



# The Infrastructure of the Great Outdoors

By Nicole Gentile and Jenny Rowland     December 16, 2016

Millions of Americans who visit national parks, live near national forests, or make their living from the enjoyment and use of America’s public lands now face deep uncertainty about how President-elect Donald Trump plans to manage the nation’s natural resources. These roughly 5.5 million square miles of public lands and ocean amount to a valuable system of natural infrastructure, which each president is tasked with governing.<sup>1</sup> While on the campaign trail, President-elect Trump indicated a measure of commitment to protecting public lands, but it remains to be seen whether he will manage these resources on behalf of all Americans.<sup>2</sup>

In January 2016, President-elect Trump unequivocally rejected any proposal to dispose of or privatize public lands. “I want to keep the lands great,” he told *Field & Stream* Magazine. “And I don’t think [public lands are] something that should be sold. ... This is magnificent land. And we have to be great stewards of this land.”<sup>3</sup> On the campaign trail, President-elect Trump also dispatched his son Donald Trump Jr. to reassure hunters and anglers with statements of support for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, fracking standards, and wildlife protections.<sup>4</sup>

Since the presidential election, however, President-elect Trump has not signaled the same kind of commitment to protecting public lands. Already, he has packed his transition team with at least 72 individuals with ties to fossil fuel tycoons Charles and David Koch.<sup>5</sup> The members of his Interior Department transition landing team have a history of championing drilling and mining on public lands; climate denial; and supporting giving away or privatizing America’s national forests, wildlife refuges, and other public lands—a direct conflict with President-elect Trump’s own stated position. The team is led by Doug Domenech, director of the Fueling Freedom Project, the mission of which is to explain the “forgotten moral case for fossil fuels.”<sup>6</sup>

However, President-elect Trump’s nominee for interior secretary could be a bright spot for the outdoor recreation industry.<sup>7</sup> Rep. Ryan Zinke (R-MT) was a co-sponsor of the Outdoor Recreation Jobs and Economic Impact Act, a bill which would measure the effects of the growing outdoor industry on the U.S. gross domestic product, or GDP,

and lend credence to a powerful sector of the economy.<sup>8</sup> However, Rep. Zinke is also a champion for, and financed by, the coal, oil, and gas industries and worked to preserve a loophole that allowed coal companies to dodge royalty payments to Montana communities and U.S. taxpayers.<sup>9</sup> As interior secretary, Rep. Zinke will have to stand up to fossil fuel interests if he plans to protect the public lands on which the outdoor industry depends. Rather than manage these lands for all Americans, it seems likely that the Trump administration will exploit them for the benefit of big business.

Whether President-elect Trump chooses to be steward-in-chief or exploiter-in-chief of America's great outdoors will have a profound impact on the future of national parks, forests, and other public lands that are the envy of the world. These lands are valuable not just for their scenic beauty but also for their immense contribution to the national economy.

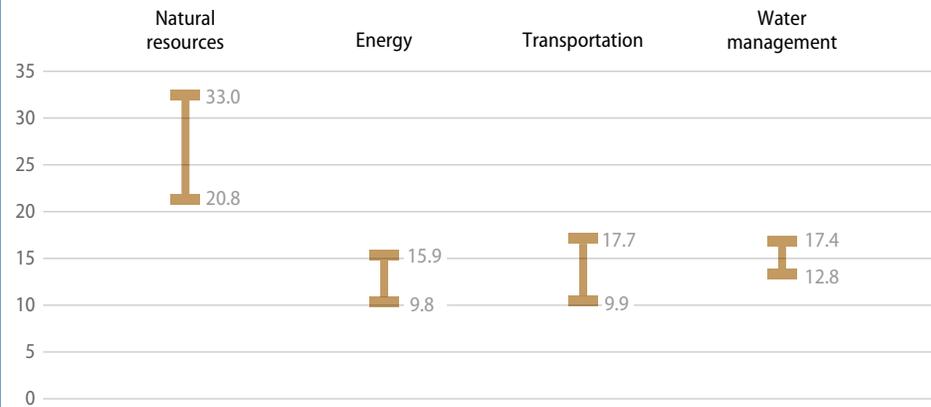
A record number of people visited national parks and public lands in 2015, and as the National Park Service celebrates its centennial, 2016 is on track to shatter those records.<sup>10</sup> Outdoor recreation is an under-recognized driver of the American economy, but it depends on proper investment in the natural and cultural infrastructure that supports the industry. This powerful economic engine supports 6.1 million direct jobs and generates \$646 billion in consumer spending—nearing the sum of motor vehicles, parts, and fuels combined.<sup>11</sup>

If President-elect Trump stays true to his campaign promise to protect America's public lands, he will have a rare opportunity for bipartisan agreement by investing in the national parks, forests, and other public lands that make this country great and contribute to the thriving outdoor economy. Public lands have long enjoyed support on both sides of the aisle from decision-makers who want to ensure that Americans have access to hunt, fish, camp, hike, and otherwise enjoy the great outdoors. This issue brief outlines a path for the next U.S. president to become a champion for America's outdoor heritage.

President-elect Trump has already pledged to invest in improving the nation's infrastructure upon taking office, but whether and how he intends to incorporate natural infrastructure into this plan remains to be seen. While gray infrastructure—the roads, bridges, and structures that span the country—may be most easily recognizable, any 21st century infrastructure plan must also invest in America's natural infrastructure, including public lands and waters, cultural and natural resources, and opportunities for recreation. America's natural infrastructure is the foundation of the outdoor economy and is also a job creator. In fact, according to a CAP analysis, investments in natural resources create more jobs—about 20 per \$1 million invested in recreation and up to 33 per \$1 million invested in environmental restoration—than other types of infrastructure spending because most of the investment goes into labor rather than capital expenses.<sup>12</sup>

**FIGURE 1**  
**Number of direct and indirect jobs created**  
**per \$1 million invested, by sector**

Investments in natural resource management—including restoration and recreation—create more jobs than investments in other infrastructure



Sources: U.S. Department of the Interior, *The Department of the Interior's Economic Contributions – Fiscal Year 2011* (2012), available at [https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/migrated/ppa/upload/2011-Econ-Report-FINAL-07\\_09\\_2012.pdf](https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/migrated/ppa/upload/2011-Econ-Report-FINAL-07_09_2012.pdf); Todd K. BenDor and others, "Defining and evaluating the ecological restoration economy," *Restoration Ecology* 23 (3) (2015): 209–219, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/rec.12206>; Robert Pollin, James Heintz, and Heidi Garrett-Peltier, "How Infrastructure Investments Support the U.S. Economy: Employment, Productivity and Growth" (Amherst: Political Economy Research Institute, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2009), available at <http://www.peri.umass.edu/publication/item/295-how-infrastructure-investments-support-the-u-s-economy>.

Public lands and opportunities for recreation are the backbone of many diversified rural economies, as they attract entrepreneurs who are seeking outdoor lifestyles and access to open space.<sup>13</sup> Studies have shown that income growth, personal income, and employment in rural western counties grew much more in those with more federal lands.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, affordable and accessible outdoor opportunities are essential to the well-being of middle-class families, as well as the anchor of prosperous and healthy communities.<sup>15</sup>

Several states have begun to recognize and capitalize on the incredible potential of the outdoor economy. Utah and Colorado have both created offices of outdoor recreation to cultivate this vital sector, citing increased tourism, job creation, and spending.<sup>16</sup> Montana also recently established an Office of Outdoor Recreation to foster economic development.<sup>17</sup> State leadership in this area is an important first step, and there is even more to be done on a national level to commit to the great outdoors. The next president must lead this effort.

For too long, the United States has failed to maintain the infrastructure, both natural and man-made, that supports its public lands and water and promotes a growing outdoor economy. The Trump administration has the opportunity to address critical needs by protecting, restoring, and rehabilitating natural and cultural treasures and expanding access for hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation. Any successful infrastructure legislation must include direct funding for outdoor infrastructure.

Below are several recommended components of a successful proposal to invest in natural infrastructure and its lands, waters, and wildlife that drive the nation's outdoor economy.

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## The Land and Water Conservation Fund

A critical component of the next administration's infrastructure investment plan should be America's most time-tested and bipartisan parks and public lands program: the Land and Water Conservation Fund, or LWCF. In 1965, Congress established the LWCF to use funds from offshore oil and gas extraction on public lands to fund conservation and improve access to outdoor recreation at the federal, state, and local levels. Millions of Americans depend on LWCF-funded projects—which range from national parks to neighborhood baseball diamonds—to access the great outdoors. The spending that this recreation generates is a boon to the economy. In fact, research shows that every \$1 of LWCF funds invested results in a return of \$4 in economic value.<sup>18</sup> LWCF has been key in helping improve many urban and rural communities.

In recent years, however, funding has been uncertain at best, and many projects have been left in limbo. Projects that could benefit from this funding include increasing public access to outdoor recreation; protecting watersheds; maintaining healthy populations of big game; and buying inholdings in the nation's parks to make sure that these special places are not developed for trophy homes but are instead protected for future generations. An infrastructure investment plan should include the LWCF program, which allows local, state, and federal officials and private citizens to work together on the lands that benefit their communities.

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## Protecting wildlife

Every year, hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching generates \$145 billion in consumer spending.<sup>19</sup> Ensuring that wildlife populations are healthy and have adequate habitat is integral to protecting these interests and the resulting economic activity. However, wildlife populations in the United States are facing significant declines. Among all imperiled mammals in the United States, more than two-thirds have populations that are falling; among bird species, nearly two-thirds of threatened species populations are decreasing.<sup>20</sup> For anglers, the story is even worse: More than two-fifths of remaining salmon, trout, and other salmonid populations are at risk of extinction.<sup>21</sup>

The next administration should provide dedicated funding for programs to slow—and even reverse—this decline and ensure that healthy populations of wildlife continue to provide a foundation for Americans to enjoy and generate economic activity in the great outdoors.

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## Parks and public lands

Visits to national parks, national forests, and lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management are higher than they have ever been. In 2015 alone, more than 307 million people visited national parks, and recreational visits from just those living within 50 miles of a national forest are expected to increase by 12 million new visits per year.<sup>22</sup> The next administration should help expand these opportunities to more people; continue to build the already record-breaking levels of outdoor recreation; and address the crumbling infrastructure at the nation's parks, forests, and other public lands.

In addition to building on the United States' legacy of wild and remote parks, forests, and wildlife refuges, a focus of the next administration should be on creating, fixing, and expanding urban parks—a key component of urban infrastructure in any city.<sup>23</sup> City parks and front country recreation areas—natural areas that are close to population centers—are economic generators and job creators. This type of open space provides outdoor recreation, health, and environmental benefits where 80 percent of the U.S. population lives.<sup>24</sup> Urban parks have been found to have benefits that include a 5 percent to 20 percent rise in property values near parks and \$3.8 billion in air pollution savings.<sup>25</sup> Parks in Philadelphia, for example, contribute \$115 million to annual tourist spending.<sup>26</sup>

A recent CAP study found that communities of color and low-income communities in the West, in primarily urban areas, have disproportionately less open space and natural areas nearby than does the overall population in their states.<sup>27</sup> Correcting for these types of inequities should be a priority when considering creating new public lands or expanding existing boundaries.

The next administration should establish a funding commitment to programs that provide grants and technical assistance to urban communities for creating and rehabilitating parks and recreation facilities.

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## Cultural resources and tribal nations

Cultural and historic sites are critical components of the nation's public lands; protecting this heritage tells the story of who we are as a nation. As the next administration faces the important task of uniting this diverse nation in a time of divisive rhetoric, it should recognize more of these cultural and historic sites. Already, two-thirds of all National Park Service sites are historic or cultural resources that include statues, buildings, and archeological sites.<sup>28</sup> Preserving this culture and history is vital to the outdoor economy: Federal historic preservation supports \$6.6 billion in economic activity.<sup>29</sup>

The incoming Trump administration should build upon current programs and parks that preserve the nation's special historic and cultural places. Many of these places, such as the recent César E. Chávez, Belmont-Paul Women's Equality, and Stonewall national monuments help tell the inclusive history of all Americans.

Efforts by Native American tribes to conserve and protect their homelands should also be considered. The incoming administration could create a new tribal lands program to provide direct resources for conservation efforts by tribes on their sovereign lands. Native Americans have long had a strong connection to the lands and waters in the country, and tribal lands protect some of the continent's most important remaining blocks of wildlife habitat.<sup>30</sup>

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## Restoring U.S. public lands

America's parks and public lands are well-loved and are under increased pressures from rising visitation numbers, as well as wildfire, drought, and other effects of a changing climate.<sup>31</sup> These pressures are coming at a time when western forests are already unhealthy and subject to decreasing budgets. The U.S. Forest Service estimates that nearly 82 million acres of National Forest System lands are in need of restoration.<sup>32</sup> However, Forest Service spending is being redirected to fighting wildfires rather than preventing them by investing in restoration.<sup>33</sup> This has major economic implications; in order for the outdoor economy to continue to generate the substantial economic returns it does in the United States, public lands must be protected and restored to healthy conditions. Investments in restoring public lands would ensure that they are around for future generations and that the outdoor economy continues to thrive.

The Trump administration should, for example, commit resources to promote forest health and help local communities cope with a changing climate. New weather patterns will have an enormous effect on the lands and waters that support the growing outdoor recreation economy, and these implications are already visible. The outdoor industry is among the first to experience the effects of changing climatic conditions. Scientists expect declines in winter tourism and recreation such as skiing and snowmobiling due to unpredictability and lack of snow, as well as limited opportunities for hunting and fishing due to warming waters and temperature changes that push fish, big game, and birds out of their historic ranges.<sup>34</sup> The increased threat of forest fires can shut down national forests, parks, and other recreation destinations and the tourism they support.<sup>35</sup>

Luckily, large, connected, healthy natural areas are the infrastructure that helps the nation's water, wildlife, and communities cope with new climate conditions. For example, coastal restoration can prevent flooding and coastal degradation, and protecting more zones where developed lands meet natural areas—known as the wildland-urban interface—helps protect communities from wildfires and saves taxpayer dollars.<sup>36</sup>

Natural areas that can recover quickly from various disturbances are the building blocks of a successful outdoor recreation economy. Investing in the great outdoors will be integral to helping communities withstand the challenges of drought, forest fires, and other effects of climate change.<sup>37</sup>

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## Conclusion

As the Trump administration begins the critical task of developing a shared vision for the nation, the president-elect must deliver on his campaign promise to be a great steward of the country's national lands. If he does, he will support the millions of jobs that depend on this natural infrastructure and will find willing partners on both sides of the aisle to restore and invest in parks, forests, rivers, wildlife, and cultural heritage. However, if President-elect Trump abandons his commitment to the great outdoors or uses U.S. public lands only as a playground for fossil fuel interests, as his early Cabinet picks signal may be the case, he risks the jobs and livelihoods of millions of Americans and jeopardizes the lands that set this country apart.<sup>38</sup> Investing in natural heritage and cultural treasures is not only critical to thriving and sustainable rural economies, but it also demonstrates who we are as a nation. Recognizing this natural infrastructure as an economic engine will allow us as a nation to realize the true value of shared natural heritage—for now and for the future.

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