



# Seeing the Forest Through the Trees

## The economic potential of nature-based placemaking

Recreational users, local residents, or visitors to a borough are customers, or potential customers, for local businesses. Too often they are not recognized as such, so municipalities don't always provide the services that they require to make their experience enjoyable and one that they will return to or better yet, bring their friends along the next time.

Pennsylvania has the potential to become as well known for outdoor recreation, outdoor recreation tourism, and nature-based placemaking as states<sup>1</sup> like Vermont, Colorado, or Utah, but it won't happen on its own.

According to the state's comprehensive outdoor recreation plan,<sup>2</sup> PA has over 12,000 miles of trails (more than five times the length of the Appalachian Trail from Maine to Georgia), and over 2,355 miles of water trails, and 487 ski trails. Additionally, there

are over 2.7 million acres of protected park land, 1.5 million acres of state game land, and 19 national parks.

Yet, Pennsylvanians travel to other states to recreate, and many local communities do not identify with their local natural assets. Why? Because these amazing resources are not being promoted as much as they could be, and communities are not embracing the fullest potential for economic growth these resources could bring.

### Economics of Recreation

In 2020 the PA Downtown Center (PDC), in partnership with the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), implemented an economic study<sup>3</sup> with the help of Jon Stover & Associates.

This study determined that outdoor recreation has a \$28.5 billion economic impact annually, and it assessed the very attainable economic potential of nature-based placemaking in three PA communities.

Additionally, the study highlighted that small incremental changes could have a significant cumulative effect in a community, and COVID brought much of this into perspective.

In places like Quakertown Borough, Bucks County, just a few miles from Lake Nockamixon, they saw 1.2 million visitors in 2019, and experienced an 212% increase in 2021.

If only half of these visitors stopped for a \$10 snack at a local café or coffee shop, an extra \$780,000 could be generated at these local businesses annually. If only one in four visitors

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purchased a t-shirt or \$25 gift in one of the downtown retail stores, almost \$2 million could be generated in the local business district, which translates to \$8,000 monthly per store.

In Clearfield Borough, Clearfield County, there is over 12,000 acres of state game land within a 30-minute drive of downtown, and those downtown businesses generate two-thirds of the hunting-related revenue for the county.

In 2019, hunting-related businesses in Clearfield County created a total economic impact of \$8.7 million in sales. This impact supported nearly \$3.5 million in wages for over 100 full-time jobs.

## Understanding the Study

It's important to understand what was measured in the study, and what significance this has for local economies and communities.

**Economic impact.** Measuring the economic impact provides insights into new or expanding businesses, increases in sales revenue, job retention and addition, and local wages.

**Fiscal impacts.** The impact on taxes can affect a community on various levels, including property taxes, personal and corporate taxes, and fees and license revenue. At a state level, the outdoor recreation industry directly generated over \$1.1 billion in annual tax revenue in 2019.

**Community impacts.** These effects are both tangible and intangible, such as vibrancy and aesthetics, historic preservation, retail amenities, safety, and entertainment, arts and culture, which could have a direct impact on local investment and quality of life.

## Nature-based Placemaking

There are strategies communities can take to improve the local economy with nature-based placemaking that are sustainable, equitable, and realistic.

These strategies support elevating the quality of life of the residents who live there, capitalizing on the authentic and unique character of the town, and honoring the local cultural heritage, all while creating an economic impact for local businesses.

There has been a significant increase in recreation users and a significant potential for increasing the economic impact.

More people have been out and about, enjoying the recreational opportunities of state parks, trails, and other natural amenities. Getting outdoors, whether to bike, hike, paddle, or fish, can have a positive effect on one's physical and emotional health and wellness, and this was seen in the first year of the pandemic with PA state park attendance increasing by 26.6%, with over 40 million visitors in both 2020 and 2021.

DCNR is committed to elevating outdoor recreation in the Commonwealth, but the responsibility to grow the economic potential of outdoor recreation is not theirs alone. Now is the ideal time for communities to realize this economic potential and begin to take action.

Boroughs can begin by creating an attractive environment that draws in customers with investments in safe, friendly, walkable, bikeable, and human-scaled downtowns and business districts.

When people are outside and recreating, they are not in their cars, so communities should reflect that by being designed as people-centric, not auto-oriented.

This means considering whether the sidewalks, crosswalks, and trail connectors are safe for children, the elderly, or users with mobility concerns, for example. Or whether there are bike racks, bike repair stations, and public restrooms for visitors.

## SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESS

The borough and community should develop a strategy for supporting local businesses and their operations. This may include having a "Doing Business in our Community Guide" or market data reports.

Other considerations are providing resources, mini-grants, loans, and other incentives for businesses to open or expand their operations

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# How outdoor recreation impacts Pennsylvania's economy

**\$5.4 billion**

**BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS EXPENSES  
INDIRECT IMPACT**

Dollars spent at outdoor recreation and supporting establishments not only impacts the business where the transaction takes place but also impacts additional industries that rely on purchases made by those businesses.

**\$15.5 billion**

**INDUSTRY OPERATIONS  
DIRECT IMPACT**

When a patron spends money purchasing new equipment, pays for lessons, and spends money traveling to a Nature-Based asset, this revenue directly supports business operations, employee wages, and generation of city and state tax revenues.

**\$7.6 billion**

**SPENDING OF WAGES  
INDUCED IMPACT**

Household spending of income earned by those employed in outdoor recreation and related industries supports additional business activity and job creation.

**\$28.5  
BILLION**

**TOTAL ECONOMIC  
IMPACT**

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in the borough. And, the current zoning should support the kinds of businesses that the borough would like to attract, and the kinds of activity that customers will want, such as outdoor dining.

**DIRECTING VISITORS**

Strategic wayfinding signage, useful maps, and easily accessible information can direct visitors to local businesses.

The local workforce and community should be educated to be town ambassadors so they can be helpful resources to out-of-town guests.

The borough and officials can support and encourage local businesses to maintain hours that are consistent with outdoor recreation users by creating community or retail events that will also expand the number of potential customers and engage the local community.

**ADVOCATE**

The borough and its officials can be advocates for outdoor recreation as well as the community by supporting the local Main Street program (if there is one) or conservation organization, volunteer clean-up efforts, and events.

Borough officials and staff should talk to county and state officials about maintaining a constant level of funding support to conserve and maintain local natural resources along with community revitalization efforts.

Most of PA communities have the potential for developing a nature-based placemaking strategy, if officials and the community take action.

**Post-pandemic**

As the state, residents, and visitors transition into a post-pandemic world, there are a few things to keep in mind:

- Outdoor recreation participation is increasing; this trend is here to stay.
- Natural assets are an increasingly important aspect to attracting visitors, employers, and residents.
- Remote working and unaffordable housing in cities are bringing people to smaller towns and more rural areas.
- There has been a surge in entrepreneurship and new business creation.
- New, short-term financial resources, such as the American Rescue Plan and other federal incentives, may be available for boroughs and nature-based placemaking plans and projects. **B**

<sup>1</sup> Nature-Based Placemaking Handbook, Pennsylvania Downtown Center.

<sup>2</sup> Pennsylvania Statewide Outdoor Recreation Plan 2020-2024, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

<sup>3</sup> Pennsylvania’s Outdoor Recreation Economy: Exploring the Economic Development Potential of Nature-Based Placemaking, developed through a partnership between Pennsylvania Downtown Center and Jon Stover & Associates. Accessible at padowntown.org. The preparation of the economic impact study was funded in part from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Bureau of Recreation and Conservation, Community Conservation Partnerships Program, and Environmental Stewardship Fund.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Julie Fitzpatrick has been involved with projects in Commonwealth communities, including community visioning, developing regional downtown revitalization strategies, establishing tourism infrastructure plans, and developing business improvement district plans and other strategic planning activities. She also provides board and committee education and technical assistance to designated DCED Keystone Communities Main Street and Elm

Street programs as well as to communities that are non-designated.