

Connecticut's 2024 – 2029 Outdoor Recreation Goals:

Goal 1: Provide equitable and sustainable access to outdoor recreation in Connecticut.

Goal 2: Enhance visitor experience and tourism by providing welcoming, safe, and well-maintained outdoor recreation areas and recreation amenities.

Goal 3: Address the threats of climate change on outdoor recreation and the conservation of natural, historic, and cultural resources by working together with outdoor recreation participants to implement strategies for habitat preservation, conservation, and decarbonization and climate change mitigation, adaptation resilience and education.

Goal 1: Provide equitable and sustainable access to outdoor recreation in Connecticut.

Strategies:

- A. Develop diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives for existing open spaces and outdoor recreation areas through collaboration with diverse stakeholders.
- B. Increase awareness of and accessibility to outdoor recreational opportunities by implementing public outreach campaigns geared toward traditionally underserved populations.
- C. Increase accessibility by reducing real and perceived barriers to visiting outdoor recreation facilities.
- D. Assess the distribution of open spaces throughout the state and increase land protection efforts in areas lacking existing opportunities.
- E. Identify, increase, and promote the availability of public transportation serving outdoor recreation areas and facilities.
- F. Develop policies and guidelines for facilities, parks, and natural areas that include measures to foster an inclusive and welcoming environment while protecting and conserving natural, cultural, and historical resources.
- G. Collect and analyze user demographic data to improve recreational resource allocation and better serve user groups.
- H. Assess and address historical bias in program development, site names and outreach methods.
- I. Increase educational programming that highlights environmental and recreational contributions from historically underrepresented groups.

J. Increase adapted outdoor recreation pursuits for people with disabilities.

Strategy 1A: Develop diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (DEI) for existing open spaces and outdoor recreation areas through collaboration with diverse stakeholders.

Supportive data:

Based on the data developed in the 2023 Statewide Outdoor Recreation Survey (SORS), Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) performance in this area is acceptable with some additional effort required to address the needs of individuals with disabilities. New initiatives should be considered and developed to further this strategy.

Question 11 of the SORS included 21 categories of constraints to participation: *If there are reasons preventing you or members of your household from using OUTDOOR recreation facilities in Connecticut, please indicate them by selecting all that apply from the list below.*

Forty-three percent of the respondents to the SORS indicated that they were fully able to access outdoor recreation facilities and activities (#1 ranked response). Five percent cited a lack of accessibility for people with disabilities (#15 ranked response), while 3% cited language barriers, 3% cited a lack of visitor diversity (#20 ranked response), and 2% mentioned a lack of staff diversity (#21 ranked response).

DEEP divisions plan collectively to expand upon their efforts at outreach to underserved communities. (See Appendix A: Division Action Plans).

Municipalities play an important role in DEI initiatives. The 2023 Municipal Survey results indicate a mixed assessment of efforts to address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Municipal Survey Question 9: *Now, thinking about the various age groups or clusters of people you serve, please indicate whether or not you are currently able to adequately meet their needs. Following this question, you will have an opportunity to indicate the problems you face in serving each group.*

Fifty-six percent of responding municipalities (31 of 55) reported that they are able to address the needs of people with disabilities while 44% (24 of 55) stated they were unable to do so. The need for more areas to accommodate these individuals was ranked 5th in specifying the constraints to meeting the needs of this population. “*Insufficient resources*” was the top ranked cause. This perspective is further reinforced by responses to Question 22, with both general and playground-specific resources being reported as inadequate for persons with disabilities.

Question 16 of the Municipal Survey identified the most popular resources currently available to individuals with disabilities.

Table 6. Popular Resources for Individuals with Disabilities

| Combined Resource Categories | Percentage of Municipalities |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Parks/playgrounds/gardens/picnic areas | 60% |
| Trails/paths | 31% |
| Pools/aquatics/fishing | 23% |
| Trips/programs/special events (road races, concerts) | 15% |
| Beaches | 15% |
| Outdoor recreation (facilities, leagues, fields, courts, parks, courses) | 10% |
| Indoor facilities (senior center, recreation centers, bowling) | 6% |

Municipal Survey Question 26 specifically addresses efforts by municipalities regarding any action to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion for their residents: *In your town, are you aware of any action being taken in the sphere of outdoor recreation to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion among the people you serve?*

Given that 18% said “no” and 33% were “not sure” suggests that additional awareness training may be warranted, potentially led by DEEP initiatives.

Table 7. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Awareness

| Response | Number of Municipalities | Percentage |
|----------|--------------------------|------------|
| Yes | 27 | 49% |
| No | 10 | 18% |
| Not Sure | 18 | 33% |

Question 26A of the Municipal Survey: *Please elaborate on any action or inaction in your town regarding the promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion among the people you serve.*

Table 8. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Actions by 19 of 55 Reporting Municipalities

| Response Category (5 most common coded responses) | Rank |
|-------------------------------------------------------|------|
| Open bi-lingual facilities | 1 |
| Grants and funding for facility upgrades and projects | 2 |
| Town programs/policies | 3 |

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|---|
| Inclusive/Equity/Diversity programs active or in development | 4 |
| Staff training and accommodations | 5 |

Strategy 1B: Increase awareness of, and accessibility to, outdoor recreational opportunities by implementing public outreach campaigns geared toward traditionally underserved populations.

Supportive data:

Communication and outreach are critical elements to the current and future relevance and success of the DEEP mission. It has become increasingly clear that a multimedia approach to communication best serves this goal. The Covid pandemic amplified the importance of web-based communication in order to inform residents of opportunities and restrictions regarding facility availability. Continued refinement of the use of social media, including messaging in languages other than English, will enhance this approach.

The following data from the Statewide Outdoor Recreation Survey (SORS) may guide future efforts in improving communication and outreach. Question 11: *If there are reasons preventing you or members of your household from using OUTDOOR recreation facilities in Connecticut, please indicate them by selecting all that apply from the list below.*

Table 9. Means of Information Access (Number of Responses From 1,010 Total Respondents)

| Means of Information Access | Number of Respondents |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Websites/internet | 631 |
| Word of mouth | 515 |
| Social media | 404 |
| Newspaper | 309 |
| Maps and road signs | 277 |
| Television | 254 |
| Tourist information center | 190 |
| Program fliers | 168 |
| Town mailings | 168 |
| Visited/Called Parks & Rec Office | 161 |
| Radio | 143 |

| | |
|-----------------------------|-----|
| Magazines | 108 |
| Club membership newsletters | 86 |
| Other | 14 |

Thirteen percent of respondents to the SORS (the 4th ranked choice of 21 options) indicated that “Do not know what is being offered” prevented them from using outdoor recreation facilities. Additionally, responses to SORS Question 11B indicated that a lack of maps or unclear maps were also impediments to resource usage. To increase the effectiveness of communication, it is critical to identify the methods of information access used by the residents. Question 12 of the SORS identified the means by which residents accessed information about recreational facilities and activities in the local communities.

These results mark a change from the previous Statewide Survey (2017) data in that web-based information sources now outrank word of mouth, an increase from 58% in 2017 to 63% in 2023, as the most common means of learning about outdoor recreation facilities. Social media was identified in 2017 as one of the primary modes of communication, a factor that has increased to 40% in the most recent survey. Word of mouth, ranked second, dropped in significance from 59% in 2017 to 51% in 2023.

Strategy 1C: Increase accessibility by reducing real and perceived barriers to visiting outdoor recreation facilities.

Supportive data:

The 2023 CCSR survey of 55 municipalities in the state (out of 169 total) revealed that municipal officials report accessibility issues and inadequacies exist at 17% of their outdoor facilities. An additional 13% of municipalities reported the need to improve public transportation to their facilities, while 10% cited the need for directional and interpretive signage. Forty-four percent of respondents indicated that they are not currently able to meet the needs of people with disabilities relative to their access to outdoor recreation facilities. The top ranked reason for this shortfall was attributed to insufficient resources, including funding and space.

The DEEP Passport to Parks Program, implemented in 2018, is supported through a \$10 biannual fee applied through the Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles to non-commercial vehicles that have new registrations, renewals, and plate transfers. A state of Connecticut license plate on a car allows residents free access to state parks, thereby reducing or eliminating barriers to resident visitors.

Strategy 1D: Assess the distribution of open spaces throughout the state and increase land protection efforts in areas lacking existing opportunities.

Supportive data:

The Land Acquisition and Management staff will be completing a comprehensive assessment of the open space land across the state to understand what percentage of the state’s land is already used for that purpose. Once that data collection effort is complete, DEEP will use those numbers to set new targets and goals for land conservation efforts across Connecticut. The updated Green Plan will highlight five main program areas including:

- Land and Water Conservation Fund
- Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program
- The Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program
- Urban Green and Community Garden Grant Program
- Property Management

Strategy 1E: Identify, increase, and promote the availability of public transportation serving outdoor recreation areas and facilities.

Supportive data:

The Park Connect Program <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/State-Parks/Park-Connect> marks the collaboration between the DEEP and the Connecticut Department of Transportation to provide safe and reliable transportation within ten minutes to six state parks and beaches. The service was provided in 2023 from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Current access is reported to be:

Table 10. How Visitors Travel to Outdoor Recreation Areas

| Mode of Transportation | Percentage of Respondents |
|------------------------|---------------------------|
| Automobile | 86% |
| Bicycle | 28% |
| Boat | 8% |
| Bus or train | 14% |
| Walk | 52% |
| Other | 2% |

Strategy 1F: Develop policies and guidelines for facilities, parks, and natural areas that include measures to foster an inclusive and welcoming environment while protecting and conserving natural, cultural, and historical resources.

Supportive data:

The Recreational Trails and Greenways Grant Program at DEEP supports projects that include outreach and education programs that address the DEEP's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Objectives including the CT Trail Finder website: <https://www.cttrailfinder.com/>

In Question 26 of the Municipal Survey, 49% of respondents (27 of 55 municipalities) were aware of actions being taken in the sphere of outdoor recreation to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion among people served. Similarly, in Question 25 of the Municipal Survey, 47% (26 of 55 municipalities) noted they were aware of any action being taken regarding the protection of municipal open space from environmental degradation or overuse.

Strategy 1G: Collect and analyze user demographic data to improve recreation resource allocation and better serve user groups.

Supportive data:

Data provided by CCESR identify respondents to the Avid Outdoor Enthusiast survey to be from all eight counties in Connecticut and comprised of 68.2% males, 30.7% females, 0.8% non-binary and 0.3% other. Individuals reporting their age as 55+ made up 47% of those responding to this survey, with 93.5% reporting to be other than Hispanic, Latino or Spanish ancestry, with 92% being Caucasian and 99% listing English as the primary household language. Eighty-nine percent of respondents reported an annual household income over \$50,000 with a full 31% identifying their household income in excess of \$150,000. Almost 100% reported at least a high school diploma with 66% reporting a college degree or post graduate degree. Twelve percent reported that a household member had a medical condition related to physical and or mobility limitations. The Avid Outdoor Enthusiast responses are not representative of the general population in Connecticut regarding demographics or activity choices.

The demographic data from the Statewide Outdoor Recreation Survey indicate noticeable differences with the Avid Outdoor Enthusiast Survey. All eight counties were represented with 50% of respondents residing in Hartford and New Haven counties. Nearly 49% of respondents were male with 51% identifying as female. Alternatives such as binary gender identification were not present in the survey. The majority of respondents, 56%, reported their age to be between 25 – 54 years old. Twenty-seven percent reported their ancestry to be Hispanic, Latino or Spanish. Additionally, 65% reported Caucasian ethnicity with 18% Hispanic/Latino, and 13% African American. Ninety-one percent identified English as the primary household language

with 7% speaking Spanish at home. Furthermore, 53% reported a household income over \$50,000, with only 20% reporting income over \$150,000. Finally, 97% reported at least a high school degree, with 49% having undergraduate or graduate degrees.

It is evident from the two surveys distributed to Connecticut residents that there is a significant difference between the two groups regarding their demographic make-up. According to the US Census Bureau (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/CT/PST045222>) the general population of Connecticut (n=3,617,176) is 64% white non-Hispanic or Latino, 18% is Hispanic/Latino, and 13% is African American.

Similar data was gathered in the Statewide Outdoor Recreation Survey (n=1,010) providing detailed demographic information and a five-tiered inquiry regarding outdoor land-based and water-based activities preferences and frequency of use.

Respondents identified their *top five land-based activities* to be walking/hiking 69%, visiting historic sites 35%, running 30%, road/neighborhood biking 25%, and biking in parks 23%. Frequency responses indicate “a few times a month” as the median level of participation in these five activities.

The *top five water-based activities* are activities at the beach 59%, swimming in fresh/salt water 46%, swimming in outdoor pools 38%, canoeing/kayaking/paddleboarding 18%, and motor boating/jet skiing 18%.

Frequency indicators suggest “less than once a month” as the median level of activity for seasonal activities. Eighty-two percent of the respondents who visited a state-owned property reported visiting between 1 and 10 times annually, with 92% rating the condition of the properties as excellent or good. Less than 1% rated them as poor.

The response for municipal facilities indicates that these facilities were visited 1 to 10 times annually by 71% of the respondents who reported visiting municipal areas. Eighty-eight percent rated the condition of the facilities to be excellent or good.

The perceived need for additional access or improvements to the facilities did not indicate a majority response for any of the 36 recreational areas identified in Question 7A of the SORS. The majority of respondents for the same 36 facilities stated that the present conditions somewhat or mostly met the needs of each household.

For Question 13 of the SORS, “Please indicate if you feel that “the state of Connecticut and your local community should increase funding, maintain the same funding, decrease funding, or you are not sure for each action,” respondents offered these opinions on funding:

Table 11. Attitudes Towards Funding Priorities for Outdoor Recreation

| Category | Increase Funding | Maintain Funding | Decrease Funding | Not Sure |
|----------|------------------|------------------|------------------|----------|
|----------|------------------|------------------|------------------|----------|

| | | | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----|----|-----|
| Maintain and improve existing outdoor facilities | 43% | 42% | 4% | 11% |
| Develop new outdoor recreation activities | 43% | 38% | 7% | 13% |
| Provide additional recreation programs and activities | 39% | 42% | 6% | 13% |
| Improve advertising and information regarding existing outdoor facilities and programs | 28% | 49% | 9% | 14% |
| Acquire open space | 34% | 41% | 9% | 16% |
| Sustain and enhance natural habitats that support hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, birding, and hiking | 40% | 41% | 7% | 12% |
| Other | 12% | 22% | 5% | 61% |

Question 14 of the SORS asked: *Please indicate which THREE of the actions listed below you would most support increasing funding for by dragging the items from the column on the left into the box on the right.*

A further analysis suggests that “*maintaining existing outdoor facilities*” and “*sustain and enhance natural habitats that support activities such as hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, birding, and hiking*” were seen as the most important areas for increased funding.

Strategy 1H: Assess and address historical bias in program development, site names, and outreach methods.

Supportive data:

This strategy will be implemented and tracked during the 2024-2029 plan period.

Strategy 1I: Increase educational programming that highlights environmental and recreational contributions from historically underrepresented groups.

Supportive data:

While some efforts to accomplish this are presently evident in the Outreach efforts, DEEP divisions will develop tactics to meet this strategy in subsequent years through their division action plans.

Strategy 1J: Increase adapted outdoor recreation pursuits for people with disabilities.

Supportive data:

DEEP is currently in the process of purchasing 10 all-terrain wheelchairs for park use.

Goal 2: Enhance visitor experience and tourism by providing welcoming, safe, and well-maintained outdoor recreation areas and recreation amenities.

Strategies:

- A. Improve outdoor recreation infrastructure to increase access and add amenities that serve diverse populations.
- B. Prioritize sustainable practices to improve the cleanliness of facilities and outdoor areas.
- C. Ensure visitor safety and protect facilities and resources through monitoring of unlawful or unpermitted activity and ensure appropriate methods of enforcement and compliance.
- D. Increase technologically innovative interfaces to enhance customer service and visitor expectations.
- E. Increase resources to repair, improve, and replace infrastructure and recreational amenities that support the public's use of facilities.
- F. Create and implement volunteer programs to help supplement staffing and increase engagement with visitors and volunteer organizations.
- G. Assess where there are gaps in recreational access; and acquire land to ensure that amenities are available to all while exploring collaboration with outdoor recreation organizations (businesses and nonprofits) to offer additional tourism and outdoor recreation services in State Parks.

Strategy 2A: Improve outdoor recreation infrastructure to increase access and add amenities that serve diverse populations.

Supportive data:

Question 7 of the Statewide Outdoor Recreation Survey (SORS) asked: *Please indicate whether you or any member of your household have a need or desire for additional access to each of the outdoor recreation facilities listed below.* Fifty percent or more of respondents were completely satisfied with the activities listed below.

Table 12. Facility Access Level of Satisfaction

| Activity | Completely Satisfied | Need or Desire for Improvement |
|---------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Paved multi-use trails | 57% | 27% |
| Unpaved multi-use trails | 57% | 24% |
| Unpaved single use trails | 57% | 20% |
| ADA accessible trails | 50% | 15% |
| Picnic areas/shelters | 51% | 31% |
| Historic sites and areas | 52% | 27% |

However, there is still room for improvement with outdoor amenities and facilities in Connecticut. Respondents noted a higher need or desire for improvement in the following activities:

Table 13. Improvement Assessment by Participants

| Activity | Need or Desire for Improvement |
|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Nature preserves and bird watching areas | 26% |
| Freshwater and saltwater swimming areas | 26% |
| Outdoor public pools, water parks, and splash pads | 27% |

In addition, the following activities were rated as either *needs somewhat met* or *needs not met at all* ratings. This suggests that approximately 60-80% of respondents do not perceive that their needs are being adequately satisfied at the present time.

Question 7A of the SORS asked: *For each OUTDOOR recreational facility, please rate how well the needs of your household are being met in terms of access or desire for improvement.*

Table 14. Needs Assessment for Facilities

| Facility Type | Number of Responses | Needs Not Met at All | Needs Somewhat Met | Needs Mostly Met |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| ADA accessible trails | 149 | 24% | 56% | 20% |
| Cross-country skiing or snowshoeing trails | 136 | 25% | 48% | 27% |
| ATV areas | 159 | 29% | 42% | 29% |
| Dirt Biking/Motorcycling areas | 154 | 29% | 40% | 31% |
| Snowmobiling areas | 127 | 28% | 45% | 27% |
| Sledding areas | 230 | 26% | 47% | 27% |
| Ice skating or hockey areas | 176 | 24% | 50% | 26% |
| Bicycle playgrounds | 225 | 27% | 44% | 29% |
| Biking pump tracks | 155 | 30% | 45% | 25% |
| Pickleball courts | 123 | 28% | 44% | 29% |

| | | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Volleyball courts | 158 | 29% | 45% | 26% |
| Disc golf courses | 107 | 23% | 49% | 28% |
| Boating access for motor boating, jet skiing, sailing, or paddle sports | 144 | 23% | 51% | 26% |
| Snorkeling and scuba diving areas | 140 | 34% | 38% | 28% |
| RV or tent sites | 201 | 24% | 48% | 27% |
| Cabin, Yurt, or 'Glamping' sites | 191 | 28% | 44% | 28% |
| Archery or shooting sport areas | 147 | 32% | 45% | 23% |

The results provide guidance for outdoor recreation providers to grow and develop new amenities that could attract new visitors/participants to our state's parks and natural areas.

Additionally, participants in the Avid Outdoor Enthusiast Survey reported improved access/options, limited places to ride (ATV/Dirt Bikes), lack of facility/area/trail upkeep or maintenance, and parking were some of the reasons participants gave that could help increase their access or enjoyment of activities.

Strategy 2B: Prioritize sustainable practices to improve the cleanliness of facilities and outdoor areas.

Supportive data:

Aesthetics could be a motivating factor for users engaging in physical activity. Additionally, "park users are more likely to visit a park where the features are maintained on a regular basis and shun those places containing elements that are in disrepair... Parks that are not maintained... could contribute to people's perceptions of safety within the park, which likely impacts their use" (Bedino-Rung, Mowen, & Cohen, 2016).

Question 5D of the Avid Outdoor Enthusiast Survey asked: *In your opinion, what are the most pressing needs of the outdoor recreation areas that you visit?* Survey respondents ranked Litter/Maintenance in outdoor recreation areas as the most pressing need to be addressed.

Question 4 of the Avid Outdoor Enthusiast Survey asked: *What is the most significant issue that you encounter when engaging in any of the activities you listed?* Survey respondents identified litter as the most significant issue they encounter while engaging in outdoor recreation, accounting for 17% of responses.

Question 7 of the Municipal Officials Survey asked: *In the following table, please indicate the overall condition of each type of recreational facility that your community offers. Percentages were displayed when 40% or more of respondents' ratings were Needs Improvement or Poor.*

Table 15. Municipal Recreational Facility Types Identified as Needing Improvement

| Facility Type | Number of Responses | Condition (Needs Improvement or Poor) |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Camping | 15 | 60% |
| Fields – Lacrosse | 34 | 44% |
| Courts – Volleyball | 31 | 46% |
| Swimming, Beaches, or Outdoor Pools | 47 | 40% |
| Winter Sports | 39 | 49% |

As identified in a review of Connecticut Recreation Trails Programs Grant funding allocation, Construction awards (\$9,833,475 or 45%) and Design awards (\$5,200,583 or 24%) dominate funding allocation. Construction and maintenance combined account for 54% of CT RTP funding (\$11,850,057). Planning and design account for 34% (\$7,454,131). These last two main project categories cover 88% of awards. Trail amenity and facility awards funded \$283,047 in projects including trail amenities/facilities, parking lots, toilet buildings, signs, and benches.

Strategy 2C: Ensure visitor safety and protect facilities and resources through monitoring of unlawful or unpermitted activity and ensure appropriate methods of enforcement and compliance.

Supportive data:

With very few large land holdings in the state and with greater than 80% of land held privately, Connecticut’s recreational areas tend to be small in scale and scattered across the landscape in abundance. This presents challenges to activities dependent on large tracts of land, for accommodating multiple user groups, and monitoring of unlawful or unpermitted activities.

During the period January 1, 2017, through December 31, 2022, EnCon Police logged a total of 159,644 calls for service. In this period, officers issued 6,358 citations and 3,650 warnings, investigated 202 accidents, and made 638 arrests. The staffing levels throughout the 5-year period ranged from as low as 44 officers to 50 officers due to the retirement of several experienced officers and the hiring of new officers during this time.

Of the activities reported by participants in the Avid Outdoor Enthusiast Survey, the *behavior of other visitors: littering, vandalism, unleashed dogs* (Activity 1, Q3A) and *maintenance issues: vandalism, poor upkeep, dirty facilities...* (Activity 2, Q3A) were identified as most impactful on their recreation experience.

Strategy 2D: Increase technologically innovative interfaces to enhance customer service and visitor expectations.

Supportive data:

“Agencies use customer engagement tools that collect insights shared by their customers and tap market research data resources to better understand the demographic trends of their populace” (National Recreation & Parks Association, 2016). “By merging data and technology, agencies are better able to improve the customer experience and feedback, as well as improve engagement among community members who might otherwise not be heard.” (Bhatt, 2017).

As mentioned in the opening section of this report, a new state park website, CTparks.com, was made available in September of 2023 that includes:

- A user-friendly ParkFinder Tool that helps users identify nearby State Parks based on their current location
- An event management system that highlights activities happening in and around the State Parks
- A user-generated content feature that captures social media content shared by actual visitors to the State Parks
- A “While You’re Here” function that highlights nearby restaurants, shops, hotels, and attractions
- ADA and multi-language support
- Existing links from the State Parks pages on the portal.ct.gov/DEEP website will redirect to the new website

Additional technological innovations include the CT Park Finder, CT Trail Finder, and the Connecticut Coastal Access Guide.

Strategy 2E: Increase resources to repair, improve, and replace infrastructure and recreational amenities that support the public's use of facilities.

Supportive data:

Connecticut Recreational Trails Grant Program funding opportunities help cover costs of repair, maintenance, and improvements to trail systems in Connecticut. (Refer to Strategy 2B.)

With the implementation of the Passport to the Parks program, funded by a dedicated \$10 biannual fee on all Connecticut passenger vehicle registrations in lieu of traditional parking fees⁴, several discontinued or curtailed services were restored, including:

Hours of operation at DEEP’s museums and nature centers will be restored from Memorial Day to Labor Day, including those at Dinosaur State Park and Arboretum, Gillette Castle State Park, Meigs Point Nature Center at Hammonasset Beach State Park, and Fort Trumbull State Park.

Several state park and forest campgrounds will reopen or restore seasonal operations:

- Devil’s Hopyard (East Haddam) – Opening day of fishing season through Labor Day
- Green Falls (Voluntown) – Opening day of fishing season through Labor Day
- Macedonia Brook (Kent) – Opening day of fishing season through Labor Day
- Salt Rock (Sprague) – Weekend before Memorial Day through Labor Day Spring camping will be restored at the following locations:
 - American Legion and Peoples State Forests (Barkhamsted) – Opening day of fishing season through Labor Day
 - Mount Misery (Voluntown) – Opening day of fishing season through Labor Day Fall camping will be restored at the following locations:
 - Hammonasset Beach (Madison) – Weekend before Memorial Day through Columbus Day
 - Rocky Neck (East Lyme) – Weekend before Memorial Day through the end of September
 - Housatonic Meadows (Sharon) – Weekend before Memorial Day through Columbus Day
 - Hopeville Pond (Griswold) – Weekend before Memorial Day through the end of September

Strategy 2F: Create and implement volunteer programs to help supplement staffing and increase engagement with visitors and volunteer organizations.

Supportive data:

In addition to municipal efforts to promote Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, DEEP divisions and partnering organizations also will identify inclusive opportunities along with the need to conserve open space resources through proper stewardship. CCESR data highlighted that trail building/maintenance/conservation/volunteering was most popular in Litchfield and Tolland Counties (both with 11% participation), as well as Windham County (10% participation).

Table 16. Volunteer Organizations

| Volunteer Organizations |
|----------------------------------------------|
| Connecticut Forest and Park Association |
| Connecticut Recreation and Parks Association |
| Friends of Connecticut State Parks |
| New England Mountain Bike Association |
| Connecticut Horse Council |
| DEEP Internship Program |

Question 9 of the Avid Outdoor Recreation Enthusiast Survey asked: *Are you a member of a club or organization whose purpose or mission is the enjoyment or support of outdoor recreation in some form?*

Sixty percent of the Avid Outdoor Recreation Enthusiast Survey respondents reported being active members in natural resource conservation clubs for which the top-rated purpose of the organization is the support, preservation, and conservation of land or wildlife.

Table 17. Avid Outdoor Recreation Enthusiast Conservation Club Membership

| Outdoor Club Membership | Top Five Responses |
|-------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Land Trust/Conservation Clubs | 1 |
| Sportsman, Fish & Game, Land & Game Clubs | 2 |
| Audubon/Bird/Ornithology Club | 3 |
| Mountain Bike Clubs | 4 |
| Hiking/Mountain Clubs | 5 |

Strategy 2G: Assess where there are gaps in recreational access and acquire land to ensure that amenities are available to all while exploring collaboration with outdoor recreation organizations (businesses and nonprofits) to offer additional tourism and outdoor recreation services in State Parks.

Supportive data:

DEEP staff is completing a comprehensive, GIS-based assessment of dedicated open space lands across Connecticut to better understand what percentage of the state’s land is already used for that purpose and where the uses are presently concentrated. Once that data collection effort is completed, DEEP will use the information to set new targets for land conservation efforts, especially in presently underserved areas. Responses to the 2023 outdoor recreation surveys could be skewed towards more white and wealthy areas of the state, which may make determining gaps in access a challenge. Major urban centers in the state, including Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, and Stamford, did not respond to the survey which does not aid in identifying gaps in services.

Table 18. Municipal Officials Survey Respondents by County and Municipality (2023)

| County | Municipality |
|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Fairfield | Brookfield, Danbury, Newtown, Norwalk, Ridgefield, Weston |
| Hartford | Avon, Bristol, Burlington, Canton, East Windsor, Glastonbury, Newington, Simsbury, West Hartford, Wethersfield |
| Litchfield | Canaan, Goshen, Litchfield, Morris, Norfolk, Plymouth, Roxbury, Salisbury, Thomaston, Washington, Watertown, Winchester |
| Middlesex | Chester, Cromwell, Deep River, East Hampton, Middletown, Old Saybrook, Westbrook |

| | |
|------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| New Haven | Bethany, Branford, Guilford, North Branford, Wallingford |
| New London | Colchester, East Lyme, Griswold, Groton, Lisbon, Preston |
| Tolland | Ellington, Hebron, Mansfield, Somers, Vernon |
| Windham | Killingly, Plainfield, Putnam, Thompson |

Goal 3: Address the threats of climate change on outdoor recreation and the conservation of natural, historic, and cultural resources by working together with outdoor recreation participants to implement strategies for habitat preservation, conservation, and decarbonization and climate change mitigation, adaptation resilience and education.

Strategies:

- A. Foster community engagement, relevancy and stewardship in outdoor recreation, community science, and conservation efforts.
- B. Plan for and invest in outdoor recreation infrastructure that is resilient to the effects of climate change, such as floods and severe weather.
- C. Reduce operating costs and minimize the carbon footprint of outdoor recreation in Connecticut through sustainable operations.
- D. Connect communities to trails by promoting trail networks that offer effective transportation alternatives and reduce emissions.
- E. Provide Electric Vehicle (EV) chargers at outdoor recreation destinations to ensure accessibility for electric vehicle drivers.
- F. Incorporate climate change information in experiential educational materials provided at outdoor recreation and natural resource destinations (nature centers, museums, etc.).
- G. Increase residents' understanding of both the benefits of outdoor recreational activities and the historical, cultural, and natural resource value of outdoor spaces.
- H. Create healthy, resilient, and connected habitats to protect and enhance nature and the economic, recreational, and physical and mental health benefits it provides.
- I. Assess, monitor, remediate, and reduce the negative impacts of recreational activity on the environment.
- J. Communicate how natural resource management strategies are addressing threats from climate change and can produce more resilient natural spaces and ensure future fish and wildlife-based recreation opportunities.
- K. Connect communities to trails and multiuse paths that offer effective transportation alternatives reducing emissions and natural corridors through the promotion of interconnected greenway systems and trail networks.

Strategy 3A: Foster community engagement, relevancy and stewardship in outdoor recreation, community science, and conservation efforts.

Supportive data:

In 2021, the National Recreation & Parks Association (NRPA) published the *Engaging Diverse Groups in Building Community Resiliency Through Stewardship* guide, which found that “Advocates, stewards and volunteers are key to the success of ecologically balanced park projects and spaces. They provide vital assistance in the advocacy, establishment, maintenance, and educational outreach needed to ensure these spaces are in harmony with nature, well-maintained and a welcoming place for all” (p. 3). The guide noted “according to national research NRPA conducted in 2020, we know that this population generally skews older, whiter, and wealthier than the community as a whole. To ensure the sustainability and success of our natural resource programs and parks, we need to make certain our advocates and stewards reflect the communities these spaces serve”.

Question 9 of the Avid Outdoor Enthusiast Survey asked: *Are you a member of a club or organization whose purpose or mission is the enjoyment or support of outdoor recreation in some form?* Sixty percent of the 4,753 respondents to the question identified being part of a club or organization. Specifically, they said were part of these types or organizations:

Table 19. Avid Outdoor Recreation Enthusiast Conservation Club Memberships

| Outdoor Club Membership | Top Five Responses |
|-------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Land Trust/Conservation Clubs | 1 |
| Sportsman, Fish & Game, Land & Game Clubs | 2 |
| Audubon/Bird/Ornithology Club | 3 |
| Mountain Bike Clubs | 4 |
| Hiking/Mountain Clubs | 5 |

Table 20. Purpose or Mission of the Conservation Club

| Response Category | Top Five Responses |
|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Promote Support, Preservation, and Conservation of Land | 1 |
| Promote Fishing, Hunting, Riding, Shooting, etc. | 2 |
| Promote/Provide Safety | 3 |
| Promote Restoration and Education | 4 |
| Provide Resources, Land, & Opportunities for People | 5 |

This population of dedicated volunteers could be a valuable resource to increase community engagement in outdoor recreation and conservation efforts.

Strategy 3B: Plan for and invest in outdoor recreation infrastructure that is resilient to the effects of climate change, such as floods and severe weather.

Supportive data:

As a coastal state, Connecticut is positioned to be a leader in the adoption of resilient infrastructure. DEEP has implemented numerous initiatives to address climate change. Specific initiatives, legislation, and guidelines can be found in the Appendix.

Strategy 3C: Reduce operating costs and minimize the carbon footprint of outdoor recreation in Connecticut through sustainable operations.

Supportive data:

Moving away from fossil fuels to electric power can help reduce the carbon footprint in parks. Transportation is responsible for approximately 28% of the annual Greenhouse Gas Emissions in the United States (NPS.gov, n.d.). According to Dolesh (2023) in an article in the National Recreation & Parks Association magazine, “Park and recreation agencies have an opportunity now to plan, budget and implement a changeover to electric power that positions them for more cost-efficient operations and a more reliable and resilient future that demonstrates a commitment to sustainability.”

Strategy 3D: Connect communities to trails by promoting trail networks that offer effective transportation alternatives and reduce emissions.

Supportive data:

Connecticut is fortunate to have a wide variety of volunteer organizations that are dedicated to the establishment, promotion, and continued support of alternative modes of transport related to their individual areas of interest. Many regional collaborations of volunteers, municipal and state representatives, planners, and professionals serve to support the planning, implementation, and expansion of their trails and greenways.

Strategy 3E: Provide Electric Vehicle (EV) chargers at outdoor recreation destinations to ensure accessibility for electric vehicle drivers.

Supportive data:

This strategy aligns with a Connecticut DEEP State initiative “The Electric Vehicle Roadmap for Connecticut (EV Roadmap)” which represents a comprehensive strategy for accelerating the deployment of electric vehicles (EVs) through policies and regulatory tools addressing transportation equity, purchasing incentives, consumer education, charging infrastructure

expansion, consumer protection, integration of EVs into the electric grid, utility investment, and utility rate design.

Furthermore, The US Department of Transportation (2023) highlighted the impact of increased EV infrastructure related to local health and economic benefits, reduction of GHGs, and opportunities to reach a larger population in more rural or traditionally underserved communities. In addition, the Department of Energy (2023) noted the EV sales in the United States continue to increase. Therefore, the need for more charging stations in non-traditional areas like parks and outdoor recreation areas will be needed.

Strategy 3F: Incorporate climate change information in experiential educational materials provided at outdoor recreation and natural resource destinations (nature centers, museums, etc.).

Supportive data:

Various sections of the Division Accomplishments identify and explain the effective use of experiential programming in support of the overall mission of DEEP and the objectives of each division as they relate to climate change.

Strategy 3G: Increase residents' understanding of both the benefits of outdoor recreational activities and the historical, cultural, and natural resource value of outdoor spaces.

Supportive data:

There are numerous wellness benefits from getting outdoors including physical, mental, social, and community (Wellness, 2021). A survey by the National Recreation and Parks Association found that local parks or picnic areas are among the favorite outdoor places Americans visit to experience the health benefits of nature (NRPA, 2019). Other areas noted were lakes, riverfronts, or beaches (56%), local parks or picnic areas (55%), trails or campsites (36%). "Parks provide a connection to nature, which studies demonstrate relieves stress levels, tightens interpersonal relationships and improves overall mental health." (NRPA, 2019).

(<https://www.fs.usda.gov/features/wellness-benefits-great-outdoors>)

(<https://www.nrpa.org/about-national-recreation-and-park-association/press-room/local-parks-among-the-top-outdoor-areas-americans-visit-to-experience-the-health-benefits-of-nature/>)

Outreach programs identified by the State Parks Education Unit demonstrate an awareness of, and effort to, address this issue.

Strategy 3H: Create healthy, resilient, and connected habitats to protect and enhance nature and the economic, recreational, and physical and mental health benefits it provides.

Supportive data:

The benefits that sustainable habitats provide through ecosystem service support our day-to-day lives. Healthy habitats help keep our drinking water clean, protect us from storms and flooding, and support outdoor recreational activities like hiking, camping, boating, fishing, and tourism.

(<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/habitat-conservation/value-habitat#:~:text=Nature's%20Benefits,boating%2C%20fishing%2C%20and%20tourism>)

The Connecticut DEEP fosters healthy habitats by implementing conservation policies, investing in green infrastructure, promoting sustainable land use practices, and effectively communicating both its goals and outcomes to residents and visitors. Connecting habitats through ecological corridors enhances biodiversity. This approach protects nature, boosts economic opportunities, and contributes to the well-being of residents through recreation, physical health, and mental wellness.

Strategy 3I: Assess, monitor, remediate, and reduce negative impacts of recreational activity on the environment.

Supportive data:

Through the combined efforts of the DEEP divisions, the involvement of many of the 169 municipalities and the many recreational clubs and interest groups throughout the state, the importance of assessing, monitoring, and remediating the negative impacts of recreational activities is an important element of both the management of each resource and its use by the public. Examples of these efforts comprise much of the information regarding the accomplishments mentioned earlier in this report.

Strategy 3J: Communicate how natural resource management strategies are addressing threats from climate change and can produce more resilient natural spaces and ensure future fish and wildlife-based recreation opportunities.

Supportive data:

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, "Climate change will alter the dynamics of outdoor recreation and the infrastructure that supports it in a number of ways, and these effects will vary greatly by season, geographic location, and population demographic... To

help managers thoughtfully consider how to respond to the effects of climate change on outdoor recreation, the Northern Institute of Applied Climate Science’s Climate Change Response Framework has designed a free download menu of climate adaptation strategies and approaches relevant to the conservation and management of natural resources for outdoor recreation.” for a full description of this document.

<https://forestadaptation.org/recreation-menu>; <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/11/24/7030>

The individual divisions of DEEP have directed strategies to address the need for informed decisions regarding the resiliency of natural spaces. The reader is advised to refer to the division reports appearing earlier in this document and the Action Plans for each division included in the Appendices. Additional information sources, including over 50 online publications covering topics including Connecticut Outdoor Guides, Responsible Recreation, Outdoor Learning Resources, and online newsletters, are available to the public and can be accessed through the DEEP official website: portal.ct.gov/DEEP.

Strategy 3K: Connect communities to trails and multiuse paths that offer effective transportation alternatives reducing emissions and natural corridors through the promotion of interconnected greenway systems and trail networks.

Supportive data:

Communities across Connecticut are both aware of and actively involved in addressing the need to engage in alternative means of accessing municipal and state facilities. Construction awards of \$9,833,475 (45.1% of total CT RTP award) were granted to projects which actively construct new recreational trails or trail segments and include labor, materials, and construction administration costs. Trail construction projects represent close to half the allocated fees of the program.

DEEP’s Office of Trails and Greenways engages and collaborates with a broad range of partner organizations and agencies to support the planning and management of recreational trails across the state. There are many organizations that partner with CT DEEP Office of Trails and Greenways. There are more than 2,000 miles of trails across state park and forest lands in Connecticut, with many more publicly accessible trails on municipal, land trust, and other conservation lands.