lands.</li> <li>Use zoning and other forms of local regulation to preserve ecologically sensitive areas like coastlines and to promote equitable uses for the land, ensuring access by and for locals while also preserving natural habitat.</li> </ul>
For Philanthropy	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coordinate and convene regional stakeholders to develop an outdoor recreation <a href="#">value chain</a>. Develop new approaches and capital tools for investment into lower-wealth places in a region.</li> <li>Fund small business incubators and accelerators that support entrepreneurs, particularly entrepreneurs of color, to launch businesses supporting the outdoor recreation economy.</li> <li>Provide seed and impact capital to local entrepreneurs and fund entrepreneurial pitch sessions to connect locals to potential investors.</li> <li>Fund research to determine where state and federal tourism dollars flow and who benefits from these investments, focusing on increasing transparency and accountability.</li> <li>Host workshops to help local communities understand federal and state opportunities and processes for outdoor recreation funding.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide matching funds for federal grants.</li> <li>Connect local and regional organizations with financial or technical experts who can provide support for federal and state grant management and reporting.</li> <li>National philanthropy: work in partnership with local and regional foundations to support the creation and sharing of stories that detail rural recreational development that is equitable, resilient, and environmentally sustainable.</li> <li>Local and regional philanthropy: create and preserve community spaces for the sometimes difficult conversations on different recreation land use.</li> </ul>
For Rural Practitioners	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use an engaged process like <a href="#">WealthWorks</a> to map assets and develop outdoor recreation value chains to grow the local economy. Use a community's understanding of its assets, rather than externally imposed definitions.</li> <li>Work to educate local communities on the potential value of economic diversification through equitable outdoor recreation and the risks if the process is not managed well.</li> <li>Provide incentives and opportunities for locals to work in, own, and lead new recreation businesses, including through collaboration with institutions like community colleges and regional technology centers for workforce and entrepreneurial development.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Make sure that the community is at the center while developing new outdoor recreation infrastructure so that trails and other access points are easily accessible to residents and visitors.</li> <li>Encourage mutual support and alignment among landowners to advance multiple uses for outdoor recreation.</li> <li>Use local signage and digital media to clearly communicate guidance on shared and conflicting use (e.g., mountain biking routes during hunting season, trail use by horse riders and hikers).</li> </ul>



## 2

## PRINCIPLE 2:

Build resilient infrastructure that supports a flourishing community, including diverse outdoor recreation businesses and workers.

**Developing an equitable recreation economy requires centering the needs, voices, and perspectives of community residents. Too often, outdoor recreation infrastructure focuses on the needs of visitors or the promise of growth from outside interests rather than full-time residents.**

Building physical and community infrastructure to drive equitable rural prosperity necessitates a proactive and inclusive development process, planning for future growth and taking steps to avert challenges before they become intractable.

A sustainable local economy in any community requires a housing market affordable to the full workforce. While rural communities have historically been seen as inexpensive, today, far too many struggle to provide housing for their public and private sector workers and populations like seniors and persons with disabilities. Rural outdoor recreation economies can bring short-term visitors as well as second homeowners and retirees who want to live seasonally or year-round. This can put significant price pressure on land values and orient housing development towards these newer members of the community. Proactively addressing this issue requires intentional planning and preservation of existing affordable neighborhoods (including historically low-income and mobile home parks) as well as undeveloped land that can be utilized for long-term affordability (typically through a community land trust) from the beginning.

The short-term rental industry has put additional pressure on the rural housing market as homeowners shift to visitors rather than long-term tenants. These challenges are especially pronounced in recreation communities. Developing new housing solutions rooted in local ownership and control (see Principle 1) from the onset — like rental housing financed by low-income housing tax credits and community land trusts to ensure long-term affordability — is vital for a sustainable and equitable local economy. **No issue is more critical to success than thinking about housing.** People may be able to commute from outside the community for a time, but successful growth will quickly gentrify local and regional housing prices that result in major labor and quality-of-life challenges down the road.

“When I hear “outdoor recreation economy,” I immediately think of the people who support those economies, and it’s often seasonal workers. And when I think of seasonal workers, housing is what always pops up. I most recently came from working for Idaho state parks, and I had a commute of about 40 miles one way because there wasn’t housing in the tiny ranching community. Often, a very privileged few could accept that position, someone who had a van that they could live out of or a trailer that their car could pull. Some people were up for camping in a tent for five months, but in the West, we can have snow in June, and we can have hundred-degree days. So appropriate, safe, comfortable housing for workers ultimately is about equity and our economies and how they can sustain this kind of increased recreation use.”



**Kate Yeater**

“Part of the problem with many of the attempts to develop affordable workforce housing has been that as soon as it gets in the market, people cash out their equity, and it becomes unaffordable. If you can keep the ownership of the land separate from the occupancy of the unit, and you have some rules about who can buy it, you can minimize price inflation. So there are models that work, but you have to take the ability to cash out the equity in a high amenity place out of the equation for sustainable workforce housing.”



**John Molinaro**

**PRINCIPLE 2:**

Build resilient infrastructure that supports a flourishing community, including diverse outdoor recreation businesses and workers.

Because rural outdoor recreation regions tend to be large with limited roadways, quality transportation infrastructure is important for visitors, long-term residents, and workers. Well-designed highway and road connectivity, public transit, and multi-modal transportation options (especially planning for safe bicycle use) allow visitors to move safely from their accommodations to recreation areas and permit residents and visitors access to local services like grocery stores and health systems. Given that most rural development has been linked to road widening as a strategy, establishing local transit networks that can move workers and visitors to recreation amenities is vital for the long-term sustainability of a community. As with other infrastructure types, failure to plan and intervene at the start leads to much more expensive solutions later on, as well as real workforce challenges as commuting and traffic congestion become major issues to resolve.

[Broadband internet connectivity](#) is also essential infrastructure for rural recreation economies, especially in facilitating local business development. Given the rise of remote work, many prospective visitors and residents require high-quality connectivity, and communities are working hard to access federal funds to build out networks. As with the other forms of infrastructure discussed above, broadband should be designed for the full spectrum of local residents, not just visitors. To drive local prosperity, newly built networks should be accessible, reliable, and affordable to all, not just in the short term.

Finally, the importance of [child care](#) as infrastructure is rarely realized in rural places until it becomes a crisis. Developing an outdoor recreation economy typically leads to several retail, restaurant, and hotel businesses, not to mention other service economy elements. These jobs rely on a range of hours for operation and typically are not high-wage employment that would support a single-wage-earner household. Given these demands, flexible, affordable, quality child care is a critical element of community infrastructure that needs to be organized, developed, and supported. This requires links to job training and small business programs, facilitating certification programs, and connection to other statewide resources that can help support a local/regional child care community.





**PRINCIPLE 2:**

Build resilient infrastructure that supports a flourishing community, including diverse outdoor recreation businesses and workers.

**PRACTITIONER VOICES**

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In Munising, we are the gateway community to Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. Our county, Alger County, has about nine thousand residents and is large and sprawling. But our area gets around a million visitors every summer to do mountain biking and things like that. This influx happened all within the last ten years. Our residents are around fifty percent low to moderate income, and many of our jobs end up being seasonal, so they're lower paying, and most don't have benefits, contributing to significant population decline. Some of that's certainly due to housing issues — many homes get turned into short-term rentals. Housing costs have skyrocketed, so people can't afford it on low-paying seasonal jobs.”



**Johanna Bogater**

“People who are offered jobs in Vermont from other places end up not taking them because there's no housing for them. These are pretty high-paying jobs—there's a housing crisis at all levels of income. This means many people aren't coming because there's nowhere for them to live, which is a pretty significant problem.”



**Melissa Levy**

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“Our Chamber of Commerce promoted the National Forest as a place for folks to come up and recreate in the winter. That was great, except our highways and city roads weren't prepared for the traffic. People lined up along the highway out of town and backed up traffic through town, creating hazardous conditions for visitors and people just trying to get through town. It had to be pulled back and rethought with more partners, which took a lot of resources.”



**Emery Cowan**

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With gentrification and increasing prices, we end up seeing simplification of the economy, where the only people who can afford to be there are people who have resources. You lose the community's dynamism — it becomes a shell of itself. Suppose you're able to address the housing question long-term. In that case, people of modest and middle incomes can afford to live in these recreation destination communities. You're going to have greater civic capacity because you're going to have more people who live there and have a stake in that community.”



**Mike Wilson**



**PRINCIPLE 2:**

Build resilient infrastructure that supports a flourishing community, including diverse outdoor recreation businesses and workers.

## Recommendations

For All	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make basic needs like housing, child care, affordable broadband, and accessible transportation essential components of any new recreation initiative. Communities must plan for these challenges from the start — before marketing the region — to avoid more expensive crises in the years ahead.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support mobile home community conversion to <a href="#">resident ownership</a> to protect against displacement.</li> </ul>
For Government	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest in infrastructure that connects rural communities to natural assets to make rural communities more attractive places to live and raise a family.</li> <li>• Prioritize a percentage of tourism revenue for residents' long-term needs like affordable housing and transit.</li> <li>• Reform tax and revenue structures to incentivize communities to steward open lands and recreation opportunities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop property tax programs that protect low- and fixed-income residents from displacement due to rising property values.</li> <li>• Develop a community land trust to create permanently affordable rental and homeownership housing stock and open space preservation and transportation options.</li> </ul>
For Philanthropy	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote peer learning among rural communities facing infrastructure challenges related to outdoor recreation and tourism to foster collaboration and sharing of best practices, focusing on communities of color and low-income communities.</li> <li>• Provide funding support, technical assistance, and guidance to community land trust efforts across the region.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support planning processes and partner with government to lay the groundwork for infrastructure projects</li> </ul>
For Rural Practitioners	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lobby legislatures and/or create model legislation that establishes revenue options (e.g., user fees, sales taxes, short-term rental fees) to grow more sustainable and equitable economies in rural areas and address tourism and outdoor recreation-created issues.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritize the development of long-term affordable housing and innovation spaces, as well as programs that encourage people to live and work in outdoor recreation communities.</li> </ul>



## 3

**PRINCIPLE 3:**

Work regionally to build trust, achieve scale, and meet shared outdoor recreation challenges and opportunities.

**The development of rural outdoor recreation economies relies on coordinating assets and stakeholder engagement at a regional level. Recreation economies are always regional economies because of the scale of recreation assets — waterways, mountains, and forests don't begin or end at the jurisdictional boundaries of townships or counties.**

Stewarding natural assets to develop equitable recreation opportunities can mean crossing counties and building consensus, sometimes within a multi-state region. [Acting as a region](#) allows different localities to persistently analyze, develop strategies, and act together within and across sensible and workable regions to address shared issues, challenges, and opportunities and achieve outdoor recreation outcomes at a productive scale.

Working together across a region, this approach requires that parties, organizations, leaders, and communities develop trust. Trusting relationships make regional coordination possible because communities acting alone may fall into a competitive “race to the bottom” trap to attract recreation businesses or opportunities, undermining each other’s efforts in the process. Many rural communities are too small to go it alone on economic development. Rural regions can develop the scale necessary for more equitable prosperity by collaborating and coordinating across a wider geography.

**“What sort of priorities are we setting for outdoor recreation? There’s a need for partnerships between the chamber of commerce, city and county government, conservation organizations, and public lands management agencies. When it comes to tourism and wanting to bring in visitors to help local businesses, can we do it in a way that’s not detrimental to the environment and to communities adjacent to and dependent on the land? Community-based organizations are great about pulling those threads together.”**



**Emery Cowan**

**RURAL DEVELOPMENT HUBS**

[Rural Development Hubs](#) are the main players in rural America that are doing development differently. Hubs think of their job as identifying and connecting community assets to market demand to build lasting livelihoods, always including marginalized people, places, and firms in both the action and the benefits. They focus on all the critical ingredients that either expand or impede prosperity in a region — the people, the businesses, the local institutions and partnerships, and the range of natural, built, cultural, intellectual, social, political, and financial resources. They work to strengthen these critical components and weave them into a system that advances enduring prosperity for all.

Hubs play a transformative role in their regions and communities. They are not focused on meeting immediate needs alone. They also aim for and deploy systemic and long-term interventions and investments to strengthen the essential components that form a better foundation for lasting prosperity.



**PRINCIPLE 3:**

Work regionally to build trust, achieve scale, and meet shared outdoor recreation challenges and opportunities.

The trust necessary to work as a region is built step-by-step through listening and understanding diverse stakeholders’ needs, values, and concerns and incorporating those perspectives into plans and action around outdoor recreation. Trusting relationships and regional coordination allow multiple governments and private-sector units like recreation planning councils, chambers of commerce, or tourism bureaus to develop comprehensive strategies or plans that help map out opportunities for recreation development that are inclusive of the whole region.

Coordinated regional action to plan and build an outdoor recreation economy increases the likelihood that collaborations and intermediary organizations like rural development hubs will apply for and win federal, state, and philanthropic funding [designed to help grow the region’s economy](#). Through coordinated hub action, regions are more likely to secure investments or incentives to address shared cross-community economic, social, and health challenges and opportunities.



**“Philanthropy, especially small regional foundations, can be instrumental in bringing all the necessary folks together to start the conversation around equitable outdoor recreation. An intermediary of that kind convenes and provides the funding to do market research to see if there is demand. It takes time and money to bring people together effectively, so that’s a big role for community philanthropy.”**



**Melissa Levy**

**“Don’t pit small communities against each other. Instead, encourage them to come in together on a grant. Funders shouldn’t make it too prescriptive. Every landscape is different. To make it work, a program or grant has to be specific to a rural place, considering its culture, needs, and assets.”**



**Ta Enos**

**CONVENING FOR THE RECREATION ECONOMY**

The Niel and Louise Tillotson Fund at the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation is a rural philanthropy dedicated to economic opportunity. Since their founding, the [Tillotson Fund](#) has played a rural development hub role by funding economic development projects in the Northern Forest. This region stretches from New York’s Adirondack Mountains to the northern border of Maine. Their work includes grants to the Conservation Fund and Appalachian Mountain Club to support in-depth analyses of demand for outdoor recreation, barriers to recreation industry growth, and opportunities to inspire entrepreneurship and growth in the outdoor sector. Regional foundations like the Tillotson Fund can be instrumental in convening regional stakeholders to start a conversation about building a regional network and strategy. Managing relationships and building trust takes time, and philanthropy is well-positioned to play this convening role in the outdoor recreation system.





**PRINCIPLE 3:**

Work regionally to build trust, achieve scale, and meet shared outdoor recreation challenges and opportunities.

“You have to build trust between the different communities, but there’s fear about taking a regional approach. “They’re going to get more money than we’re going to get because we’re smaller and they’re bigger.” So the reality is that implementing regional work can be a slow process because trust-building is crucial.”



**Jordan Reeves**

“Ask, what would you share with people coming here? What do you think is most distinctive and special about your place? And as you bring people together and tell stories, you start mapping them. And by mapping who we are, we rediscover our regional identity.”



**Nicole Manapol**

## Recommendations

For All	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build alliances across regions to develop a network of organizations and agencies that can take action to create a more equitable outdoor recreation system.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand rural scale, and implement better measurements for rural places. Allow regions to self-identify the scope of their work and measures of success in funding opportunities.</li> </ul>
For Government	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase outdoor recreation planning and participation capacity by working hand-in-hand with local non-profit groups, particularly those groups and populations historically marginalized or disconnected from outdoor recreation opportunities.</li> <li>• Don’t pit small communities against one another when distributing federal or state resources. Develop funding mechanisms that support regional collaboration.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foster collaboration between public health systems and local governments involved in recreation and tourism planning, focusing on strengthening health outcomes.</li> <li>• Invest in regional collaborations that involve multiple local organizations or agencies, such as chambers of commerce or tourism boards.</li> </ul>
For Philanthropy	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support capacity building by directing funding to local nonprofits. Create incentives for local governments and urban nonprofits within a wider region to work with these rural organizations.</li> <li>• Invest in rural development hubs as a model to provide capacity in low-population, rural regions. Build trust between the community and external funders by working through regional hub intermediaries.</li> <li>• Make sure regional convenings and collaborations include groups grounded in local communities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocate within the community, the local business sector, and local government for a more inclusive, regional recreation economy. Convene and provide inclusive local spaces for people to work together, as well as opportunities for communities and organizations to learn from others in different geographies.</li> <li>• Avoid competition among smaller rural communities by assessing needs and activating assets at a regional scale. Incentivize collaboration through funding opportunities.</li> <li>• Fund peer-learning opportunities where communities are matched based on population size and/or recreation amenity type to avoid costly mistakes when implementing a new recreation or tourism strategy.</li> </ul>
For Rural Practitioners	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner with other advocates or organizations in a region to identify regional assets, challenges, and working solutions.</li> <li>• Create a bigger voice by speaking as a region when advocating at the state and federal level on outdoor recreation issues and resources.</li> <li>• Work with regional organizations to help them understand the significance of local history and other community assets.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leverage or build partnerships with similar organizations within a wider region to develop a regional destination based on identified regional assets (e.g., birding, wildlife viewing, breweries).</li> <li>• Build regional momentum and trust through initial or small victories that strengthen relationships and accountability. Small victories lend themselves to stronger relationships, trust, celebration, and bigger victories down the line.</li> </ul>



## 4

**PRINCIPLE 4:**

Respect the local landscape, people, and culture in the design and implementation of all development efforts.

**Respect for the local landscape, people, and culture is a foundational element of an equitable outdoor recreation economy. But a balanced, respectful relationship is only possible where all participants enter the relationship voluntarily and with the power to shape the interaction.**

There is a dramatic difference between sharing a culture and place on one's own terms and exploiting a culture and place by outside forces. That difference is who has the power, who shapes the interaction, and who benefits. Too often, tourism and recreation economies are based on the exploitation of a people, culture, and place for outside profit. To avoid this, local people from across the community must be [active in designing](#) visitor infrastructure and activities — which includes the ability to say “no” to new activities or projects that would be destructive or incompatible with the health or self-respect of the community. This is particularly important to consider in communities with a history of power imbalance or exploitation, including Indigenous communities, Black and immigrant communities, and low-wealth communities.

Indigenous communities seeking to reestablish balanced use of land in ways that honor ancestral connections as well as preserve the health of the land for future generations may experience special challenges regarding respectful use of land for tourism and recreation. An economic model that only sees land as a resource to be used for human recreation desires is incompatible with these goals. Private ownership models can also challenge community access to ancestral lands and cultural activities. As a path forward, some Indigenous communities are promoting [regenerative tourism](#) as a way to invite visitors to recreate and give back to the land and community at the same time.

TRALE participants shared the many challenges rural communities face regarding disrespectful and destructive behavior by tourists and visitors, from Maine to Hawaii. But they also shared the challenges local people face in sharing their communities with pride. “Why would anyone want to come here?” is a common reaction to the possibility of a recreation economy in places that haven't historically been seen as valuable or special. Both of these challenges have the same roots: pride of place and self-respect are only possible when local people have power and voice, and disrespectful systems evolve where that power and voice are lacking.

## THE POTENTIAL OF REGENERATIVE TOURISM

“Regenerative tourism means shifting from an extractive relationship to investment and reciprocity. It starts with an awareness of belonging, and from that sense of belonging to that place and community grows what we call kuleana (responsibility, seen as a privilege). It means the aloha spirit, the way of welcoming a person to feel a sense of belonging that translates into a deep sense of responsibility to that place. The joke is, you know you are family if you are invited to a home for dinner, and they let you wash dishes. One indicator of regenerative tourism is the willingness to move from the dining table to washing dishes. The willingness to reframe and question everything we've been told is knowledge, success, wealth. It is a low bar to just focus on sustainability. In the past, Hawai'i wasn't just sustainable, it was abundant.”



**Janice Ikeda**



**PRINCIPLE 4:**

Respect the local landscape, people, and culture in the design and implementation of all development efforts.

**PRACTITIONER VOICES**

“

When I pulled into Nacogdoches, Texas, to gas up, the woman behind me started a conversation. I asked, “What do I have to see here before I leave?” and she couldn’t stop talking. She was so excited about her community, giving me five things to see and do. And you know, I got all excited. Sometimes I go to places where people say, “you’re better off just getting the hell out of here because there’s nothing to do.” It’s tied up in the pride that people have about their place. People are the ambassadors for the community, and how they feel about the community will shine through.”



**Ines Polonius**

“Not all land should be public. Some of the land is sacred, and equitable outdoor recreation means holding Native nation and Indigenous communities’ sovereignty close.”



**Juan Martinez**

“

“Store owners in lower Michigan put up signs to warn the visitors to be nice, and some have even closed because of bad visitors. The tourist mindset sees others as there to serve you — that they owe you, and you should be grateful. So what are alternate values? How can we create a tourist culture where you come in with respect and humility? Openness and a learning mindset? This would be a reciprocal tourist economy.”



**Megan Hess**

“

“We started a community counting process for all 57 cruise ships that came in this spring and publicly released the data on social media. The county government had been saying for years that tourists were not a problem, that they come for twenty minutes, only come in the morning, they don’t touch anything, they don’t step on the coral, it’s not a problem. Well, our numbers validated the community feeling that it was a problem. It doesn’t have to be like this anymore.”



**Susan Champeny**



**PRINCIPLE 4:**

Respect the local landscape, people, and culture in the design and implementation of all development efforts.

## Recommendations

For All	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage local leaders — both formal and informal — early and often and draw on their experience with the region to inform the bottom-up planning of outdoor recreation strategy. Make sure the community has the power to say “no” to projects incompatible with local needs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Take local and Indigenous knowledge into account in RFPs and contracts. Value the social capital an organization brings in the same way as you would financial capital, and normalize fair-price compensation for the social capital local and Indigenous communities bring to the table.</li> </ul>
For Government	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create requirements for tourism and economic development efforts to consult with affected stakeholder groups, especially Native nations and historically marginalized communities, when embarking on new projects.</li> <li>Be responsive to community input when designing outdoor recreation projects and programs. Invite community organizations and residents who have been historically excluded to join planning efforts and attend formal government meetings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create state and federal block grants that can fund inclusive, community-generated planning processes, collaborative capacity building, and local efforts to have control over the development and acquisition of outdoor recreation assets.</li> <li>Frame discussions and community meetings in a way that invites story-sharing and discovery and do not restrict discussion to reach a pre-ordained outcome.</li> </ul>
For Philanthropy	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support local recreation organizations’ efforts to engage with and learn about funding and government systems, especially new organizations and those involving groups that have been historically excluded.</li> <li>Support bottom-up decisions that grow recreation opportunities that are chosen and supported by community residents, and listen to the whole community, not just elected officials and business leaders, when making funding decisions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Loosen reporting and organizational structure requirements and legitimize, support, and sustain community voice and action without community groups needing to create formal non-profit organizations.</li> </ul>
For Rural Practitioners	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assess local tourism boards, their philosophies, and their marketing strategies, and identify places to make shifts towards equity. Use power mapping to identify decision-makers who influence outdoor recreation and tourism efforts.</li> <li>Consider how outdoor recreation development affects each and every resident in the community, and grow a coalition of organizations, governments, and businesses to reduce the negative impacts of development and bring those not typically involved into the discussion.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Highlight local culture to attract visitors and new recreation industry opportunities in a way that avoids abusing or exploiting that local culture. Keep culture bearers in the driver’s seat when it comes to project development.</li> <li>Engage in processes that ask people to identify what they love about their place and what they want to share with visitors.</li> </ul>



## 5

**PRINCIPLE 5:**

Design for equitable access to and participation in outdoor recreation activities.

Given our country's historical and existing exclusion of people from political power, social mobility, and economic opportunity based on the location or size of their community; racial, immigrant, or cultural identity; or wealth or income level, it should not come as a surprise that different demographic groups have varied levels of participation in outdoor recreation.

Youth, particularly youth of color, are less likely to take advantage of outdoor recreation, which means they are missing from the outdoor recreation economy as consumers and potential business owners or workers. And the high cost of recreation activities — from gear to entry fees — means that people and families without the financial means to participate are also missing from the outdoor recreation economy. As a result, youth and low-income people are less likely to enjoy the vital health and mental health benefits of being active outdoors.

Equitable access to recreation activities and opportunities requires the intentional design of efforts, including voices beyond the overwhelmingly white and affluent population that currently recreates. There is a genuine risk that developing new outdoor recreation economies will reinforce or deepen existing economic, health, and social inequities in rural communities. In every aspect of planning, design, funding, development, and implementation of outdoor recreation economies, governments, philanthropy, practitioners, and community members must actively consider who is at the table, who will benefit, and who will have access to opportunities and programming.

Done right, an outdoor recreation economy designed for the whole community as well as visitors has the potential to spur local wealth creation through entrepreneurship, drive local ownership (see Principle 1), and provide opportunities for young people to stay in their communities and thrive.

"We need to invest in capacity in the community itself. Thinking about health, kids that get outdoors are much more resilient in the future when they're struggling at home. And so, how do we start doing that in our community? Even these rural youth are not getting outdoors. That's a key piece of their future. And so if we can empower them and invest in the community, we'll start to create a sustainable system."

**Oak Rankin**

"This landscape is ripe for people to engage, be active, and participate in healthy activities to improve their health outcomes. Mountain biking, skiing, hiking, and paddling are all good health-building activities. But we often see a disconnect between folks who are coming from away to take advantage of those activities and longtime residents of the community. Often, locals are not participating in those activities because it's not what they grew up doing and the gear can be expensive."

**Mike Wilson****GETTING TO KNOW THE RIVER**

The beautiful and awe-inspiring lower Mississippi River is often inaccessible to people who live nearby, due to physical barriers like levees, or social and economic barriers to recreation access in the region's low-income and majority Black communities. The Lower Mississippi River Foundation helps local youth get to know the river through outdoor recreation programming, including exploration and camping trips that develop wilderness skills and introduce participants to outdoor recreation. The Foundation aims to build connections between young people and the river so that future generations will love, protect, and value it.



**PRINCIPLE 5:**

Design for equitable access to and participation in outdoor recreation activities.

“Unless you have a commitment to equity and develop smart goals as part of a project, it does not happen. It’s wonderful to say, Yes, we have an equity lens, and we’re going to do this work, but unless you put it into terms that can be measured and you hold yourselves accountable, my experience says you’re not going to move the needle.”



**Nancy Van Milligen**

“We will be better aligned on needs if we bring together all the players in the region related to recreation, if we can have conversations about opportunities, challenges, equity, and inclusion. It’s like a needs assessment where everyone can see the alignment between folks working in the recreation space, folks utilizing recreation, community members, and even elected officials with a grander vision.”



**Hetal Patel**

“What is needed is yielding the trust and meeting the immigrant population where they are with resources, by addressing challenges and barriers, so that they are able and ready to take on opportunities.”



**Ernestor De La Rosa**

“Equitable outdoor recreation is about allowing people who live locally to use those assets and not be pushed out by visitors. It means maintaining the integrity of those assets so they are not overused to the point where they become liabilities.”



**Melissa Levy**

## Recommendations

For All	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish equity standards for current and future outdoor recreation and tourism efforts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Take the time necessary to build trust within historically marginalized communities, especially youth and families.</li> </ul>
For Government	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Make it easier for long-term residents to enjoy recreation opportunities. Host inclusive community conversations that clearly explain the health benefits of outdoor recreation, and then make sure the community actually sees those benefits by connecting families to recreation assets.</li> <li>Engage K-12 schools and health systems as part of a strategy to get youth and families more involved in outdoor recreation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Educate recreation and tourism industry partners on how businesses can be more inclusive to youth and families when providing access to recreation opportunities.</li> </ul>
For Philanthropy	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide knowledge, training, and support for rural communities seeking to reach youth through outdoor recreation efforts or make an existing effort more equitable for youth.</li> <li>Implement strategies that reduce financial barriers for youth of color to meaningfully engage in outdoor recreation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fund peer learning and experiential learning opportunities for historically marginalized local and regional leaders to create more connections and opportunities within the outdoor recreation economy.</li> <li>Provide education and engagement on outdoor recreation’s potential to be a tool for sustainable development for the whole community.</li> </ul>
For Rural Practitioners	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Build systems and programs to help youth access outdoor recreation opportunities — both for their health and enjoyment and to engage them in the industry.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Share outdoor recreation information in an easily accessible and understandable manner for community members and visitors. Invite locals and businesses to become ambassadors for social events that can help disconnected residents learn about recreation opportunities and help tourists learn about and engage the community.</li> </ul>



## TRALE Participant List

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The following people worked together to shape this Call to Action:

- Action-Learning Exchanges were facilitated by Bonita Robertson-Hardy and Chris Estes, with coordination support from Tyler Bowders.
- Devin Deaton identified key themes and highlighted participant quotes and stories.
- Aspen CSG's consultant Rebecca Huenink led the writing process.
- The entire Aspen CSG team – Bonita Robertson-Hardy, Chris Estes, Erin Cahill, Devin Deaton, and Tyler Bowders – helped edit and sharpen the concepts.

# Community Strategies Group

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The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.*

Since 1985, the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group has been committed to equitable rural prosperity. We work towards a future where communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.

Aspen CSG serves as a connecting hub for equitable rural community and economic development. We design and facilitate action-inducing peer learning among rural practitioners, national and regional organizations, and policymakers. We build networks, foster collaboration, and advance best practices from the field. The foundation of our work is the Thrive Rural Framework – a tool to take stock, target action, and gauge progress on equitable rural prosperity.

For more on Aspen CSG,  
see: [www.AspenCSG.org](http://www.AspenCSG.org)

For more on the Thrive Rural Framework,  
see: [www.ThriveRural.org](http://www.ThriveRural.org)