



September 25, 2025

## **PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS TO INTERIM STUDY COMMITTEE on AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES**

### **BENEFITS OF PUBLIC LANDS FOR RECREATION**

To assist the interim legislative committee studying the value of public lands for recreation, Indiana Conservation Alliance offers the following suggestions for inclusion in the final study committee report.

#### **OVERALL COMMENTS**

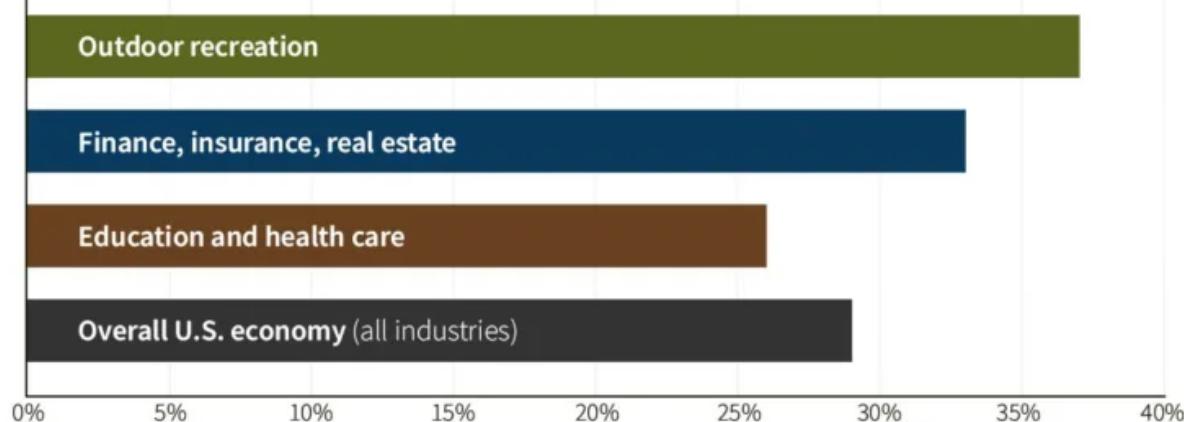
Public lands for outdoor recreation include a wide variety of properties: parks, recreation areas, fish & wildlife areas, nature preserves, forests, and historic sites. Some of these are state and some are local. What they all have in common is that they provide an opportunity to escape the stresses of everyday life and enjoy the benefits of nature or, in the case of historic sites, our cultural heritage. Although the scope of these benefits is difficult to measure, there is no doubt that they are real, improving physical and mental health. Children in particular benefit from contact with nature during their formative years.

Besides inspiration for Hoosier families, community leaders, and visitors from other states, Indiana's forests, wetlands and prairies make our state a healthier, more productive place to live and work – improving our water and air quality, supporting the pollinators that our food crops depend on, providing habitat for the animals that control agricultural pests, and offering opportunities for physical activity that supports healthier lifestyles.

Among the benefits from our public lands is their contribution to Indiana's economy from jobs created and consumer spending on outdoor recreation. The U.S. Department of Commerce calculates this economic value to Indiana from outdoor recreation at \$16 billion a year, supporting 105,000 direct jobs. This Department of Commerce report also indicates that outdoor recreation is growing faster than other economic sectors. Improving quality of place is a major goal in Indiana's successful regional economic development program – READI—recognizing that our economic well-being depends on our quality of life. Virtually every READI grant proposal featured trail, greenway, or park projects (<https://indianareadi.com/>). The outdoor recreation sector in the U.S. is growing faster than any other economic sector.

## Outdoor recreation is growing faster than other sectors

Change in value added (GDP) from 2012-2023



Data source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account and Regional Economic Accounts



### Division of State Parks (incorporates recommendations of the Indiana Parks Alliance)

The Division of State Parks manages approximately 180,000 acres of the land and water owned by the Department of Natural Resources, with 24 state parks and seven small satellite locations, eight reservoir properties, two state forest recreation areas, and two off-road riding areas.

The committee has heard testimony from multiple sources about the importance of public lands for recreation on local communities, including directly from many of these local communities themselves. DNR Division of State Parks conducted a user survey in late 2024 and early 2025. The results of that survey show that 26% of park users spent \$25-\$50 in nearby communities during their stay, 30% spent \$50-\$100, and 20% spent over \$100. Based on that survey, and making a reasonable assumption about the number of visitors a survey responder represented, it means that state park visitors are spending between \$191 million and \$344 million dollars each year in nearby communities.

Of particular relevance was the testimony of the representative of the Owen County Chamber of Commerce, related to the Town of Spencer. Owen County CC presented documentation on the impact to the Town of the loss of the McCormick's Creek campground due to a tornado in 2023. Comparison of the fiscal years 2023 and 2024 show that the park itself suffered losses in revenue of over \$1 million due to the absence of the campground, while the reduced visitation has caused economic activity in Spencer to broadly decline since the campground was destroyed.

The committee also heard testimony from a local entrepreneur in the Town of Versailles who has developed a hotel in a local historic building, in large part to serve visitors to Versailles State Park. Park visitation was a large part of her decision to make this investment and is critical to its continued success. Based on presentations from other local organizations, the committee believes that there are many other similar cases throughout the state.

Most state public lands for recreation are located in rural areas, many of which are badly in need of good job opportunities. These areas are unlikely to lure a large, national corporation to build a manufacturing plant. State investment in the existing natural and cultural resources in those areas can provide opportunities for local entrepreneurs to start and grow local businesses, adding jobs directly and increasing economic activity throughout the community.

The committee also heard testimony about the significant number of out-of-state residents that public lands for recreation bring into the state. Just looking at state parks alone, an estimated 3 million visits to those parks were from out-of-state residents (16.8% of total state park visits). Using the same survey of typical visitor spending cited earlier indicates that these out-of-state visitors contribute between \$32 million and \$58 million to the local economies, in addition to what they contribute to the state economy elsewhere in the state during their visits.

**The committee should recommend:**

**SPENDING**

In order to maintain and increase revenue generated by visitors to state public lands, the State of Indiana needs to invest in these properties. Testimony was presented indicating that spending in recent years is insufficient to maintain facilities. If facilities are allowed to deteriorate, and expected services are not offered, it will lead to a decline in visitation, both in-state and out-of-state. The 2023-25 State Parks budget for maintenance and repair of facilities was \$16,820,000 (excluding the new Potato Creek Inn). This maintenance budget is only 32% of the inflation adjusted budget for State Parks in 2007.

The committee recommends that the biannual construction and maintenance budget for State Parks, as well as other DNR divisions and the State Museum Historic Sites, be increased in future budgets to return to levels similar to the inflation-adjusted 2007 spending levels.

**REVENUE**

Division of State Parks covered 89% of their operating costs during fiscal year 2024 with revenue from fees paid by visitors to their properties. This revenue is primarily generated by gate admission fees and camping fees, although other miscellaneous fees are paid by visitors to properties during their stays. Division of State Parks should look at their fee structure and compare them with those charged by other surrounding states.

The committee recommends that the Division of State Parks raise their fees for both in-state visitors and out-of-state visitors, with particular emphasis on those affecting out-of-state

visitors. This will generate a significant increase in revenue totals. This increased revenue should be used to increase staff to improve visitor experiences, encouraging return visits.

The committee also recommends that the state of Indiana should adopt a permanent, dedicated source of conservation funding to:

- 1) Fund the acquisition of new public lands throughout Indiana, in collaboration with local units of government, park boards, and nonprofit organizations. This dedicated source of conservation funding must include support for the President Harrison Conservation Trust.
- 2) Maintain and expand facilities to enhance visitor experiences at state-owned public lands for recreation.

### **Division of Fish, Wildlife & Nature Preserves**

The Division of Fish and Wildlife manages 170,000 acres in 26 state fish and wildlife areas, and 57,076 acres in 306 nature preserves.

In response to legislation adopted in 2022, the Division of Fish and Wildlife established the Fee & Licensure Working Group, which issued its final report on October 27, 2022. The report recommended:

- The Indiana General Assembly allocate license fee revenue from licenses sold by the Division of Fish and Wildlife to maximize the federal matching dollars the division can obtain.
- The Indiana General Assembly allocate general funds or dedicate some or all of the sales tax revenue collected on outdoor recreation gear to further fund the land management bureau within the Department of Natural Resources (fish and wildlife, forestry, state parks, nature preserves) to ensure the division can maximize federal matching dollars.

Indiana's Fish and Wildlife Areas experience substantial recreational use, which has been difficult to quantify since these areas do not have traditional "entrance fees" collected at a single gate to the property. Nationally, wildlife-related recreation (fishing, hunting, wildlife watching) generates \$395 billion a year in participant spending (US Fish and Wildlife Service, 2022). Much of this recreation occurs on state and federal public lands – fish and wildlife areas, state and national forests, and national wildlife refuges.

Witnesses at the study committee hearing testified that access to public hunting areas is a key factor in individuals' decisions whether to become a hunter. In many areas of Indiana, this access is greatly limited by the lack of public lands.

#### **The committee should recommend that:**

- 1) The Division of Fish and Wildlife explore and implement a system(s) to collect visitor fees at state fish and wildlife areas, particularly from non-consumptive users.

- 2) The state of Indiana adopt a permanent, dedicated source of conservation funding to fund the acquisition of new public lands throughout Indiana, in collaboration with local units of government, park boards, and nonprofit organizations. This dedicated source of conservation funding must include support for the President Harrison Conservation Trust.

## **Division of Forestry**

The Division of Forestry manages 160,000 acres in 15 state forests. These properties are mainly located in southern Indiana.

Outdoor recreation is a popular use of the state forests – hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, and bird watching. The Division's tracking of state forest trail use found that the total projected trail traffic for all properties increased 92% from 2019 to 2020 compared to a 6% increase in traffic from 2018-2019.

Like state fish and wildlife areas, state forests typically do not have a single entrance point, making it difficult to record specific visitor use numbers or collect user fees, other than from users in state forest campgrounds.

The Division's 2025-2029 Strategic Direction Plan contains detailed recommendations for improving outdoor recreation opportunities on state forest lands, including:

- Conserving important lands through strategic acquisitions
- Improving state forest user experience through investments to modernize infrastructure including maintaining and improving recreational trails across the state forest system
- Improve security and fiscal position of the State Forest properties in relation to offered recreation opportunities and user experiences. These include general improvement of facilities and the development and implementation of entrance gates and/or pass system for those accessing and using State Forest facilities and recreational opportunities.

### **The study committee should recommend that:**

- 1) The General Assembly enable the Division of Forestry to carry out the land acquisition and recreation provisions in its strategic plan.
- 2) The state of Indiana adopt a permanent, dedicated source of conservation funding to fund the acquisition of new public lands throughout Indiana, in collaboration with local units of government, park boards, and nonprofit organizations. This dedicated source of conservation funding must include support for the President Harrison Conservation Trust.

**Other recommendations:**

- 1) The study committee report should recognize that access to outdoor recreation opportunities on public lands is limited in many areas of Indiana, and our existing public lands are not keeping up with demand. For example,
  - Applications for Next Level Trails grants exceeded available funding by \$227 million (Indiana DNR).
  - Indiana's 2021-2025 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) reports that 55 Indiana counties did not have the recommended local outdoor recreation acres; 39 counties had a shortage of total (local, state and federal) recreation acres; and 29 counties had a shortage in all three categories.
  - Attendance at our state parks, state recreation areas, and other local, state and federal lands is growing as more people participate in outdoor recreation activities (DNR; Outdoor Industry Association).
- 2) The study committee should recommend that the State of Indiana commission a comprehensive professional Indiana specific study on the value and benefits of public and conserved lands.
- 3) The study committee should encourage continuing discussion of the impact of public lands on the provision of local services including emergency services.