

MOVE FORWARD TOGETHER VERMONT

Vision and Priority Actions (Draft)

July 2024

OVERVIEW

Hundreds of people in Vermont engaged in surveys and focus groups through the Move Forward Together Vermont planning process in late 2023 and early 2024 to help staff from the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation (FPR) and the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative (VOREC) identify a vision and priority actions for outdoor recreation in Vermont over the next five years. Members of the VOREC Steering Committee and the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) Technical Advisory Committee refined the goals and reviewed and prioritized the actions. The document below describes the vision of fostering healthy and vibrant communities through outdoor recreation in more detail, explains the principles which will be used to guide our work together, and outlines the themes, common objectives, and priority actions we will work on together over the next five years.

VISION

Foster Healthy and Vibrant Communities through Outdoor Recreation

In Vermont, healthy and vibrant communities are full of connections that reflect a sense of place and strengthen individual and systemic wellness. They support and are supported by Vermont's healthy physical environment -- from clean air and water, to flourishing habitat for plants and animals and functional ecosystem cycles. Healthy and vibrant communities also support human connection and thriving economies with spaces for gathering, movement, business, and creating memorable experiences.

Outdoor recreation is a critical tool for fostering healthy and vibrant communities in Vermont. Outdoor recreation spaces, whether parks, trails, or water access, physically connect people to their environment and to each other. Recreating outdoors promotes both mental and physical health, creates human connections, and supports identity development. Outdoor economies encourage and enhance participation in outdoor recreation and outdoor experiences, engage people in developing new skills, provide equipment and resources to have safe experiences, and create workforce opportunities.

By focusing on outdoor recreation as an avenue for fostering healthy and vibrant communities over the next five years we will support partnerships, projects, and programs at the local, regional and statewide scale that protect Vermont's healthy, functioning environment, establish and maintain high-quality and inviting outdoor recreation spaces, and cultivate communities that are diverse in the people they engage and the opportunities they support. Our work will be grounded first in our communities and will be informed by best practices, planning and guidance developed at regional, statewide, and national levels.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Who we are

The outdoor recreation economy is a web of connected parts, all of which rely on each other to be successful. To use outdoor recreation to foster healthy and vibrant communities, the outdoor recreation community in Vermont needs to strategically direct funding, resources, and energy into strengthening connections that already exist and creating new connections where they are needed. Connections must be made between the entities working in the outdoor recreation economy including municipal, state, and federal government staff and programs, outdoor businesses, educational institutions, and outdoor recreation non-profits. Critically, these connections must always include participants in outdoor recreation, including those who live in or visit communities in Vermont. When “we” is used in this document, it is intended to encompass all these stakeholders and anyone else who shares the goal of fostering healthy and vibrant communities through outdoor recreation.

What community means

Geography contributes to how we define communities in Vermont, but communities are not limited to town lines. The Move Forward Together Vermont process highlighted that people in Vermont can drive an average of about 30 minutes and still consider themselves within “their community.” Furthermore, communities are not defined by population size and are the social foundation of both the least populated and most urban parts of Vermont. Communities also form through shared values, experiences, and identities. For our work, an inclusive definition of community will allow us to truly foster vibrancy in all of Vermont’s many forms of community.

How we work

Equally important to what we will do is how we will work together to produce high quality outcomes. The following principles are ways we will approach our work together over the next five years.

- **Collaboration**
 - Strong partnerships require us to listen and learn from each other as well as to be thoughtful in our planning. Outdoor recreation projects involve many stakeholders and are most successful when informed by diverse perspectives.
- **Inclusion**
 - Through our work together, we will create spaces and places for all people in the outdoors, no matter their background or ability. Collectively, we can advance our goals much farther than we can separately.
- **Data-driven**
 - We will collect and assess information related to each of our priorities as we advance them. This will allow us to be flexible and adapt to the changing needs of our communities.

COMMON OBJECTIVES

We have an opportunity over the next five years to make significant progress to address systemic barriers and challenges that prevent us from building diversity, equity and inclusion in outdoor recreation and allow us to adapt to a changing climate. These objectives are elevated to highlight their importance across all the core themes and priorities we will work on together over the next five years. The common objectives we will take action towards are:

Equity

Historic and modern practices within the outdoor community have created barriers that prevent BIPOC, LGBTQ+ people, people with low income, people with disabilities, people in large bodies and people who speak languages other than English, among others, from accessing and enjoying Vermont's outdoors. Our objective is to collectively expand opportunities and reduce barriers so that all people feel welcome in Vermont's outdoors. As we move forward with our work, we will regularly assess our actions to ensure that they advance outdoor equity and are grounded in listening to people and groups who have been and continue to be marginalized.

Climate Resilience

Vermont's climate is changing. We are facing more large-scale and extreme rain events, shorter winter seasons, more rain in winter, and more variable weather patterns leading to drought, floods, and expanding invasive pests and plants. These changes impact all aspects of outdoor recreation, from individual health and security to community infrastructure to outdoor business. Our objective is to collectively strengthen the sustainability, flexibility, and resilience of our communities so that we can weather the impacts of climate change. Throughout the next five years, we will regularly evaluate our actions to ensure they build resilience and adjust them as we and others hone best practices for infrastructure and community building.

PRIORITY ACTIONS

Priority actions will direct our work together for the next five years. For organizational purposes, we have split these priority actions into "Themes" which represent the foundation of our work – Stewardship, Wellness and Economic Development. Despite the categorization, we recognize that all the themes and priority actions are interrelated and applicable to everyone who works in outdoor recreation, whether they are an outdoor business, conservation organization, outdoor recreation planner, provider, or other outdoor recreation stakeholder.

Stewardship

Vermont's landscape, from mountains, forests, to streams and lakes, fundamentally shapes our communities, parks, water access, and trails. Investing in our existing recreational infrastructure and open spaces as well as the organizations tasked with stewarding them is critical as we face a changing climate and more people seeking the outdoors. Using these priorities, we will ensure that we protect the health of our environment and cultivate and preserve high quality outdoor recreation experiences.

- Invest in stewarding and upgrading existing recreational infrastructure to better accommodate modern use and impacts from climate change.
- Strengthen guidance and education about climate resilient strategies that help communities interact with their rivers and water bodies with particular focus on public access, conservation, and healthy ecosystems.
- Cultivate and promote a stewardship ethic among Vermonters and visitors that promotes respectful behavior, shared use, and service to land and community.
- Identify and support regional outdoor recreation planning and partnership to build capacity, promote high-quality planning, and strengthen partnerships between existing regional organizations and organizations, groups, and businesses working at the local level.
- Create and promote a suite of technical assistance resources that will increase the skills and expertise of non-profits, municipalities and businesses who conserve and manage recreation and open spaces, recreation infrastructure and recreation-related programming.
- Reinforce and sustain public recreation on private lands through policy improvement, education, and support for private landowners.

Wellness

Individual wellness is a cornerstone of the health and vibrancy of our communities. Many Vermonters, including young people and seniors, face mental and physical health challenges that can be improved through recreating outdoors. Using these priorities, we will create and steward places and connections that welcome all people and allow them to heal, learn, grow, and live their lives fully.


- Create and enhance in-community outdoor recreation opportunities that directly connect to where people live, learn, and work.
- Develop recreational infrastructure and conserve open spaces that strategically fill gaps in experiences and distribution across the state, identified by public outreach, assessment, and planning.
- Create safe, welcoming, and environmentally sustainable entry spaces into the outdoors by improving signage, parking, mapping, bathroom facilities, and accessibility at trailheads, parks, and water access areas.
- Centralize, improve, and make more accessible informational resources about outdoor recreation opportunities and events.
- Support programs that reduce the costs of outdoor recreation including gear libraries, no- or low-cost recreation programming and rentals, and accessible transportation.
- Strengthen connections between outdoor recreation providers, public health providers, educational programs, senior centers, and local community resources that cater to health and wellness.
- Strengthen community awareness about improved health and wellness outcomes through outdoor recreation.

Economic development

Economic activity connects outdoor recreation resources, participation in the outdoors, and the businesses and organizations that strengthen our communities. To capture and sustain the benefits of outdoor recreation we need to clearly communicate its positive economic impact and create opportunities for entrepreneurship, learning, and innovation. Using these priorities, we will support communities to be proactive in using outdoor recreation to create a sustainable, vibrant, future.

- Develop information and resources that can be used to demonstrate the ways in which outdoor recreation resources and vibrant local economies are connected.
- Strengthen the capacity of municipalities to engage in the outdoor recreation economy including recreation management, community planning for local and regional development, and local business support.
- Strengthen workforce opportunities in Vermont's outdoor sector by supporting partnerships and programs that define clear career pathways and support a highly skilled workforce.
- Foster resilience and flexibility in outdoor recreation communities, organizations, and businesses to withstand both major weather events and a variable climate by investing in planning, knowledge sharing, education opportunities and/or expanding programming.
- Invest in organizations and businesses led by and serving non-white Vermonters, LGBTQ+, Veterans, Seniors, Vermonters who are low-income, and Vermonters with adaptive needs to strengthen outdoor recreation opportunities and participation.
- Support innovation in Vermont's outdoor sector by supporting entrepreneurship and new small businesses, providing resources to businesses exploring new climate-friendly technologies, and businesses seeking year-round employment solutions.

FOSTER HEALTHY AND VIBRANT COMMUNITIES THROUGH OUTDOOR RECREATION

OPPORTUNITY	Support partnerships, projects, and programs at the local, regional and statewide scale that protect Vermont’s healthy, functioning environment, establish and maintain high-quality and inviting outdoor recreation spaces, and cultivate communities that are diverse in the people they engage and the opportunities they support.	
GUIDING PRINCIPLES		
COMMON OBJECTIVES	<p style="text-align: center;">EQUITY</p> <p><i>We will collectively expand opportunities and reduce barriers so that all people feel welcome in Vermont’s outdoors.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">CLIMATE RESILIENCE</p> <p><i>We will collectively strengthen the sustainability, flexibility, and resilience of our communities so that we can weather the impacts of climate change.</i></p>

THEMES	<p style="text-align: center;">STEWARDSHIP</p> <p>PROTECT • MAINTAIN • CONSERVE</p> <p><i>We will ensure that we protect the health of our environment and cultivate and preserve high quality outdoor recreation experiences.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">WELLNESS</p> <p>LEARN • CREATE • CONNECT</p> <p><i>We will create and steward places and connections that welcome all people and allow them to heal, learn, grow, and live their lives fully.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT</p> <p>CULTIVATE • INVEST • BUILD</p> <p><i>We will support communities to be proactive in using outdoor recreation to create a sustainable, vibrant future.</i></p>
FIVE YEAR PRIORITY ACTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in stewarding and upgrading existing recreational infrastructure. Strengthen guidance and education about climate resilient strategies that help communities interact with their rivers and water bodies. Cultivate and promote a stewardship ethic among Vermonters and visitors. Identify and support regional outdoor recreation planning and partnership. Create and promote a suite of technical assistance resources that will increase the skills and expertise of non-profits, municipalities and businesses. Reinforce and sustain public recreation on private lands. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create and enhance in-community outdoor recreation opportunities that directly connect to where people live, learn, and work. Develop recreational infrastructure and conserve open spaces that strategically fill gaps in experiences and distribution across the state. Create safe, welcoming, and environmentally sustainable entry spaces into the outdoors. Centralize, improve, and make more accessible informational resources about outdoor recreation opportunities and events. Support programs that reduce the costs of outdoor recreation. Strengthen connections between outdoor recreation providers, public health providers, educational programs, senior centers, and local community resources that cater to health and wellness. Strengthen community awareness about improved health and wellness outcomes through outdoor recreation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop information and resources that can be used to demonstrate the ways in which outdoor recreation resources and vibrant local economies are connected. Strengthen the capacity of municipalities to engage in the outdoor recreation economy. Strengthen workforce opportunities in Vermont’s outdoor sector. Foster resilience and flexibility in outdoor recreation communities, organizations, and businesses to withstand both major weather events and a variable climate. Invest in organizations and businesses led by and serving non-white Vermonters, LGBTQ+, Veterans, Seniors, Vermonters who are low-income, and Vermonters with adaptive needs. Support innovation in Vermont’s outdoor sector by supporting entrepreneurship, providing resources to businesses, and seeking solutions to challenges.