

# MAPPING A NEW TERRAIN

## Five Principles for Equitable Rural Outdoor Recreation Economies

A CALL TO ACTION

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.

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. 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.



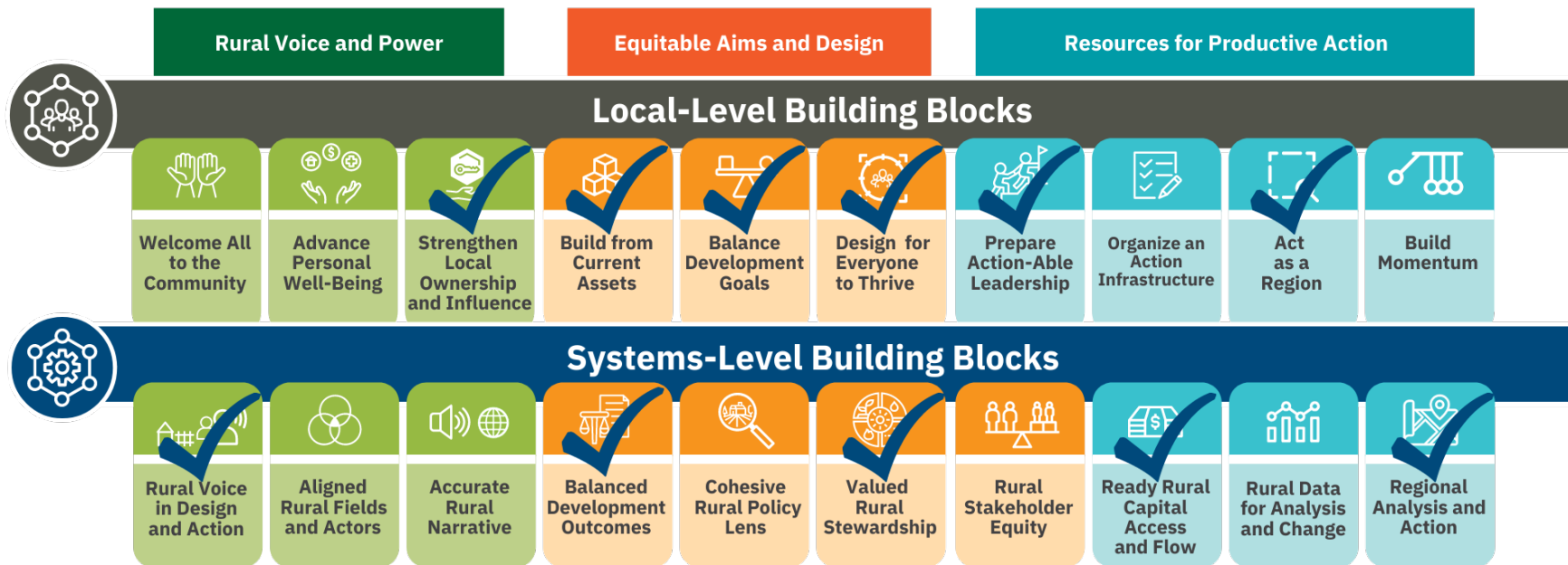


# 5 PRINCIPLES TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND ECONOMIC OUTCOMES FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES AND NATIVE NATIONS

## THE PROCESS

The Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (Aspen CSG) convened 27 rural economic and community development practitioners from a diverse range of rural and Native nation communities to inform this Call to Action. [Click here](#) for the list of participants.

Aspen CSG's [Thrive Rural Framework](#) is a tool to take stock, target action, and gauge progress on equitable rural prosperity. We've noted the most relevant framework building blocks from this Call to Action below.



**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.





## 5 PRINCIPLES TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND ECONOMIC OUTCOMES FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES AND NATIVE NATIONS

### CROSS-CUTTING RECOMMENDATIONS

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.





## 5 PRINCIPLES TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND ECONOMIC OUTCOMES FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES AND NATIVE NATIONS

### 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. 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.

## 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> |
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## 5 PRINCIPLES TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND ECONOMIC OUTCOMES FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES AND NATIVE NATIONS

### For Philanthropy

- Coordinate and convene regional stakeholders to develop an outdoor recreation [value chain](#). Develop new approaches and capital tools for investment into lower-wealth places in a region.
- Fund small business incubators and accelerators that support entrepreneurs, particularly entrepreneurs of color, to launch businesses supporting the outdoor recreation economy.
- Provide seed and impact capital to local entrepreneurs and fund entrepreneurial pitch sessions to connect locals to potential investors.
- Fund research to determine where state and federal tourism dollars flow and who benefits from these investments, focusing on increasing transparency and accountability.
- Host workshops to help local communities understand federal and state opportunities and processes for outdoor recreation funding.
- Provide matching funds for federal grants.
- Connect local and regional organizations with financial or technical experts who can provide support for federal and state grant management and reporting.
- 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.
- Local and regional philanthropy: create and preserve community spaces for the sometimes difficult conversations on different recreation land use.

### For Rural Practitioners

- Use an engaged process like [WealthWorks](#) 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Encourage mutual support and alignment among landowners to advance multiple uses for outdoor recreation.
- 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).



## 5 PRINCIPLES TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND ECONOMIC OUTCOMES FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES AND NATIVE NATIONS

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### PRINCIPLE 2:

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

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. This is particularly important in the context of the growth and pressure that can affect important systems like housing and transportation in a rural outdoor recreation economy.

## Recommendations

### For All

- 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.
- Support mobile home community conversion to [resident ownership](#) to protect against displacement.

### For Government

- Invest in infrastructure that connects rural communities to natural assets to make rural communities more attractive places to live and raise a family.
- Develop property tax programs that protect low- and fixed-income residents from displacement due to rising property values.
- Prioritize a percentage of tourism revenue for residents' long-term needs like affordable housing and transit.
- Develop a community land trust to create permanently affordable rental and homeownership housing stock and open space preservation and transportation options.
- Reform tax and revenue structures to incentivize communities to steward open lands and recreation opportunities.

### For Philanthropy

- 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.
- Support planning processes and partner with government to lay the groundwork for infrastructure projects
- Provide funding support, technical assistance, and guidance to community land trust efforts across the region.

### For Rural Practitioners

- 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.
- 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.





## 5 PRINCIPLES TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND ECONOMIC OUTCOMES FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES AND NATIVE NATIONS

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**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. 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.

### Recommendations

#### For All

- Build alliances across regions to develop a network of organizations and agencies that can take action to create a more equitable outdoor recreation system.
- 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.

#### For Government

- 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.
- Don't pit small communities against one another when distributing federal or state resources. Develop funding mechanisms that support regional collaboration.
- Foster collaboration between public health systems and local governments involved in recreation and tourism planning, focusing on strengthening health outcomes.
- Invest in regional collaborations that involve multiple local organizations or agencies, such as chambers of commerce or tourism boards.

#### For Philanthropy

- 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.
- 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.
- Make sure regional convenings and collaborations include groups grounded in local communities.
- 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.
- Avoid competition among smaller rural communities by assessing needs and activating assets at a regional scale. Incentivize collaboration through funding opportunities.
- 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.



## 5 PRINCIPLES TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND ECONOMIC OUTCOMES FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES AND NATIVE NATIONS

### For Rural Practitioners

- Partner with other advocates or organizations in a region to identify regional assets, challenges, and working solutions.
- Create a bigger voice by speaking as a region when advocating at the state and federal level on outdoor recreation issues and resources.
- Work with regional organizations to help them understand the significance of local history and other community assets.
- 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).
- 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.







## 5 PRINCIPLES TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND ECONOMIC OUTCOMES FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES AND NATIVE NATIONS

### 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.

## 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 PRINCIPLES TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND ECONOMIC OUTCOMES FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES AND NATIVE NATIONS

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### PRINCIPLE 5: Design for equitable access to and participation in outdoor recreation activities.

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. 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, and provide opportunities for young people to stay in their communities and thrive.

## 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>                     |

# Community Strategies Group



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.

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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,  
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