

RHODE ISLAND STATE COMPREHENSIVE OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN 2026

STATE GUIDE PLAN ELEMENT 152

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ABSTRACT

TITLE: Rhode Island's Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan
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ABSTRACT: This document represents the eleventh edition of the SCORP. The Plan establishes long-term state goals and policies for outdoor recreation and includes a 10-year "Plan for Action." The Plan was approved by the State Planning Council as an element of the State Guide Plan and by the National Park Service, as the State of Rhode Island's State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) for the 2026-2036 period.

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE	3
SCORP Composition/Document Structure	7
User Guide: Navigating the SCORP	7
2019 SCORP Achievements	9
THE COMMUNITY AND CONTEXT	10
General Overview of Rhode Island Outdoor Recreation Resources.....	10
Shifting Tides: Demographic and Economic Trends.....	13
National Trends in Outdoor Recreation	16
COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES	18
Community Engagement Framework.....	18
Key Findings & Themes	23
From Insights to Action.....	30
A VISION FOR THE FUTURE	31
Priority Areas & Recommendations	31
ACTION PLAN & IMPLEMENTATION MATRIX	50
APPENDIX 1: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT DOCUMENTATION	
APPENDIX 2: RHODE ISLAND WETLAND PRIORITY PROTECTION PLAN	
APPENDIX 3: RECREATION GRANT SELECTION PROCESS	

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rhode Island's 2026 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) is a roadmap for creating a more inclusive, sustainable, and responsive outdoor recreation system over the next ten years. Shaped by extensive public engagement, including input from more than 3,500 Rhode Islanders, the SCORP outlines clear strategies and actions to create an outdoor recreation system that serves all Rhode Islanders – a system that meets evolving recreation needs, addresses existing barriers to participation, and protects the state's beloved outdoor spaces.

While gauging the supply and demand of our existing outdoor recreation assets, this plan robustly examined the reasons that keep the public from making the most of Rhode Island's recreation opportunities. Several barriers were identified, including:

- Lack of information about where to go and what can be found at each facility;
- Private ownership and overcrowding, especially at coastal sites;
- Limited facilities with universal access to amenities;
- Cost;
- Facilities that did not meet expectations due to lack of amenities, maintenance issues, and feelings of unsafety;
- Lack of walkable, bikeable, transit friendly options for reaching parks and other outdoor recreation resources; and
- Lack of opportunities for culturally relevant activities.

To address these barriers, this plan recommends expanded access to and within facilities, strategies to provide outdoor recreation experiences with desired amenities, and approaches to improve maintenance and feelings of safety.

Specific strategies include:

- Showcase and provide better information about Rhode Island's existing facilities that provide in-demand amenities and experiences;
- Create more easily accessible outdoor recreation facilities with amenities that are well-maintained and staffed; and
- Provide family friendly programming and guided introductions to outdoor experiences at these facilities.

Also revealed by this planning process is the overwhelming demand for outdoor recreation opportunities by Rhode Islanders and tourists alike. This demand places great pressure on those individuals and organizations maintaining these treasured spaces – an imposition often difficult to manage given limited financial and staffing support and finite outdoor recreation assets. To confront this challenge, creating a culture of care and better maintenance practices are recommended.

This plan also calls for the removal of barriers to participation so more Rhode Islanders can have quality outdoor recreation experiences while the state's natural assets are preserved for future generations. Six key priority areas guide the plan:



RI SCORP 2026-2036 Key Priority Areas.



POSITIONING FOR SUCCESS

Central to achieving these priorities is the recommended creation of a dedicated Office of Outdoor Recreation. This office would coordinate statewide initiatives, enhance interagency collaboration, streamline resource allocation, and promote partnerships between state, municipal, private, and non-profit stakeholders.

Rhode Island's 2026 SCORP reaffirms the state's commitment to outdoor recreation as integral to public health, environmental sustainability, economic vitality, and community wellbeing. Guided by robust public input, this plan positions Rhode Island to deliver accessible, inclusive, and sustainable outdoor recreation experiences now and into the future.



SUSTAINABLE BY DESIGN

Residents voiced concerns about the ongoing maintenance and condition of parks, beaches, trails, and recreation facilities. The SCORP promotes a culture of shared responsibility, clear standards for facility maintenance, strategic long-term maintenance planning, and strengthened public/private partnerships to ensure the state's outdoor resources remain safe, welcoming, and environmentally sound.



TIDES CHANGE, SO MUST WE

Rhode Island's recreation facilities and programs must adapt to changing demographics and preferences. Residents highlighted the need for spaces supporting family-friendly, multi-generational, and culturally diverse activities such as flexible community spaces, paddle sports, biking, disc golf, and nature-based educational programs. The SCORP prioritizes creating versatile facilities that reflect evolving interests and community traditions.



RECREATION FOR ALL

Equitable access is fundamental. Many Rhode Islanders face barriers including high fees at beaches, limited transportation options, safety concerns, and facilities not designed for all abilities. This SCORP emphasizes inclusive fee structures, expanded public transit and pedestrian connections, universal design standards, improved signage and lighting, and targeted infrastructure investments to create safer, more accessible recreation experiences statewide.

High demand at state beaches, often at capacity early in the day, highlights the need to promote and improve alternative coastal recreation options. This includes developing and directing visitors toward lesser-known sites and new recreational areas, such as improved water access points along Narragansett Bay.



GATEWAY EXPERIENCES

Some Rhode Islanders hesitate to explore the outdoors due to a perceived lack of safety and comfort. This plan suggests the creation of guided introductions or "gateway" experiences as a way to get people comfortable with the outdoors. These can include both the promotion of existing high-amenity outdoor recreation facilities - well-manicured and maintained facilities with support amenities such as restrooms and weather shelters that have park staff present - as well as individual staff or volunteer-led outdoor experiences at outdoor recreation facilities.



SHOUT IT FROM THE TREETOPS

Many Rhode Islanders are unaware of the full range of outdoor recreation opportunities available. Enhanced communication strategies, including a central online hub, multilingual outreach, improved signage, and strengthened community partnerships, will ensure all residents can easily discover and enjoy Rhode Island's outdoor resources.

INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND, AND PURPOSE



Beavertail State Park, Jamestown

INTRODUCTION

Rhode Island's 2026 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) reflects a collective vision for ensuring that the state's outdoor spaces remain relevant, accessible, inclusive, and sustainable for all Rhode Islanders and those visiting our beautiful state. Rooted in community feedback, the SCORP outlines strategies to enhance outdoor recreation opportunities, address barriers, and foster connections between residents and nature while prioritizing equitable access to an environmental stewardship of public lands.

Rhode Island's unique geography offers a wide array of opportunities for outdoor recreation. The state's 400 miles of coastline and rich maritime history make water-based activities such as kayaking, sailing, and beachcombing integral to its identity.

Meanwhile, inland forests, freshwater lakes, and bike paths cater to hiking, biking, and camping enthusiasts. Despite the state's small size, accessibility challenges persist, particularly for urban residents and underserved populations. Addressing these barriers, such as transportation limitations, cost concerns, and cultural inclusivity, remains a priority for state agencies and municipal partners alike.

Through the public engagement component of this plan, residents voiced a strong desire for more family-friendly amenities, safer and better-maintained facilities, and expanded opportunities for environmental education and community events. Many noted the need for

This SCORP reaffirms the state's commitment to outdoor recreation as a cornerstone of public health, environmental conservation, and community well-being.

improved transportation to outdoor recreation spaces, culturally inclusive opportunities, and amenities that meet diverse needs, from accessible trails to bilingual signage.

Rhode Island residents value outdoor recreation spaces as places of connection and growth, underscoring the need to reflect and respect the diversity of the state's population. Barriers such as perceived unwelcomeness and physical accessibility challenges highlight the need for intentional planning to ensure equitable experiences for all.

Rhode Island's SCORP serves as a roadmap to secure and allocate The National Park Services' Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The LWCF plays a critical role in supporting Rhode Island's efforts to expand and improve outdoor recreation assets. LWCF investments have facilitated transformative projects, such as upgrading coastal facilities and expanding urban green spaces - but the work is far from complete. The 2026 SCORP emphasizes building resilient, inclusive, and engaging recreational opportunities that honor the voices of all Rhode Islanders.

As we look to the future, this SCORP reaffirms the state's commitment to outdoor recreation as a cornerstone of public health, environmental conservation, and community well-being. Through collaboration, innovative solutions, and sustained investment, Rhode Island is poised to create a recreation system that reflects the values and aspirations of its diverse population.

BACKGROUND

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) is a federal program based on the provisions of the LWCF Act (54 U.S.C. § 200305(d)), that provides matching grants to states and local governments for the acquisition and development of public outdoor recreation areas and facilities. To be eligible for LWCF grants, states must maintain an up-to-date SCORP. This requirement ensures that LWCF funding aligns with the state's identified recreational priorities and strategies for effective administration of the LWCF program. Over the past half-century, Rhode Island has benefited from more than \$74 million in LWCF investments, which have been instrumental in protecting the state's coastlines, historic sites, and enhancing recreational access.

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM) administers these funds, allocating them to various projects across the state. For instance, previous LWCF grants have supported the construction of a new "green" beach pavilion at Lincoln Woods State Park and upgraded bathroom facilities at Fishermen's State Park and Campground. Rhode Island receives an annual apportionment through the LWCF to enhance parks, preserve open spaces, and improve public outdoor recreation opportunities statewide. This funding, currently at \$3.95 million for RI, is now guaranteed permanently as established by the Great American Outdoors Act signed into law in August 2020.

Additionally, Rhode Island's SCORP fulfills the U.S. Department of Transportation - Federal Highway Administration's requirement for a State Recreational Trails Plan as part of their Recreational Trails Program. This federal program distributes an annual apportionment to all 50 states to develop and maintain recreational trails. DEM and the RI Department of Transportation work together to distribute these funds via the state's Recreational Trails Grant Program.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE SCORP

The Rhode Island Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) serves as the Recreation Element of the Rhode Island State Guide Plan (SGP), providing a strategic framework for maintaining, improving, and expanding the state's outdoor recreation system. As both a planning and implementation tool, the SCORP aligns state and local goals with community needs, ensuring that outdoor recreation resources are accessible, sustainable, and responsive to Rhode Island's diverse population and its needs. This document outlines a ten-year action plan for state agencies, municipalities, and non-governmental organizations (NGO's) while articulating long-term recreation policies that guide public and private investments. By bridging the gap between strategic planning and actionable outcomes, the SCORP guides investments, informs policy decisions, and empowers stakeholders to collaboratively address outdoor recreation needs and priorities across Rhode Island.

Guiding Document for Recreation Planning and Investment

As an essential element of the SGP, the SCORP provides a cohesive vision for outdoor recreation across Rhode Island, integrating planning across state and local agencies. It establishes goals and policies with which municipal comprehensive plans must align, ensuring a consistent approach to conservation and recreation development statewide. The SCORP's role extends beyond guiding recreation - it helps shape transit connections, economic development initiatives, and public health strategies, underscoring its importance in Rhode Island's overall planning ecosystem.

The SCORP's inclusive approach actively involves a diverse range of stakeholders by engaging residents, community-based organizations, non-profits, the private sector, and advocacy groups. This inclusive strategy ensures that the voices of underrepresented communities, recreational users, and local businesses are incorporated into decision-making processes.

By balancing government-driven objectives with grassroots input, the SCORP bridges the gap between statewide policy planning and community-driven initiatives, creating a dynamic and adaptable blueprint for outdoor recreation that reflects the needs and aspirations of all Rhode Islanders.

The SCORP is also a dynamic planning tool, adapting to changing demographics, environmental conditions, and recreational trends. By assessing current challenges and opportunities, it offers a roadmap for enhancing outdoor spaces to meet future demands while protecting the state's ecological and cultural heritage. Furthermore, it informs publicly funded projects, ensuring they align with state priorities while benefiting local communities.



Nicholas Farm, Coventry

Statewide Coverage

The SCORP's scope includes all public outdoor recreation resources in Rhode Island. This comprehensive coverage spans state parks, municipal recreation areas, beaches, trails, conservation lands, and urban green spaces. Recognizing that transit and recreation often overlap, the SCORP encourages close collaboration between agencies to promote considerations for transportation access so that public spaces are reachable and usable for all Rhode Islanders, regardless of geographic or socioeconomic barriers.

This holistic approach enables Rhode Island to coordinate recreation planning with other critical elements of the State Guide Plan, including land use, transportation, and environmental conservation. It also ensures that municipalities and non-profits, as key stewards of local recreation facilities, have a unified framework to align their initiatives with statewide priorities.

Funding Mechanisms Guided by the SCORP

The SCORP is instrumental in unlocking state and federal funding for outdoor recreation. Three key programs directly linked to the plan are:

1. Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF):

The LWCF provides matching grants for the acquisition, development, and rehabilitation of public outdoor spaces. Maintaining an up-to-date SCORP is a prerequisite for Rhode Island to access these funds. Projects funded through the LWCF have included enhancements to beaches, trail networks, and urban green spaces, emphasizing accessibility and environmental sustainability.

2. State Outdoor Recreation Grant Program:

This state grant program, funded by the voter-approved Green Bond, provides funds for the acquisition, development and renovation of outdoor recreational lands and facilities. Cities, towns, and recognized Native American tribes can apply to acquire land that will be used for outdoor recreational purposes, or to improve existing or create new outdoor recreational facilities.

3. Recreational Trails Grant Program:

This grant program funded by the Federal Highway Administration and administered by DEM and the RI Department of Transportation, supports the planning, construction, and maintenance of trail systems that enhance connectivity and promotes active recreation. Municipalities and non-profits use these grants to develop inclusive, safe, and innovative trail experiences that serve as vital links within Rhode Island's recreation system.

Protecting Existing Recreation Resources

In a small, dense state with many competing uses for our land, ensuring that existing recreational resources are protected is paramount. One role of this plan is to help protect existing recreational resources.

Where replacement or conversion of recreational land to another use is considered unavoidable, a “one for one” replacement of the acreage or resource value should be the minimum standard.

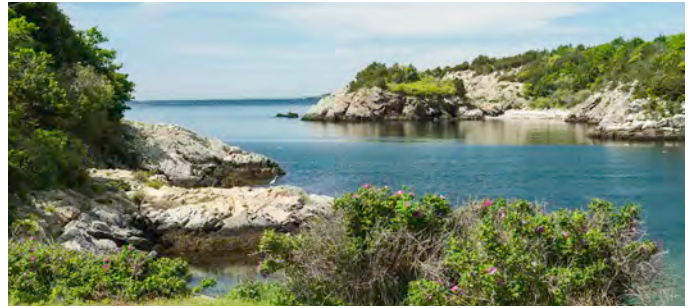
In addition, throughout Rhode Island, there are parcels of unused government land that provide unofficial recreational and open space values. Particularly in urban areas, the open space functions of such lands may have unrecognized but real importance. For example, although unsanctioned for such use, the site may serve as a “de facto” play lot for children having no other opportunities close at hand. Government decisions to part with such parcels should accord public input and serious public significance to these intangible benefits in their calculations of management efficiency or added revenues.

By leveraging these funding mechanisms, the SCORP empowers municipalities to realize transformative projects that expand recreational access, enhance environmental stewardship, and contribute to public health and well-being.

Integrated Planning for Broader Impacts

The SCORP serves multiple interrelated purposes at both the state and federal levels. Its integration into the SGP ensures alignment with other critical planning elements, including transportation, land use, and economic development.

This interconnected approach reinforces the role of recreation as a key component of Rhode Island’s broader growth and sustainability strategies.



Fort Wetherill State Park, Jamestown

Through its focus on inclusivity, accessibility, and strategic investment, the SCORP positions outdoor recreation as a catalyst for community enrichment, environmental resilience, and statewide economic vitality. By coordinating efforts across agencies and communities, the SCORP ensures that Rhode Island’s outdoor spaces continue to inspire, connect, and sustain for generations to come.

A Tool for Implementation

The SCORP serves as a vital tool for implementation, enabling state and local stakeholders to transform strategic goals into tangible outcomes that directly enhance Rhode Island’s outdoor recreation system. Central to this function is the alignment of grant funding with the plan’s goals, priorities, and actionable recommendations. By requiring proposed projects to demonstrate consistency with the SCORP’s objectives, grant programs such as LWCF, the State Outdoor Recreation Grant Program, and the Recreational Trails Grant Program prioritize investments that address Rhode Island’s most pressing recreational needs. This ensures that state and local efforts are both strategic and impactful, fostering progress that benefits all Rhode Islanders.

To support effective implementation, the SCORP outlines a comprehensive “Plan for Action,” which is closely tied to the goals, policy recommendations, and actionable steps detailed in the chapter titled “A Vision for the Future.” Each recommendation within the plan is supported by specific, measurable actions and identifies key implementation partners, including state agencies, municipal governments, non-profits, and community organizations. These actionable steps provide stakeholders with clear pathways for achieving the SCORP’s goals while fostering collaboration and accountability at all levels of execution.

The action plan emphasizes the importance of clear timelines and achievable milestones, differentiating between ongoing initiatives incorporated into annual budgets and single-project actions that require targeted resources. Short- and mid-term actions are designed to be completed within the SCORP's five-year planning horizon, addressing immediate and evolving priorities. Long-term actions, meanwhile, are structured to extend into future planning cycles, ensuring continuity and sustained progress. This phased approach provides a roadmap for stakeholders to prioritize resources, secure funding, and plan for sustainable impact over time.

By bridging visionary planning and practical execution, the SCORP ensures that Rhode Island's outdoor recreation system evolves dynamically to meet community needs, adapt to environmental changes, and reflect the values of its diverse population. Through the integration of planning, funding, and collaboration, the SCORP empowers state and local partners to make informed, impactful decisions, building a recreation network that supports health, accessibility, and environmental stewardship for all Rhode Islanders.

SCORP COMPOSITION/ DOCUMENT STRUCTURE

The SCORP is divided into distinct chapters and sections that guide readers through Rhode Island's outdoor recreation vision, priorities, and actionable steps. Beginning with this **Introduction and Background** section, the document establishes the context for Rhode Island's outdoor recreation system and its importance to public health, environmental resilience, and economic vitality. This is followed by an in-depth discussion of the SCORP's **Purpose and Scope**, which outlines its role as a guiding document and its comprehensive coverage of public recreational spaces.

The **Community and Context** section provides a snapshot of Rhode Island's recreational landscape, including a high-level inventory of facilities, demographic trends, and public feedback. This foundation informs the **Vision for the Future** and **A Plan for Action** chapters, which articulate long-term goals, measurable policies, and actionable steps to achieve them.

Finally, the SCORP includes **appendices** with **technical resources**, public engagement methodologies, and supplementary plans, ensuring that all users have access to the detailed data and frameworks underpinning the plan.

USER GUIDE: NAVIGATING THE SCORP

The Rhode Island Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) is designed to be a practical resource for planners, municipal officials, NGOs, and community stakeholders. This guide explains how to navigate and utilize the document effectively to achieve recreation and conservation goals while aligning with statewide priorities.

Who Should Use the SCORP?

- **Municipal Planners and Officials:** Align local comprehensive plans with state recreation goals, identify funding opportunities, and guide local investments in recreational spaces.
- **State Agencies:** Coordinate recreation efforts across departments, track progress on state-level initiatives, and support municipalities in achieving shared goals.
- **NGOs and Community-based Organizations (CBOs):** Access strategic priorities and identify partnership or funding opportunities for recreation projects.
- **Residents and Advocacy Groups:** Understand the vision for Rhode Island's outdoor recreation system and advocate for local projects.
- **The Business Community:** Gain insights into consumer demands for recreational facilities and activities, enabling the development of services and businesses that cater to these needs while capitalizing on the economic opportunities presented by outdoor recreation.
- **Legislators and Policymakers:** Refer to the SCORP as a strategic guide for decision-making on future investment areas, both physical and topical, recognizing the potential of recreational investment to serve as an economic multiplier and enhance quality of life across the state.

How to Use the SCORP

1. Find Rhode Island's Outdoor Recreation Vision and Goals:

- Start with the **Executive Summary** to gain a quick overview of the SCORP's purpose, key priorities, and action items. This section provides a snapshot of what the plan aims to achieve.

2. Understand the Broader Context:

- Explore the **Introduction, Background, and Purpose** to learn about the history of outdoor recreation planning in Rhode Island, current challenges, and statewide priorities for the future.
- Visit the **Community and Context** chapter to learn how demographic shifts, local and national recreation trends and Rhode Island's outdoor recreation assets are connected.

4. Listen To The People:

- Grasp common themes from **Community Perspectives** that underpin this plan's recommendations.

5. Identify Strategic Priorities:

- The **Vision for the Future** chapter outlines Rhode Island's core recreation priorities, including:

6. Plan for Action:

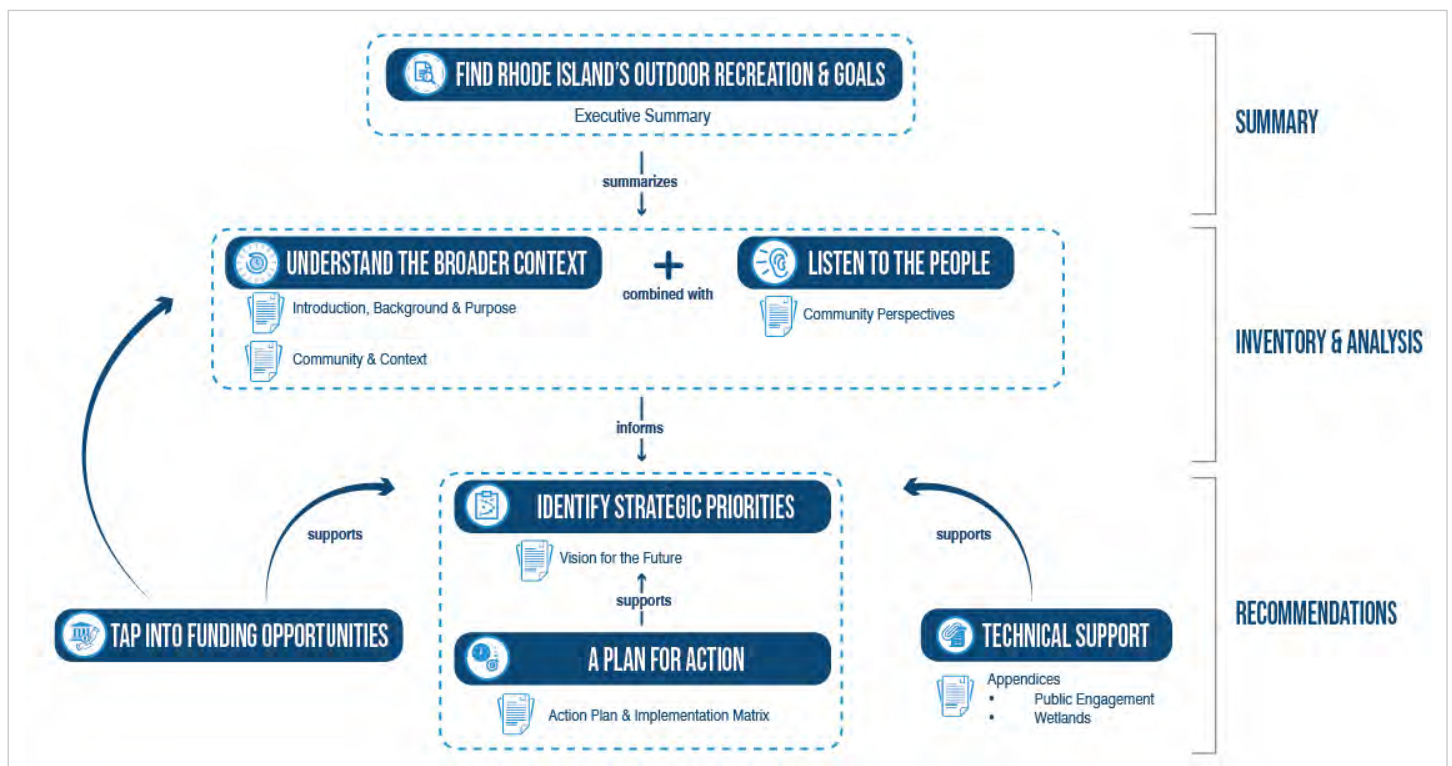
- Use the **Action Plan** to identify specific goals, policies, and short- and long-term steps. This section highlights practical strategies for enhancing outdoor spaces and achieving recreation objectives.
- Monitor and celebrate progress using the implementation framework that identifies the responsible organization(s) and time line for execution.

7. Tap Into Funding Opportunities:

- Refer to the Purpose and Scope section for information on available funding mechanisms, such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), the State Outdoor Recreation Grant Program, and State Trails Grant Program.

9. Leverage Appendices for Technical Support:

- The Appendices provide detailed methodologies, raw public engagement data, and supplementary information to support in-depth planning and decision-making.



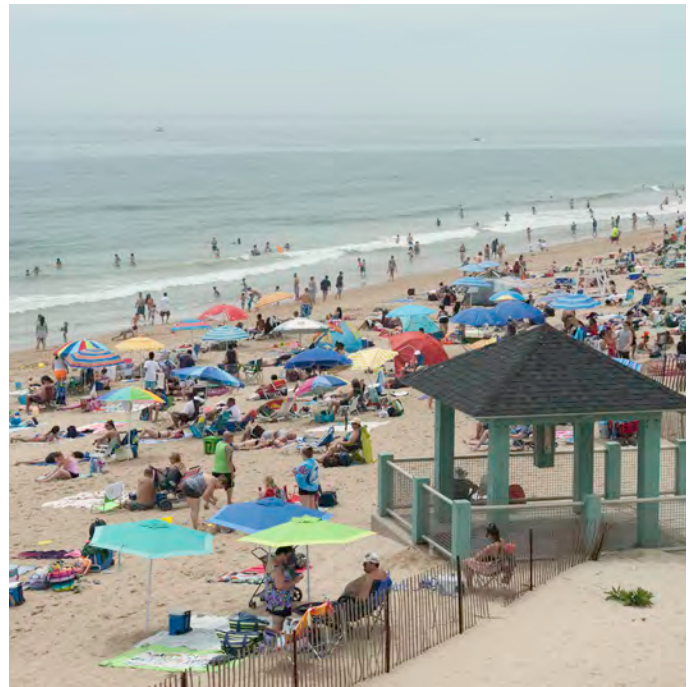
Tips for Effective Use

- **Coordinate Across Sectors:** Use the SCORP to align efforts among local governments, non-profits, and state agencies to create unified, impactful recreation projects.
- **Focus on Inclusivity:** Reference community feedback in the Community and Context section to ensure plans meet the needs of diverse populations.
- **Adapt and Innovate:** The SCORP is a living document, intended to be revisited and adapted as circumstances evolve. Use it as a foundation for creative, forward-thinking recreation planning.

The SCORP is more than a document - it is a tool for collaboration, inspiration, and action. By navigating its sections thoughtfully, users can help ensure that Rhode Island's outdoor spaces continue to enrich lives, promote well-being, and protect the environment for future generations.

2019 SCORP Achievements

With millions visiting Rhode Island's beaches, parks, management areas, and campgrounds each year, RIDEM is advancing several major capital projects to modernize facilities. At Roger Wheeler State Beach, a new bulkhead and boardwalk will deliver sustainable, accessible amenities by this spring. Misquamicut State Beach is getting a new entrance with several new entry lanes to ease heavy traffic. At Burlingame Campground, Phase 1 of restroom upgrades was completed in 2025, replacing three outdated facilities. Phase 2, scheduled for completion in 2027, will add new shower and restroom facilities in three additional sections, including indoor and outdoor hot-water showers. Recently completed projects include Fisherman's State Park Restrooms, East Matunuck State Beach entrance improvements, Fort Adams State Park new maintenance garage.



Misquamicut State Beach, Westerly

Since 2018 DEM has expended \$16.5 M on capital improvements and asset management.

Other completed deliverables from the goals of the previous SCORP include:

- Launch of complimentary sunscreen dispenser stations at all State Beaches and Parks
- Ongoing boating and fishing access improvements including at Lincoln Woods State Park, Main Street Boat Ramp in Westerly, and Rocky Point Fishing Pier in Warwick
- Bicycle infrastructure improvements including expansion of the Woonasquatucket River Greenway in Providence
- Funded three Outdoor Recreation Grant rounds and one Recreational Trails Grant round, distributing over \$14 million in state funds across 70 recreation projects
- State land conservation bond funding secured in 2022 and 2024

THE COMMUNITY AND CONTEXT

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF RHODE ISLAND OUTDOOR RECREATION RESOURCES

Outdoor spaces are more than places of recreation; they are critical infrastructure and essential to our well-being, fostering resilience, equity, and community connection. In Rhode Island, these spaces represent a unique intersection of cultural heritage and natural beauty, where landscapes meet evolving needs for inclusivity and accessibility. Our state's population has grown more diverse, its recreational demands have continued to evolve, and the effects of climate change are increasingly felt. These changes, though they can be challenging, present opportunities for us to protect and enhance Rhode Island's vitally important natural resources. This chapter explores the key demographic factors and current outdoor recreation trends which have the potential to shape the cultural and natural landscapes all throughout Rhode Island. These insights offer us the opportunity to develop strategies we can use to ensure that these spaces continue to inspire and sustain future generations of Rhode Islanders for many years to come.



Fort Adams, Newport

The Many Benefits of Rhode Island's Outdoor Resources

Quality Of Life & Sense of Place

Rhode Island, affectionately known as the Ocean State, boasts an extraordinary wealth of natural resources that define our state's character and support its outdoor recreation system. With over 400 miles of coastline, the state's rich coastal environment, including Narragansett Bay and its surrounding estuaries, plays a central role in the lives of residents and visitors alike. These coastal landscapes not only provide critical habitats for diverse marine and bird species but also serve as prime locations for water-based recreation such as fishing, paddling, sailing, and beachgoing.

The state's inland areas are equally impressive. Mature hardwood forests, rolling hills, wetlands, and rivers offer opportunities for hiking, birdwatching, and other land-based recreational activities. Protected natural areas, such as those managed by the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM), municipalities, and NGO's, are essential for preserving biodiversity and ensuring access to green spaces for all our communities, now and into the future.

74% of public opinion survey respondents agree or strongly agree that outdoor recreation is an essential part of their life.

Rhode Island's agricultural and fishing heritage is deeply intertwined with its outdoor recreational culture. Family-owned farms contribute to the scenic rural landscapes that define much of the state, while farmer's markets and agritourism destinations offer residents and tourists alike a connection to the land. Similarly, the state's many active harbors showcase a working waterfront that sustains livelihoods and provides inspiration for recreational fishing and boating enthusiasts.

Nature's Role in Promoting Public Health in the Ocean State

Rhode Island's natural resources are not only aesthetically pleasing but also critical to public health and wellness. Engaging in outdoor recreation has been shown to reduce stress, improve mental and physical health, and strengthen community connections. For Rhode Islanders, spending time outdoors is more than a pastime—it is a way of life. Whether walking along a wooded trail, casting a line into the bay, or simply enjoying a picnic at a local park, these activities reflect the intrinsic value of accessible outdoor spaces.

Research indicates that spending at least 120 minutes in nature per week can significantly boost health and well-being.¹ Activities such as hiking and fishing are particularly popular among adults over age 55, promoting both physical health and social connection.² Moreover, exposure to natural environments has been linked to improved mood, reduced anxiety, and enhanced cognitive function.³

Environmental and Economic Benefits of Rhode Island's Outdoor Resources

As Rhode Island confronts challenges like urban sprawl, climate change, and increasing demand for recreational spaces, the imperative to protect and manage our natural assets has never been more critical. Conservation efforts are essential to preserving these areas for future generations, offering vital ecosystem services such as water filtration, carbon sequestration, and wildlife habitats. For instance, Rhode Island's forests play a significant role in carbon sequestration, helping to mitigate climate change impacts.⁴

Moreover, outdoor recreation is a substantial contributor to Rhode Island's economy. The outdoor recreation sector accounts for 2.4% of the state's gross domestic product (GDP), generating \$1.9 billion in value added and supporting approximately 17,828 direct jobs. Specifically, Rhode Island's state parks attract over 9 million visits annually, infusing more than \$310 million into the economy and contributing approximately \$40 million in state and local taxes.⁶

Types of Outdoor Recreation Resources

Rhode Island's outdoor recreation facilities are diverse and plentiful, offering opportunities for residents and visitors to engage with our state's rich natural and cultural landscapes. These resources include state parks, beaches, hiking and biking trails, fishing access points, and sports fields – all integral parts of our shared recreational network. Together, they form a comprehensive system, aimed at meeting the state's recreation needs.

State-Managed Facilities

DEM oversees a robust network of parks, forests, beaches, and wildlife management areas that enrich our communities. These include iconic destinations such as Colt State Park, offering sprawling open spaces along the shoreline, and Burlingame State Park, with its camping facilities and access to trails and waterways. Rhode Island's state beaches, including Misquamicut and East Matunuck, are particularly beloved, drawing thousands of visitors annually for swimming, sunbathing, and water sports.

DEM-managed facilities also extend to wildlife management areas and fishing access points, which cater to hunters, anglers, and conservation enthusiasts. Popular destinations include Arcadia Management Area, with over 14,000 acres of forestland and the Galilee Boat Ramp, which provides key access to Point Judith Pond and the Atlantic Ocean. These spaces preserve critical habitats while providing recreational opportunities that connect the public to Rhode Island's ecological heritage.

¹ Healthline. (2019). Health benefits of being outdoors: 8 ways nature can boost wellness. Retrieved from <https://www.healthline.com/health/health-benefits-of-being-outdoors>

² National Environmental Education Foundation. (2021). Enjoy the health benefits of the outdoors at any age. Retrieved from <https://www.neefusa.org/story/health-and-environment/enjoy-health-benefits-outdoors-any-age>

³ U.S. Forest Service. (2019). The wellness benefits of the great outdoors: A systematic review. Retrieved from <https://www.fs.usda.gov/about-agency/features/wellness-benefits-great-outdoors>

⁴ Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (n.d.). Value of forests. Retrieved from <https://dem.ri.gov/natural-resources-bureau/agriculture-and-forest-environment/value-of-forests>

⁶ Rhode Island General Assembly. (2021). Testimony on outdoor recreation: Economic benefits and visitation statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.rilegis-lature.gov/Special/comdoc/House%20Oversight/04-19-2021-House%20Oversight%20Outdoor%20Recreation%202021.pdf>

Local and Municipal Resources

Our cities and towns contribute significantly to the state's outdoor recreation system through municipal parks, playgrounds, athletic facilities and multi-use trails. Local green spaces like Roger Williams Park in Providence serve as community hubs, offering walking paths, picnic areas, and cultural attractions. Additionally, municipal sports fields and courts support youth and adult athletic programs, promoting active lifestyles, sports tourism and community engagement.

Municipalities also play a key role in maintaining public access to the state's extensive shoreline. Through partnerships with the Coastal Resources Management Council and other agencies, cities and towns ensure that people have access to beaches, boat launches, and scenic coastal walkways.

Privately Managed Resources

Private organizations and non-profits further enhance our state's recreation system by managing nature preserves, conservation lands, and specialized facilities. The Audubon Society of Rhode Island, for example, maintains several wildlife refuges with trails and educational programming.⁷ Similarly, land trusts across the state protect critical natural areas, offering public access while preserving Rhode Island's environmental integrity.⁸ The Nature Conservancy contributes by managing significant properties, such as the 2,200-acre Tillinghast Pond Management Area in West Greenwich⁹ and several conserved lands on Block Island, which are vital for recreation and biodiversity.

Summary Statistics of Facilities

The state's outdoor recreation system includes an impressive variety of resources:

- **Trails and Multi-Use Paths:** Rhode Island has over 400 miles of trails that cater to hikers, cyclists, runners, and nature enthusiasts. These include everything from urban greenway paths like the East Bay Bike Path to rugged hiking trails in state parks such as Arcadia Management Area.

- **Saltwater Beaches:** Rhode Island is home to more than 30 60 (DOH tests 60 salt water beaches) state and local beaches, offering expansive public access to the coastline. Popular destinations like Misquamicut State Beach and East Matunuck Beach provide vital spaces for swimming, sunbathing, and water sports.
- **Fishing, Boating, and Paddling Access:** Rhode Island offers approximately 60 saltwater fishing access points and 115 freshwater fishing access points, along with 66 state-managed boat ramps and 58 locally managed launch sites. These facilities provide opportunities for recreational fishing, kayaking, and boating across diverse aquatic environments, including Narragansett Bay, inland ponds, and rivers.
- **Conservation Areas:** DEM and other conservation entities in the state together manage over 70,000 acres of conservation land. These management areas and preserves are critical for hiking, hunting, birdwatching, and conserving biodiversity.
- **Sports Fields and Courts:** Local municipalities maintain a robust network of sports fields and courts, supporting activities such as soccer, baseball, basketball, and tennis. Many parks, such as Roger Williams Park, offer multi-use facilities that serve as community hubs.
- **Playgrounds and Family-Oriented Spaces:** Rhode Island boasts 357 public playgrounds, many managed by municipalities.
- **Campgrounds:** RIDEM manages five campgrounds with a total of 1,048 campsites. This total includes locations like the George Washington Campground, Burlingame State Campground, and Charlestown Breachway.

⁸ Rhode Island Land Trust Council. (n.d.). Find a RI land trust. Retrieved from <https://rilandtrusts.org/find-a-land-trust-in-your-community/>

⁹ The Nature Conservancy. (n.d.). Tillinghast Pond Management Area. Retrieved from <https://westgreenwichlandtrust.org/properties/tillinghast>

SHIFTING TIDES: DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC TRENDS

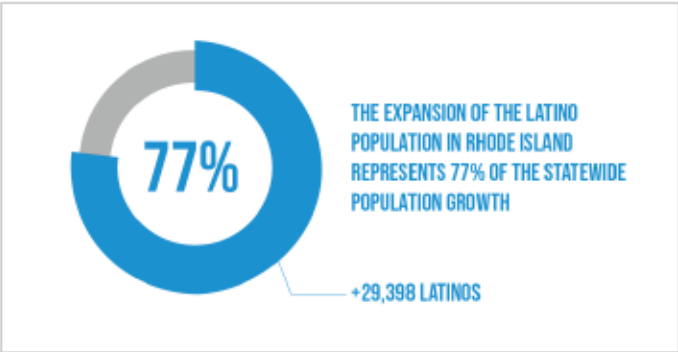
Rhode Island is experiencing demographic and economic shifts that are reshaping its communities and influencing the future of outdoor recreation. Population growth, driven by an expanding Latino community, highlights the increasing diversity within the state. Concurrently, the growing aging population underscores the need to address the unique challenges and opportunities associated with an older demographic. Economic dynamics, including disparities in income levels across household types and age groups, further illustrate the complexities of planning for equitable access to recreation. These changes call for adaptive strategies to ensure that our state's parks, programs, and community spaces meet the evolving needs of its residents, fostering inclusivity, accessibility, and cultural responsiveness.



Scarborough Beach, Narragansett

Key Demographic Changes

Recent demographic data reveals noteworthy shifts in Rhode Island's population. The U.S. Census Bureau's 2023 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates show that between 2020 and 2023, the state experienced a 3.6% increase in population, rising from 1,057,798 to 1,095,962. A significant driver of this growth has been the expansion of the Latino population, which increased from 168,007 individuals in 2020 to 197,405 in 2023 representing 77% of statewide population growth during that time period, highlighting the demographic's critical role in shaping the state's population trends.¹



In addition to this growth, Rhode Island continues to see its population aging. The median age rose from 36.7 years in 2000¹² to 40.8 years in 2023, with notable increases in older age groups.



The number of individuals aged 65 to 74 grew substantially from 73,684 to 123,761, while those aged 60 to 64 increased from 39,007 to 77,491.¹ Similarly, the population of residents aged 75 to 84 also saw a substantial rise from 57,821 to 65,227 during this time.¹ This represents 95,967 new individuals 60 or older in RI.

¹ Healthline. (2019). Health benefits of being outdoors: 8 ways nature can boost wellness. Retrieved from <https://www.healthline.com/health/health-benefits-of-being-outdoors>

¹² U.S. Census Bureau. (2001). Census 2000 Summary File 1 Technical Documentation. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce. Retrieved from https://www2.census.gov/census_2000/datasets/Summary_File_1/0Technical_Documentation/

These demographic trends reflect a state undergoing significant changes, driven by both the vibrant growth of the Latino community and an increasingly aging population. These shifts present new challenges and opportunities for our planners, policymakers, and community leaders as they work to address the evolving recreation needs of a diverse and aging population.

Income Inequality

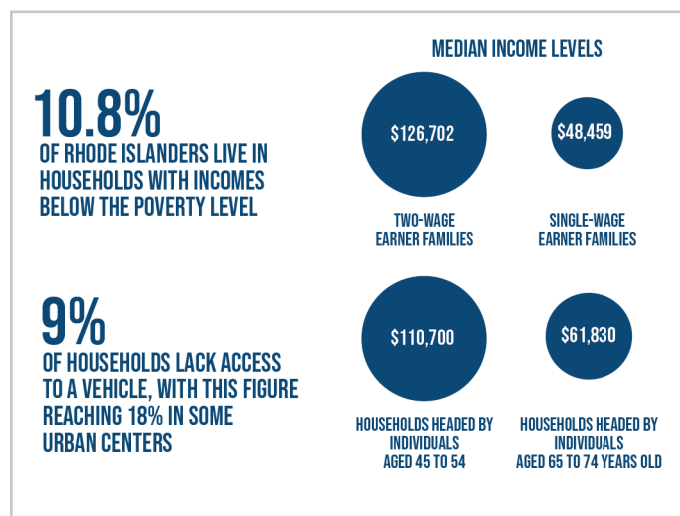
Median household income in the state has grown to \$81,854, reflecting a positive trend despite ongoing economic pressures from inflation and lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³ And yet, as of 2022, approximately 10.8% of Rhode Islanders live in households with incomes below the federal poverty level, encompassing a significant portion of the population for whom poverty status is determined.¹⁴ Furthermore, income levels vary widely across household types. Two-wage-earner families reported a median income of \$126,702, while single-wage-earner households earned a median income of \$48,459, far below half of two-wage earner households.¹³ Married-couple families with children continue to enjoy higher median earnings, while households headed by single mothers with children remain disproportionately affected by lower incomes, often falling below poverty thresholds.^{13 11}

Household income disparities are also evident across different age groups. Prime earning years (households headed by individuals aged 45 to 54) see median incomes (\$110,700) that significantly outpace those of older households led by individuals 65 to 74 years old (\$61,830), further illustrating the challenges faced by seniors, especially those on fixed incomes.¹³

These economic disparities have direct implications for outdoor recreation access in Rhode Island. Low-income households, whether in urban or rural areas, face unique barriers to accessing recreational spaces. In urban areas, neighborhoods with higher concentrations of low-income households often have fewer parks or recreational facilities. Per capita park availability highlights these disparities: urban areas like Providence have approximately 6.2 parks per 10,000 residents, compared to rural areas where availability can exceed 14 parks per 10,000 residents.

However, the presence of parks alone does not ensure access; in urban areas, challenges such as the size, maintenance, and perceived safety of parks can further deter use.¹⁶

Transportation access to and between outdoor recreation opportunities also plays a critical role in shaping one's ability to experience the outdoors. Across Rhode Island, 10% of households lack access to a vehicle, with this figure reaching nearly 20% in some urban centers.¹⁷ Affordable transportation options are a significant barrier for many residents, particularly in low-income communities. Studies have shown that individuals in these areas often face limited public transit options and the high cost of private vehicle ownership, which restrict their ability to access recreational spaces.¹⁸ This barrier is compounded by concerns about safety and the practicality of using public transportation for outdoor activities.¹⁹



¹¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). 2023 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Retrieved from the Rhode Island demographic data table.

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates: Household income distribution by type. Retrieved from the provided dataset.

¹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates: Poverty status of individuals by household type. Retrieved from the provided dataset.

¹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). American Community Survey 5-year estimates. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs>

¹⁸ American Public Health Association. (2015). Equity and Transportation: Safe Routes to School National Partnership. Retrieved from <https://www.apha.org>

¹⁹ Urban Institute. (n.d.). Upward Mobility: Transportation Barriers. Retrieved from <https://upward-mobility.urban.org>

Youth from under-resourced communities are particularly impacted, with transportation costs and safety concerns likely preventing their participation in outdoor activities such as trail use.²⁰ In rural areas, vehicle ownership is higher overall, but residents without vehicles still face difficulties accessing parks due to geographic isolation and minimal public transportation infrastructure.²¹

Although rural areas generally have higher per capita park availability, geographic isolation and limited infrastructure still restrict access to these spaces. Conversely, in more densely populated urban areas, access challenges are often tied to aging infrastructure, safety concerns, transportation limitations and in some cities, limited acreage of parkland. Together, these factors reveal the complexities of ensuring equitable access to recreational spaces across Rhode Island's diverse communities.

Projected Trends and Implications

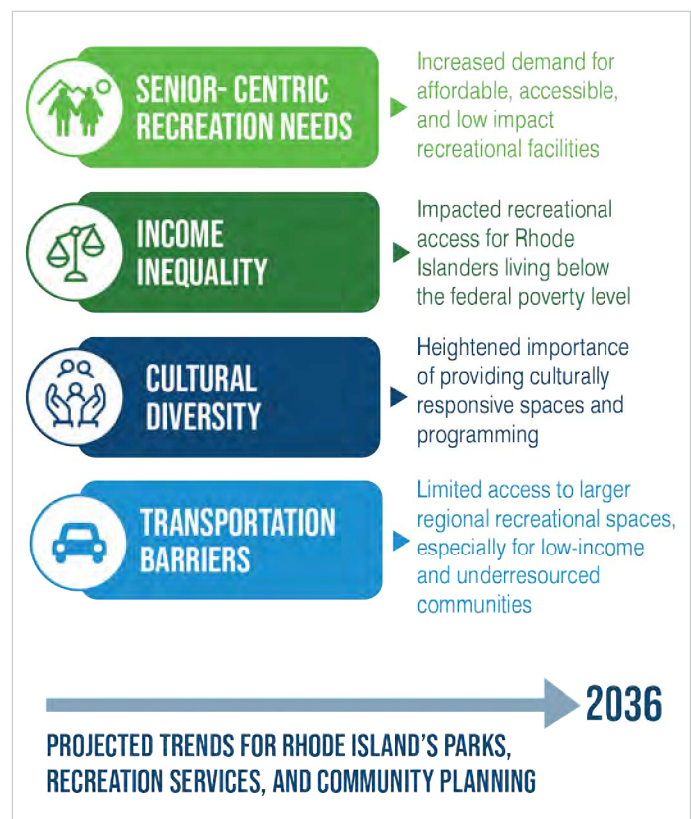
The demographic and income trends outlined above suggest several possible implications for Rhode Island's parks, recreation services, and community planning as the state progresses toward 2030:

- **Senior-Centric Recreation Needs:** Rhode Island's aging population, combined with fixed or lower incomes among older households, suggests increasing demand for affordable, accessible, and low-impact recreational facilities. Activities such as walking, birdwatching, and fishing are particularly popular among adults over age 55, reflecting the importance of smooth walking paths, shaded seating areas, and spaces for social connection.
- **Affordability and Access:** Approximately 10.8% of Rhode Islanders live below the federal poverty level, with significant income disparities across household types and age groups. Income inequality can impact recreational access, particularly for single-parent households and those on fixed incomes. Living below the federal poverty level often leaves little in the way of an expendable income to purchase equipment, memberships, registration fees or travel to outdoor destinations.

- **Cultural Diversity in Recreation:**

The expanding Latino population, which has driven a significant portion of the state's population growth in recent years, highlights the importance of providing culturally responsive spaces and programming.

- **Urban and Rural Disparities in Access:** Urban areas often face challenges tied to insufficient park space and aging infrastructure, while rural areas contend with geographic isolation and limited transportation infrastructure.
- **Transportation Barriers:** Approximately 10% of households statewide lack access to a vehicle, with this figure nearing 20% in some urban centers. This limits access to larger, regional recreational spaces, especially for low-income and under-resourced communities. Rural residents without vehicles may face even greater challenges, given minimal public transportation options.



²⁰ American Society of Landscape Architects. (2021). Trail Access and Use for Youth from Under-Resourced Communities. Retrieved from <https://thefield.asla.org>

²¹ Rhode Island Division of Planning. (2020). Long-Range Transportation Plan: Appendix D. Retrieved from <https://planning.ri.gov>

These trends underscore the need for Rhode Island to proactively adapt its recreational offerings to meet the diverse and evolving needs of its population, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility for all communities.

NATIONAL TRENDS IN OUTDOOR RECREATION

Since 2020, outdoor recreation in the U.S. has experienced transformative shifts, influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, demographic diversification, climate change, social and political unrest, chronic disease and emerging technology. These changes reflect both challenges and opportunities, as recreation evolves to meet the growing needs of our broader and more diverse population.



Blackstone Valley Bikeway

Post-Pandemic Surge in Outdoor Activity

The pandemic significantly altered how Americans engage with outdoor spaces. According to the Outdoor Industry Association (OIA), the outdoor recreation participant base grew to a record 168.1 million individuals in 2022, representing 55% of the U.S. population aged six and older. Activities such as hiking, camping, and biking surged in popularity as people sought safe, socially distanced ways to exercise and connect with nature. Gateway activities like hiking and camping proved particularly pivotal, drawing millions of new participants. For example, there were nearly 5.8 million new entrants across the U.S. into activities such as camping, birding, and paved-surface bicycling in 2022 alone.²²

Diverse Demographics Driving Change

Outdoor recreation has seen a marked increase in participation among historically underrepresented groups. Latino participants, for instance, demonstrated the highest annual growth rate of 5.5% over the past five years.²³ Additionally, outdoor activity participation rates among members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) community continue to be the most active adult cohort, with participation rates totaling 60%.²⁴ Programs aimed at increasing inclusivity, such as Movement Education Outdoors and Thrive Outside, are successfully diversifying the participant base by offering transformative outdoor experiences in partnership with local teachers and communities. With a focus on eliminating barriers to access, these programs provide multiple access points for youth of color and of limited economic resources to experience wellness and enhance STEM learning in outdoor environments.

Age demographics are also shifting. Participation among seniors aged 55 and older reached a record 35% in 2022, with activities like birdwatching and hiking have become popular choices for this age group.²⁵ Among youth, adventure-oriented activities such as climbing, snowshoeing, and backpacking are gaining traction.²⁶

²² Outdoor Industry Association. (2023). Outdoor Participation Trends Report. Retrieved from <https://outdoorindustry.org/participation/>

²³ Outdoor Industry Association. (2023). Outdoor Participation Trends Report. Retrieved from <https://outdoorindustry.org/participation/>

²⁴ Outdoor Industry Association. (2023). Outdoor Participation Trends Report. Retrieved from <https://outdoorindustry.org/participation/>

²⁵ Outdoor Industry Association. (2023). Outdoor Participation Trends Report. Retrieved from <https://outdoorindustry.org/participation/>

²⁶ Outdoor Industry Association. (2023). 2023 Outdoor Participation Trends - Outdoor Industry Association. Retrieved from <https://outdoorindustry.org/participation/>

Social and Environmental Influences

Income inequality, highly contested elections and political divide have contributed to increased instances of civil unrest.²⁷ Simultaneously, the loneliness and isolation epidemic and prevalence of chronic disease are taking their toll on communities across the U.S. Lastly, the effects of climate change are felt more frequently and deeply as intense storms, extreme heat, flooding and wildfires threaten human lives and assets.

Parks and outdoor spaces have begun to play a critical role in mitigating these threats to health, quality of life and the environment. Parks are democratic spaces that bring people together and improve community cohesion. Parks can serve as the first line of defense against coastal flooding and sea level rise and mitigate urban heat islands. Spending time in parks and open space improves mental and physical health. For these reasons, outdoor recreation in the 21st Century has evolved into critical infrastructure with the potential to solve our nation's most pressing challenges.

Activity Trends and Preferences

Certain outdoor activities continue to dominate the national landscape. Day hiking remains the most popular, with 59.6 million participants in 2022 . Running, camping, and bicycling also rank highly, supported by their accessibility and versatility. Notably, activities like skateboarding, surfing, and birdwatching have exhibited the highest annual growth rates, reflecting an expanding interest in niche outdoor experiences.

Technological advancements play a vital role in shaping these trends. Mobile apps now enable participants to access trail maps, safety information, and virtual communities, enhancing the overall outdoor experience. The rise of remote work has also spurred demand for outdoor-adjacent lifestyles, popularizing extended camping trips, RV travel, and “van life”.²⁸

The Economic Significance

The outdoor recreation economy is a powerful engine, generating \$887 billion in annual consumer spending and supporting 7.6 million American jobs.²⁹ In 2021, the National Recreation and Parks Agency reported 1,063 jobs, \$57,651,215 in labor income, \$78,385,103 in value add (similar to GDP, including property income, dividends, corporate profits, etc.), and \$148,300,764 in output (the value of resulting transactions) from local Rhode Island parks alone.³⁰

These trends underscore the importance of continued investment in public lands, urban parks, conservation areas and recreational infrastructure to meet the evolving needs of a diverse and growing participant base. By recognizing and adapting to these national trends, the state can align its recreation planning to reflect the preferences and aspirations of its own residents, ensuring inclusivity, accessibility, and sustainability in its outdoor recreation system.



Lincoln Woods State Park, Lincoln

²⁷ Maplecroft. (2024). Risk Of Unrest In US At Highest Levels Since 2020 Protests: <https://www.maplecroft.com/products-and-solutions/geopolitical-and-country-risk/insights/risk-of-unrest-in-us-at-highest-levels-since-2020-protests/>.

²⁸ Outdoor Industry Association. (2023). 2023 Outdoor Participation Trends - Outdoor Industry Association. Retrieved from <https://outdoorindustry.org/participation/>.

²⁹ Outdoor Industry Association. (2023). The Outdoor Recreation Economy. Retrieved from <https://outdoorindustry.org/>.

³⁰ National Recreation and Parks Association. (2023). The Economic Impact of Parks. Retrieved from: <https://www.nrpa.org/contentassets/f568e0ca499743a08148e3593c860fc5/2023-economic-impact-report.pdf>

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

Introduction & Key Findings

This plan is the result of a comprehensive public engagement strategy that energized and empowered Rhode Islanders from all walks of life to participate in the planning of a future vision for statewide outdoor recreation. Focused on understanding supply and demand for outdoor recreation state-wide, the engagement process revealed the needs and wants of the public far exceed what is available, especially for saltwater beaches, and facilities for walking, running, hiking and biking. This reported mismatch between the demand for outdoor recreation opportunities and the finite recreation resources statewide was also expressed as needed improvements in maintenance, support facilities and accessible facilities (complying with the ADA). The following summarizes the key findings of the community engagement process, which included feedback from 3,500 participants.

- **Maintenance & Environmental Stewardship:** 63% of public survey respondents identified lack of maintenance as a top threat to outdoor recreation. The cumulative effects of high demand for finite recreation resources, lack of environmental stewardship by the public, and public funding and staffing limitations make it increasingly difficult for providers to offer well-maintained facilities.

- **Meeting Outdoor Recreation Needs:** 71% of participants expressed interest in more events and festivals, reflecting high demand for expanded programming. Nature-based activities, adult programs and special events are ranked as top programs and services survey respondents would like to see more of. Expansion of current offerings is also needed to meet the desire for youth and teen programs, environmental education, family-friendly and multigenerational activities, and culturally diverse events.

Aside from ongoing maintenance and upgrades and expansion of existing facilities, survey participants chose additional shoreline access points as priorities for investment (27% and 23% of respondents, respectfully).

- **Cultural Relevance:** High demand exists for recreational spaces and programs that reflect cultural preferences and interests, such as group settings and activities, multicultural events, and culturally responsive amenities, but the supply of such offerings remains limited.
- **Support Facilities:** Restrooms (80%), parking (72%), and weather shelters (48%) ranked as top priorities in surveys, underscoring demand for basic amenities. Participants also selected insufficient parking as the number one reason (38%) keeping them from using outdoor recreation areas more often, followed by facilities being too crowded (33%). Insufficient supply of seating, trash receptacles, wayfinding signage, and ADA-compliant trails also limits user satisfaction.
- **Barriers to access:** Perceived safety, cost, limited public transportation, disconnected walking routes in disrepair, and beachfront access points limited by private ownership were reported as hurdles to enjoying the outdoors. Strategies are needed that reduce barriers and open opportunities for all Rhode Islanders to experience outdoor recreation and natural environments.

- **Accessibility:** Increasing demand for accessible facilities and amenities remains unmet, with participants noting the need for clear, updated information about accessibility features and routes.
- **Communication Issues:** 32% of survey respondents were unaware of what available outdoor recreation opportunities exist and where, highlighting a gap in supply of clear, centralized and consistent marketing and signage to meet public demand for recreation opportunities.
- **Funding Needs:** 67% of respondents identified funding limitations as a challenge and the top threat to the future of outdoor recreation in Rhode Island. Participants expressed that current funding levels do not meet the growing demand for on-going and deferred maintenance, facility improvements, and expanded programming.

The Engagement Process

The 2019 SCORP engagement process focused on targeted needs, wants and degree of satisfaction for various recreation assets (campgrounds, beaches, fields and athletics, skateboarding, etc), and reached the general public together with outdoor recreation enthusiasts. An added component for this current plan is a tailored engagement process that identifies the traditionally under-engaged populations' barriers to participation and use of recreation programs and amenities. While still gauging the general public's needs and demands for outdoor recreation, the new component was intended to inform recommendations that remove barriers for this group, whether physical, cultural, financial or lack of knowledge, in order to expand access to the benefits of Rhode Island's outdoor recreation resources.

This innovative and multi-faceted public outreach campaign met citizens in the places they frequent most in order to reach historically under-engaged populations in a culturally-responsive way. This resulted in meaningful feedback from diverse voices. A detailed summary of the engagement plan and events is provided in the Appendix.



Community perspectives

The engagement process was primarily focused on gaining insight into:

- **Supply and Demand:** Which state and local facilities do participants frequent most and why? Are existing resources adequate? What amenities are most popular? Which types of facilities or amenities would participants like to see more of?
- **Barriers to use:** What are the reasons individuals do not use parks, blueways and greenways; frequent beaches or campgrounds, participate in local or state recreation programs, or visit managed lands for hunting, boating and fishing.

By understanding where gaps are between supply and demand, and the reasons people aren't using outdoor recreation facilities provides a foundation for the priority recommendations of the SCORP. Removing barriers to access and participation, whether physical or cultural, results in an expanded user base so more people can enjoy the benefits and joy of outdoor recreation.

When crafting the engagement plan, sub-goals were considered so the engagement process itself not only collected information, but also provided a benefit to the community members who participated. These benefits targeted:

- **Empowerment:** Actively engage underrepresented and underinvested communities, to promote an inclusive, accessible, and authentic process. Empower participants to feel invested in the outcomes of their engagement and that their input matters when it may not have in the past.
- **Productivity:** Provide meaningful opportunities for learning and collaboration. An engagement process is strengthened by including aspects of education so members of the public can gain a deeper understanding about the benefits of outdoor recreation and what opportunities are available to them. Directly connecting participant feedback to the plan recommendations is a way to co-create the SCORP, making use of the action plan to champion the needs and wants of the public.
- **Expand Usership:** Encourage greater use of parks by fostering long-term stewardship and building sustainable relationships that support ongoing dialogue.

A strong presence throughout the planning process naturally brings awareness to outdoor recreation opportunities and benefits, and encourages use. Initial conversations with participants spark dialog about the needs and wants of the public that serve as a launching point for future conversations.

- **Creativity:** Infuse the process with creativity and enjoyment, ensuring engagement activities are memorable and meaningful. After all, engagement around a plan focused on outdoor recreation and parks should be fun! More than an exchange of information, the activities intend to "give-back" to the participants.

Target Audiences

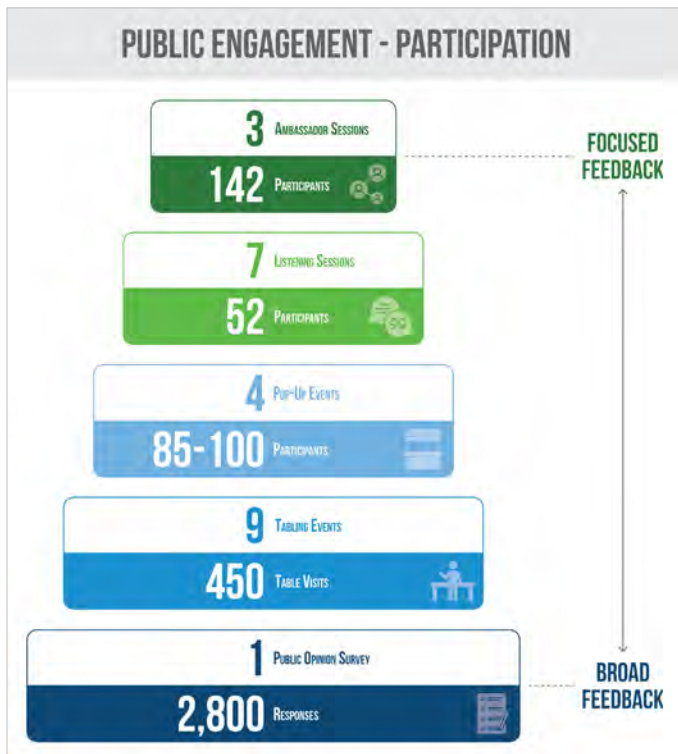
The 2026 SCORP engagement plan builds on insights gathered during the 2019 SCORP, expanding outreach efforts to connect with a diverse audience that reflects the full spectrum of Rhode Islanders. This process aimed to engage current users, as well as those who are unaware of or not actively using parks and recreation resources. Public input was gathered from four key populations:

- **The General Public:** This group encompasses Rhode Island residents with varying levels of engagement in outdoor recreation, including frequent users, occasional visitors, and those who benefit indirectly. This group represents diverse demographics and interests and was targeted to understand general perspectives on the public's awareness of what is offered in the way of outdoor recreation resources, which recreation resources are used most regardless of ownership, and what the current recreation needs are for programs, amenities and facilities.
- **Youth (under 18) and seniors (65+):** Working with youth and seniors, two groups who are often insufficiently engaged, provides insights into the unique needs, preferences and barriers these populations face. This plan identifies tools, resources and strategies to better address these specific needs and challenges. This approach contributes to an inclusive planning process reflective of the population's diversity.

- **Traditionally under-engaged populations:**

These are individuals who may lack equal access to outdoor recreation due to a variety of factors like new residency, limited information, socioeconomic or disability status. Engaging this group helps identify strategies for promotion, reducing barriers and increased participation.

Through the strategies outlined below, the engagement process reached over 3,500 participants, representing diverse ages, cultural backgrounds, genders, and abilities. This broad participation ensures the SCORP reflects perspectives from all corners of Rhode Island.



Layered Approach: A layered approach to engagement resulted in both broad and focused perspectives from over 3,500 participants

Strategies For Community Engagement

To raise awareness about the SCORP and gather input on outdoor recreation needs, the engagement plan utilized several different methods to capture a wide range of perspectives. Efforts included a mix of in-person and virtual approaches designed to lower barriers to participation as follows:

In person events:

- 1) **Tabling at events** – the SCORP team set up shop at large community events and recreational sites to bring awareness to the planning process and to reach the general RI population - including an Earth Day event in Providence, the Washington County Fair, and Scarborough Beach in Narragansett.
- 2) **Listening sessions** – pre-planned listening sessions engaged youth, seniors, and recreational directors through in-person and virtual platforms.
- 3) **Outreach sessions with “SCORP Ambassadors”** – located at key community hubs including the West End Community Center Mobile Food Pantry, Groundwork RI, and with the Rhode Island Governor’s Commission on Disabilities and hosted by key community members identified as “SCORP Ambassadors”, these sessions were designed especially to reach unaware non-users.
- 4) **Pop-up events** – hosted at locations throughout the state selected for their target demographics and highly accessible spaces, such as the Woonsocket Harris Public Library, Payne Park in Pawtucket, and Hopkins Square in Providence.



PaynePark-Popup

- 5) **Public meetings** – offered in an open-house style to get feedback on the draft plan from the general public at the end of the project.

Virtual activities:

- 1) **Online public survey** and **Municipal Recreation Directors survey**
- 2) **Social media campaigns**
- 3) **Draft plan posted online** with **Public comment period**

Each event was thoughtfully tailored to resonate with its audience, ensuring meaningful and culturally responsive engagement. The geographic distribution of these efforts underscores the State's commitment to statewide inclusivity. Engagement events were strategically distributed across Rhode Island's urban centers, suburban neighborhoods, and rural areas. Notable urban locations included Providence and Woonsocket, while rural and suburban outreach extended to Pulaski State Park and Misquamicut Beach. These efforts were

See Appendix A for the Public Engagement Plan in its entirety.



KEY FINDINGS & THEMES

Public engagement efforts for the SCORP highlighted widespread appreciation for the state's natural beauty and recreational offerings, alongside a clear desire for improvements. Participants emphasized the importance of addressing barriers such as accessibility challenges, maintenance concerns, and limited public transportation options.

Effective communication and marketing were also noted as vital for raising awareness and connecting people with available resources. Access emerged as a multi-faceted issue, including cost, equity, transportation, walkability, and physical accessibility.

Suggestions from the public included expanding environmental education programs, creating more family- and youth-friendly spaces, and improving facilities like restrooms, seating areas at beaches and wayfinding signage throughout parks and campgrounds. These insights reflect the diverse needs of Rhode Islanders and form the foundation for SCORP's inclusive and community-driven vision for the future of outdoor recreation. Each theme is explored in greater detail in the sections that follow. The below graphic summarizes the input received during tabling and pop-up events in during the 2024 community engagement efforts.

Maintenance & Environmental Stewardship

Above all other topics, participants across all engagement activities consistently identified maintenance as a concern. Topping the need for new land or expanded outdoor recreation opportunities and more beach access points, public opinion survey respondents chose ongoing maintenance of existing facilities and areas as the number one priority for investment. In addition, 63% of respondents chose lack of maintenance as a greater threat to the future of outdoor recreation than overcrowding, limited funding, staffing shortages, and climate change.

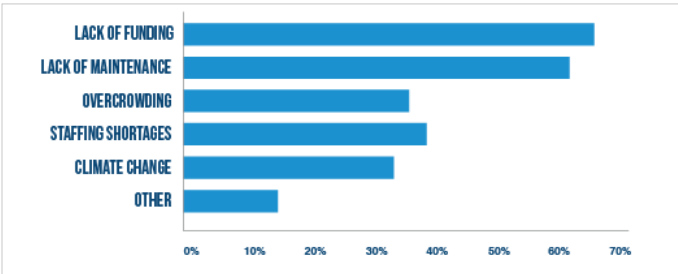
"Many (people) LOVE what RHODE ISLAND has to Offer (in the way of outdoor recreation resources)!"

– Bristol Beach Tabling Event Participant

Rhode Island's outdoor recreation opportunities are beloved by residents and visitors alike and yet, they are limited in quantity and scale, forcing a growing demand upon a limited supply. Similarly, not all lands used for recreation are intended for public recreation as the primary function – many primarily serve as management and conservation lands – to protect drinking water quality, sensitive species and habitat, and forest health. While such conserved lands are available to the public for uses including boating, fishing, swimming, hiking, hunting, biking and nature observation, their conservation purposes should not be compromised. When these publicly accessible lands are used for purposes other than intended, or at a frequency and intensity not planned for, and the public's expectations for maintenance go beyond the established practices to support the original use, misalignment between what agencies are able to provide and the public's expectations occurs.

When facilitating pop-up and tabling events at beaches, whether fresh or saltwater, issues such as trash accumulation, broken handrails, and deteriorating infrastructure were repeatedly cited as barriers to visitor enjoyment. Participants frequently emphasized the importance of natural resource and pest management during engagement events. Issues such as rodent infestations, waterfowl waste, pet waste, and the overgrowth of aquatic plants were commonly cited concerns at freshwater beaches and municipal parks. The public believes their observations signify a lack of adequate natural resource and pest management – however complex issues beyond the control of local managers are also at play, from invasive aquatic plants infestations spread by recreational boaters, to a lack of pet-owner responsibility. Several significant efforts are underway to educate users and provide facilities such as boat washing stations to address the problem.

The results of the public opinion survey were consistent with this theme. When asked to identify the greatest threat to the future of outdoor recreation in Rhode Island, maintenance upkeep was the most frequently mentioned, second only to the 67% who highlighted limited funding.



Top responses when asked about threats to the future of outdoor recreation in Rhode Island.

When asked, residents consistently emphasized that funding should prioritize the upkeep of existing facilities before new projects are considered, ensuring that Rhode Island’s outdoor recreation assets remain functional, safe, and inviting. Comments frequently mentioned trash tied up in state-provided bags but left behind, discarded fishing tackle, and the limited availability of trash receptacles. These findings underscore the need to both improve upkeep by local and state agencies, and to better educate and encourage stewardship by users.

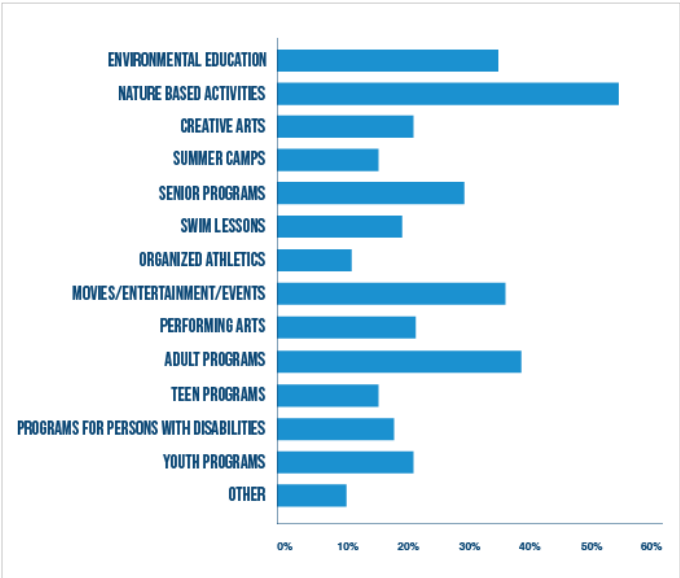
During tabling events at the State’s beaches, participants noted they were visiting from other states because they experience Rhode Island’s beaches and outdoor recreation resources as superior to those in their home states, including Massachusetts and Connecticut. As Rhode Island continues to attract out-of-state visitors and serve its residents, expectations for well-maintained beaches, campgrounds, parks, boating access points, and trails will only grow. Meeting these rising demands will require sustained investment in day-to-day upkeep, ongoing repairs and replacements and responsible stewardship of public lands.

“There are so many lakes and ponds that were once clean and active. Unfortunately, so many are polluted now and no longer allowed for swimming. Having the state put money into revitalizing our freshwater access would be a joy for so many communities throughout our state”

– public opinion survey respondent

Programming & Services

Overall, the SCORP’s public engagement findings indicate a growing demand for nature-based recreation; events, festivals and entertainment, and multigenerational, multicultural programs, that cater to youth, teens and seniors.



Desired recreation programs by the public.

Examples of organizations (NGOs) and their outdoor recreation program offerings include:

Audubon Society of Rhode Island

delivers immersive nature experiences through hikes, environmental education, and wildlife programs, making it a hub for family-friendly outdoor adventure and conservation opportunities.

Movement Education Outdoors (MEO)

MEO centers equity and access by offering transformative outdoor programs—like hiking, kayaking, and nature-based learning—for youth of color and those facing economic barriers, uniquely blending outdoor adventure with leadership, mindfulness, and social justice education.

Partnership for Providence Parks

This organization empowers neighborhood 'Friends' groups, providing support to revitalize urban parks with outdoor programming and events; its collaborative model directly engages communities in shaping spaces for both structured and playful recreation.

Roger Williams Park Conservancy

A dedicated nonprofit partner to Providence Parks, the Conservancy enhances and sustains Roger Williams Park as a vibrant destination, promoting inclusive events and stewardship of public green spaces for recreation, education, and community gathering.

Programming and services offer opportunities for education, support, entertainment, community cohesion and connection to nature. Programs and services may be provided by state agencies such as RIDEM, non-governmental organizations, municipal parks and recreation agencies and private organizations. Examples include athletics, kids clubs and camps, arts and music classes,

environmental education and outdoor adventure, martial arts and swimming lessons, and more. Activities and events are often included under the umbrella of programs and services, with dedicated staff responsible for organizing and operating annual events and festivals at the local or state level. Many municipal parks and recreation agencies have also become providers of senior services such as health and wellness seminars and technology classes.

In response to the ever-changing recreation needs of the public, 87% of Rhode Island recreation directors (27 out of 31 directors) reported introducing new programs / activities in the last five years. Similarly, Rhode Island State Parks, Fish and Wildlife and non-profit organizations continue to offer a variety of events and programs, from the State Park Naturalist Program to guided hikes at state parks, and outdoor education programs such as the Aquatic Resource Education Program, Hunter Education Program, Wildlife Outreach Program, Great Swamp Shooting Range and fishing award programs to name a few.

No matter who is the program and service provider, Rhode Islanders are asking for more. Throughout the public engagement process, participants consistently emphasized the need for expanded and inclusive programming that serves residents and visitors alike. Events and festivals, environmental education, and youth- and family-oriented activities were among the most frequently requested additions. These insights reflect the public's desire for programming that celebrates culture, fosters learning, and encourages multigenerational participation, making parks vibrant hubs of activity and connection.



Fishing at Charlestown-Breachway Campground

During tabling and pop-up events, 71% of participants expressed a desire for more events and festivals, while 44% highlighted interest in environmental programs. In conversations with participants, engagement specialists consistently heard a call for family-friendly events, educational tours, winter sports opportunities, and kayak rentals. As one participant put it, park providers should “give the people a reason to want to go there [to parks].”

Rhode Islanders also expressed a strong desire for special events that celebrate art, culture, and community while appealing to multigenerational and multicultural families. Participants emphasized the importance of programming that fosters a “sense of being something bigger... and part of a community,” as noted by a SCORP Ambassador Program attendee at the Ocean State Center for Independent Living event.

Ranking second behind events and festivals, participants at tabling and pop-up events shared the need for guided hikes and environmental programs. Participants also emphasized the need for youth and family-friendly events that combine outdoor experiences with opportunities for learning.

“Cooking at sites would be great. Culturally, families recreate together and usually through a meal.”

**– Listening session with
Groundworks Rhode Island**

Support Facilities & Amenities

Participants across all engagement events consistently emphasized the need for basic amenities to improve their experiences in Rhode Island’s parks and outdoor recreation areas. Key requests included seating, trash receptacles, water fountains, restrooms, pet waste stations, wayfinding signage, charging stations, and WiFi. When surveyed about amenities that would enhance their park visits, restrooms ranked as the top priority (80.30%), followed by parking (72.60%) and shelter from weather and sun (48.32%). Many participants at pop-ups, listening sessions, and ambassador events also expressed a desire for accessible and gender-neutral restrooms to ensure inclusivity and comfort for all visitors.

Another frequently mentioned need was improved wayfinding and signage. Participants noted that clear navigation tools, such as trail maps and informational kiosks, help visitors feel more welcome and confident when exploring parks. Effective wayfinding minimizes concerns about disorientation and ensures that routes and amenities are easy to locate. Participants frequently suggested adding clearly marked accessible trails and signage to enhance the experience for all park users, including individuals with disabilities. RIDEM is currently undertaking a wayfinding signage plan for State parks to develop several standard sign types that can be used across all State parks. A unified signage package with consistent fonts, colors, forms and dimensions to increase the visual clarity and legibility of visitor navigation.

Trash receptacles were a frequently requested amenity during engagement events. In an era of significant budget constraints at the municipal and state levels, creative solutions for trash removal, such as carry-in-carry-out policies need better adoption by the general public.

Safety

Although many community members expressed feeling welcome in the outdoor recreation spaces they frequent, safety concerns were identified as a barrier to use. Participants at pop-ups and ambassador events highlighted concerns such as dimly lit paths, tired facilities, and lack of identified park staff which they report discourage park visitation. Additionally, many survey respondents noted they won’t hike or use trails alone, suggesting the presence of park rangers or programming such as group hikes as a strategy to enhance feelings of safety for vulnerable populations such as women, people of color and seniors.

**“We feel welcome,
but don’t feel safe.”**

**– noted a senior participant at the
Cranston Senior Center
Listening Session.**

Listening sessions with the 65+ age group, people with a disability, and ambassador sessions revealed a potential need for safety accommodations. Participants at the Ocean State Center for Independent Living event and other ambassador sessions suggested emergency call stations. When SCORP Ambassadors from the West End Community Center in Providence asked participants about obstacles to park visitation, an overwhelming majority identified safety concerns, with increased security—specifically better lighting—as their top recommendation.

“While safety ratings are vital, patrons often pay more attention to how they perceive a park’s safety. Dimly illuminated paths and facilities can drive patrons away, even if the recreation area has outstanding safety.”¹

Participants at pop-up, tabling, and ambassador events identified several amenities and strategies that could significantly enhance safety perceptions in Rhode Island’s parks. Improved lighting, particularly along paths, was frequently cited as a critical measure to deter unsafe behaviors and increase visibility, with notable support from participants at the West End Community Center and Cranston Senior Center. Emergency call boxes along bike paths were suggested at the Ocean State Center for Independent Living session. Aid stations equipped with Automated External Defibrillator (AEDs), first-aid kits, and Narcan to address health emergencies, were suggested by participants of the tabling event at Lincoln Woods.

In addition to these physical improvements, participants pointed to the role of programming in fostering a safer environment. Suggestions included extending the hours of lifeguard coverage, implementing ranger or volunteer programs to provide a visible presence, and offering evening activities to activate spaces during less busy hours. A senior who attended the Edward King Senior Center session in Newport highlighted

the value of welcoming volunteers or rangers in promoting information. Throughout the engagement process, recreation enthusiasts noted that the perception of safety is closely tied to park maintenance, emphasizing that clean, well-maintained facilities naturally feel safer and more inviting.

These findings emphasize the need to improve both actual safety measures and the perception of safety to encourage greater park usage. Ensuring outdoor recreation resources feel welcoming and safe for all users will require prioritization of physical improvements to the built environment, on-going maintenance and stewardship, and clearly defining proper use and expected behaviors for each asset.

Barriers to Access

Across all engagement events, participants called out improved access to outdoor recreation opportunities as a priority. Disclosed barriers to use include the cost of admittance, lack of equitable access especially due to public transportation and walkability challenges, inaccessible amenities, and private ownership that limits the public’s right to access beaches and trails while also contributing to overcrowding of facilities that are open to the public.

Cost

Several comments were heard regarding the cost of parking, licenses admission passes and program fees. The public survey showed that one of the top five reasons that keep people from using outdoor recreation areas is that fees are too high. One survey respondent stated, “hunting fees (deer tags) are too high; it’s going to keep me from hunting again,” and another suggested the need for “sliding scale parking fees” at beaches. Several other survey respondents noted the cost to access parks and beaches is too expensive for seniors and people with a disability. For households experiencing cost as a barrier to visiting outdoor recreation facilities or participating in recreation programs adopting diverse fee structures with sliding scales based on income, time of use, resident status, and age can go a long way.

¹ Healthline. (2019). Health benefits of being outdoors: 8 ways nature can boost wellness. Retrieved from <https://www.healthline.com/health/health-benefits-of-being-outdoors>

Transportation & Walkability Challenges

A large percentage of engagement participants reported lack of complete sidewalk and biking networks in good condition and few public transportation options as a barrier to use.

A participant at the Edward King House Senior Center session discussed challenges when navigating to or through facilities and encouraged careful “consideration of paving materials and finishes”. Similarly, connectivity to and through parks is a barrier. A participant at the Cranston Senior Center session noted that “small slopes are big issues for seniors...not just for those in wheelchairs and walkers, but for able-bodied seniors trying to navigate slopes on paths.”

Participants in the Groundwork RI Garden Time SCORP Ambassador event and the Ocean State Center for Independent Living listening session both noted “lack of sidewalks and connectivity” as a barrier to participation. When asked “how do you usually get to the parks or outdoor recreation facilities you frequent,” 93% of the respondents to the Public Opinion Survey question answered they drive, followed by 3% walk, 2% bike and less than 1% use public transportation. With such a heavy reliance on the car to access parks, a lack of public transportation and inefficient or unsafe routes present difficulties for youth, people with a disability, aging adults, or non-car households. When asked about the reasons that keep people from using outdoor recreation areas more often, several respondents who bike as their mode of transportation described challenges ranging from closed routes after hours to un-plowed conditions in winter. Attendees at the Groundwork RI Garden Time SCORP Ambassador event emphasized that better and more efficient alternative transportation routes and schedules to park facilities would activate more participation.

“The buses to Lincoln Woods don’t go all the way, they drop you off at the Police Barracks.”

– Groundwork RI Garden Time SCORP Ambassador event participant



East Bay Bike path

Inaccessible Amenities

Accessible facilities and amenities were identified as a barrier to access. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) ensures that public places are accessible to people with disabilities and governs aspects of the built environment such as the maximum slope of walkways, adequate space for wheelchairs to maneuver, and curb cuts name a few. While the ADA establishes legally binding minimum standards, long gone are the days of mere compliance. Many public recreation providers are adopting principles of Universal Design, exceeding the requirements of the ADA and addressing needs that promote inclusion. Examples of universal design include providing places of respite for individuals with cognitive disabilities, the use of colors to indicate the intensity of an experience, and inclusion of play equipment for physically disabled children and adults. Engagement participants clearly highlighted that recreational areas are still not accessible enough.

Survey respondents and ambassador event attendees alike requested more accessible parking and walkways at outdoor recreation hubs. Participants in the Ocean State Center for Independent Living ambassador program noted that “they can get to the site/ facility, but not into the facility or to the activity due to lack of accessible routes.” These participants also noted that “information isn’t updated, and we often have to call or go and check. Frequently we have to leave when accessible amenities aren’t provided.” Members with a disability would greatly benefit from a database that identifies accessible routes and accessible amenities at each facility. Information regarding accessible routes and amenities should be available at each location.

Equitable, Fair Access

National studies have highlighted the longstanding disparity in access to quality parks and open space, suggesting that urban and economically disadvantaged communities often face greater obstacles. While outside of the scope of this project, the extent of such inequities in Rhode Island warrants closer examination.

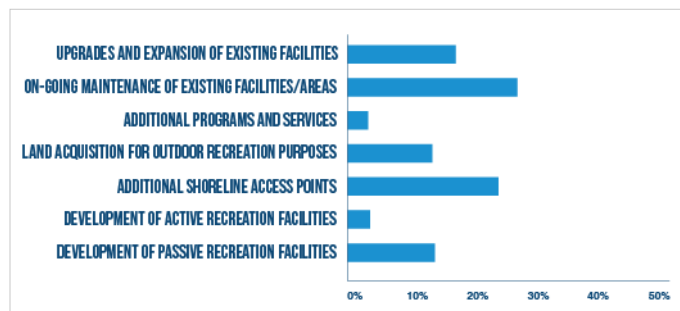
Socially vulnerable communities face disproportionate hardships that prevent fair access to the benefits of outdoor recreation. The inequities are stark, ranging from a history of segregation preventing people of color from using parks, to current transportation barriers for non-car households typically associated with lower incomes or a disability. Redlining has also been identified as a contributor to systemic inequities and took place in Rhode Island cities. Finally, many underestimated communities have been and continue to be left out of the engagement process, excluding their voice in the decision-making process.

The 2026 SCORP engagement process was specifically designed to reach the voices historically left out of conversations such as those that inform this plan. These voices confirmed many had never been asked to participate in a process such as this and were grateful for the opportunity.

Private Ownership & Overcrowding

A recurring issue in public engagement was the restriction of shoreline access due to private property barriers and overcrowding (33%) as a top reason keeping people from using outdoor recreation more often. Participants reported frustration with limited right-of-way access points, difficulty finding affordable or free beach options during peak summer months and private property owners discouraging public use of the shoreline. At the same time, when asked about initiatives that should receive the highest priority for investment, additional shoreline access points ranked second (23%) behind on-going maintenance of existing facilities/areas.

The message from the public is clear: Rhode Island coastal beaches are beloved and in high demand, yet, with limited coastline and public access points, the demand far exceeds the availability of the resource.



Survey respondents top priorities for investment.

When asked what are the reasons that keep you from using outdoor recreation areas more often, a noteworthy number of respondents reported challenges with private beach ownership. Comments describing barriers to use because of private property owners included: “beaches are either private or crowded and expensive,” “harassment by shoreline property owners,” property owners trying to enforce false private beach property,” “Private interests blocking public access,” “Letting rich landowners make it hard,” and “many of the public access areas have been shut down or not maintained from 50 years ago causing less accessibility and overcrowding of available areas.”

The RI Constitution provides for the “right of fishery and the privileges of the shore”, including “fishing from the shore ... and passage along the shore” (RI Const. art. I, § XVII). More recently, in 2023, Rhode Island enacted a law through the RI Swash Line Case, specifying public access along the shoreline up to ten feet landward of the visible high tide line, often marked by the swash line or wrack line³¹. This decision has been controversial as many beachfront homeowners claimed it would be an unconstitutional taking of private property³². Shoreline access is a complex issue of equity, environment and law. Meeting the demand for additional public shoreline access and services will require commitment of staffing and funding, as well as programs to facilitate access and ensure stewardship of the natural resources and financial investments.

³¹ New Shoreline Access Disclosure Law Now in Effect. RI Realtors, Thursday, July 25, 2024. Found at: <https://www.rirealtors.org/news/2024/07/25/news/new-shoreline-access-disclosure-law-now-in-effect/#:~:text=In%20late%20June%202023%2C%20a,access%20rights%20over%20the%20property>.

³² Noori Farzan, Antonia. “Shoreline access commission agrees law should change but has yet to settle on new boundary.” The Providence Journal, January 28, 2022.

Communications & Marketing

Despite Rhode Island's extensive network of state and local parks and outdoor recreation resources, participants at several engagement events consistently expressed that they are unaware of the opportunities available to them. During tabling events and pop-ups, participants viewing a map of state parks, beaches, campgrounds, and conservation land frequently commented that they were unfamiliar with many of the lands shown. Similarly, the public opinion survey revealed that not knowing what is offered or where, ranked as the third highest barrier (32%) preventing respondents from utilizing parks and recreation facilities. In particular, youth and seniors reported challenges understanding what certain state and local parks offer and distinguishing between public and private beaches.

When asked which form of communication do survey respondents primarily use when seeking information on outdoor recreation, the majority of respondents selected the internet (search engines or specific websites) (65%) while social media (17%) and word of mouth (8.31%) lagged far behind. These results emphasize the importance of web-based information that is well organized and easy to navigate, comprehensive, and routinely updated.

Outdoor recreation providers and recreationists both cited lack of a central, comprehensive listing of all outdoor recreation opportunities state-wide, with associated location, hours of operation, fees, amenities and accommodations, intended use and classification of recreation settings. Whether owned and operated by a public institution, or private and NGO organizations, there is consensus that improved information to direct recreation enthusiasts to the right recreation asset they are seeking could increase usership and reduce unintended maintenance burden.

FROM INSIGHTS TO ACTION

The insights gathered through the SCORP's community engagement efforts underscore the deep connection residents have with their state's parks and outdoor recreation resources. Participants from diverse backgrounds, ages, and abilities not only shared their appreciation for these spaces but also offered valuable perspectives on the challenges that must be addressed to enhance accessibility, feelings of safety, programming, and infrastructure that enables easy access to outdoor recreation. These voices provide a foundation for shaping a future where Rhode Island's parks continue to be inclusive, vibrant, and reflective of the needs of all communities.

As this plan transitions into a vision for the future, the feedback from these engagement efforts serves as both a guide and a call to action. The next chapter will outline Rhode Island's key outdoor recreation priorities and aspirational goals, focusing on themes of accessibility, sustainability, recreation for all, and funding. Together, these elements form a cohesive strategy for ensuring that the state's natural and recreational resources remain a source of pride, connection, and well-being for generations to come.



Wildlife in the Great Swamp, South Kingstown

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

PRIORITY AREAS & RECOMMENDATIONS

How to Read the Recommendations

The following recommendations and actions span a wide range of partners and implementation pathways. To guide readers and future implementers, each action is categorized by the entity best positioned to lead or coordinate its success:

- **R** - RIDEM-Led Initiative: Directly implementable by RIDEM based on current or anticipated capacity.
- **O** - Office of Outdoor Recreation: Actions recommended for coordination through a proposed Office of Outdoor Recreation, serving as a liaison among agencies, sectors, and communities (see Priority Area 1)
- **P** - Partner/Advocacy Priority: Actions requiring leadership from municipalities, nonprofits, private entities, or interagency partnerships, with RIDEM playing a supporting role through funding, technical assistance, or outreach.

While the primary purpose of the SCORP is to understand supply and demand of outdoor recreation opportunities and direct grant funding, this plan also recognizes that many of the proposed recommendations and action items are beyond the purview of LWCF or state outdoor recreation grant funds. While the recommendations included herein are comprehensive, those that are eligible for funding through LWCF or outdoor recreation funds are indicated with a “*.”



PRIORITY AREA 1 POSITIONING FOR SUCCESS:

Establishing An Outdoor Recreation Office (ORO) For Rhode Island

Many of the recommendations throughout this plan call for a coordinated approach to advancing Rhode Island’s outdoor recreation priorities. Since outdoor recreation assets in the state are owned, managed, and programmed by a wide array of public agencies, municipalities, non-profit organizations, and private entities, a unifying structure will be needed to implement initiatives at scale and with shared vision.

To address this challenge, the 2026 SCORP recommends the establishment of an Office of Outdoor Recreation. This office would act as a central coordinating body to champion outdoor recreation across Rhode Island’s government and its many partners, and to oversee implementation of action items within this plan. Modeled after similar offices in over two dozen other states, Rhode Island’s approach may take the form of a dedicated position or unit within RIDEM with a mandate to serve as a liaison, convener, and advisor on outdoor recreation policy, funding, planning, promotion, and implementation of several recommendations of this plan.

The responsibilities of the Outdoor Recreation Office would include:

- Facilitating collaboration among state agencies, municipalities, and non-profit partners;
- Coordinating the implementation of SCORP recommendations;
- Advising on grant programs, including development and implementation of criteria for operations and maintenance planning, stewardship, and equity;
- Convening an interagency Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee to provide guidance and foster alignment;
- Promoting Rhode Island’s outdoor economy, cultural tourism, and workforce development through strategic partnerships;
- Leading statewide initiatives on signage, accessibility, data collection, and stewardship campaigns;

- Serving as a public point of contact for outdoor recreation users and advocates; and
- Tracking progress on SCORP implementation and reporting to leadership at RIDEM and partner agencies.
- Advocating for the outdoor recreation needs of all Rhode Islanders.

Given the rising demand for high-quality outdoor recreation and the increasingly complex policy landscape—ranging from environmental stewardship to equitable access—this Office would ensure that outdoor recreation remains a well-resourced, visible, and coordinated priority statewide.

■ **RECOMMENDATION 1.1:**

Prioritize approvals, program planning and staffing for the ORO.

Develop a clear path to establishment of an ORO that includes approvals such as legislative or executive action, a staffing plan, annual budget, roles and responsibilities, and jurisdictional authority. Identify and overcome any barriers to establishment of the Office. Given the number of recommendations and action items outlined within this document that the ORO is responsible for, implementing this recommendation is critical to the success of the SCORP.

■ **Action 1.1a: Develop a 5-year program plan for the ORO**

- Develop a plan that clearly articulates the ORO's purpose, goals, staffing needs, budget, and authority for the next 5 years.

■ **Action 1.1b: Establish the ORO and hire leadership staff**

- Seek and secure required approvals for the ORO existence
- Identify the first staff member needed to begin program plan execution
- Prepare a job description and security hiring and budget approvals
- Interview candidates and execute job offer
- Begin program plan execution



PRIORITY AREA 2 SUSTAINABLE BY DESIGN:

Maintain A Sustainable Network Of Outdoor Recreation Resources.

Rhode Island's outdoor recreation system is one of the state's greatest assets, offering an extensive and diverse network of parks, trails, beaches, and other natural spaces. These resources provide unparalleled opportunities for physical activity, social cohesion, and connection to nature. However, high demand for access to these one-of-a-kind assets coupled with finite state resources for ongoing maintenance and lack of environmental stewardship by the public has led to challenges with upkeep at some facilities, specifically at beaches. Public feedback from the 2026 SCORP engagement process reaffirmed the perception that inadequate maintenance has contributed to failing infrastructure, trash accumulation, and natural resource degradation. In fact, the public views lack of maintenance as the second most pressing threat to Rhode Island's recreation network. Similarly, municipal recreation directors report deferred maintenance (58%) as the second greatest threat the future of their parks, recreation and open space system, topped only by a lack of funding (68%).

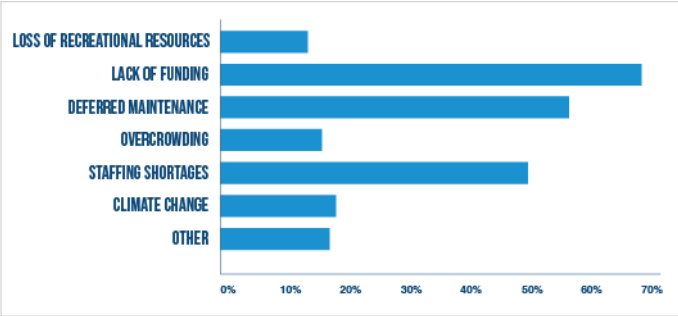
As demand for outdoor recreation continues to grow, maintaining and enhancing these finite natural spaces and fostering strong environmental stewardship are critical to ensuring they remain safe, welcoming, and accessible for all. While the public's perception is one measure of the problem's magnitude, a deeper look into operations and even human behavior informs a more complete picture when considering strategies and actions for improvement.

The State of Recreation Maintenance

The 2018 Organizational Management and Operations Study of Rhode Island State Parks highlighted stark challenges faced by the state: a 67% reduction in full-time staff since 1989 and \$47.1 million in unmet capital needs for state park buildings and structures. Since the 2018 study, DEM Division of Parks and Recreation has made significant progress, including hiring 26 new full time positions and investing over \$21 million in capital improvements including \$800,000 at state beaches, \$3.9 million at state campgrounds, \$9.5

million at state parks, and \$7.4 million on the bike path network. And yet, unmet capital needs and lack of staffing to conduct maintenance continue to be common issues at both the state and municipal levels.

During the listening session with municipal Parks & Recreation Directors, this group highlighted systemic funding gaps that separate capital improvement budgets from ongoing maintenance allocations, leaving new projects without long-term care plans. Directors reported that detailed budgets are created for capital improvements, but few have adequate annual budgets for on-going maintenance, and rarely are operations and maintenance plans prepared with the future financial implications of those improvements in mind. Park director survey responses reported lack of funding, deferred maintenance, and staffing shortages as the top three greatest threats to the future of their park system – three challenges that are inextricably linked.



Recreational director survey responses: threats to RI's outdoor recreation assets.

This disconnect contributes to the visible decline of some recreation amenities, with issues such as eroding trails, deteriorating pavement, out-of-date equipment, inadequate restroom facilities, and a lack of modern amenities discouraging public use. At the same time, many popular outdoor recreation facilities are heavily used and well-loved by Rhode Islanders and visitors. To bridge this gap, this plan recommends public education on responsible park use and environmental stewardship, setting clear standards for park maintenance to temper user expectations, greater attention to operations and maintenance planning and implementation, and enhanced advocacy around the need for asset maintenance.

Building a Culture of Care

To address the challenges outlined above, Rhode Island must foster a true shared responsibility model: a “Culture of Care” among all stakeholders—government agencies, municipal leaders, staff, and recreation users, residents and tourists alike. This cultural shift prioritizes stewardship, sustainability, and collaboration as guiding principles for managing outdoor recreation resources. The Rhode Islanders surveyed for this project reported that existing volunteer and stewardship opportunities are not widely advertised. While there are several well-established volunteer opportunities, those who would be willing to help often do not know how to get involved. Expanding structured volunteer programs and fostering community partnerships is one way to bridge this gap. By reinforcing shared responsibility, Rhode Island can ensure that its outdoor recreation network remains a source of pride.

A more robust environmental stewardship program, including increased funding for ecological restoration projects, improved signage to protect sensitive habitats, and educational programming about local ecosystems, should be developed to foster greater awareness and responsibility among visitors. Strategic public engagement can help promote responsible visitor behaviors that support conservation goals. Finally, incorporating enhanced natural resource management into agencies’ day-to-day maintenance practices enhances the resilience of these spaces, ensuring they continue to support biodiversity, recreational use, and tourism.



Lincoln Woods, Lincoln

RECOMMENDATION 2.1:

Foster a Culture of Care

Develop a statewide ethos of stewardship and shared responsibility for Rhode Island's outdoor recreation resources. This approach empowers all partners—staff, decision-makers, and the public—to actively participate in preserving and enhancing recreational spaces.



Park ambassadors

Action 2.1a: Establish Recreation Care Ambassadors

- Encourage partnerships between volunteer groups and municipal and state recreation providers (friends-of groups)
- Provide recognition and incentives for community-led stewardship programs & ambassador success stories to ensure long-term participation and impact.
- Advertise state wide volunteer opportunities on social media or listserve

Action 2.1b: Enhance Staff Training and Development

- Offer regular training programs for state and local parks and recreation staff, focusing on preventive maintenance, accessibility standards, and sustainable practices.
- Expand training efforts for more staff to include environmental restoration techniques, such as invasive species control, erosion management, and responsible shoreline maintenance.
- Encourage providers to offer incentives, such as certification bonuses or career advancement opportunities, to encourage staff participation in training programs.

- Expand training to include community partners, ambassadors and volunteers, empowering local groups to support maintenance efforts.

Action 2.1c: Educate the Public on Environmental Stewardship *

- Coordinate with the Governor's office on litter programming.
- Develop multilingual public education material highlighting the importance of maintaining outdoor recreation facilities and how individuals can contribute.
- Include updated, multilingual signage and informational kiosks at outdoor recreation hubs that outline usage expectations to encourage responsible behaviors, such as proper trash disposal, pet waste management, respecting natural habitats, and proper use of facilities like trails and managed lands.
- Include clear, visible, and continuous signage outlining the balance between provider maintenance and visitor responsibility, particularly for "carry-in, carry-out" policies. See <https://riparks.ri.gov/activities-programs/carry-carry-out>

RECOMMENDATION 2.2:

Incentivize Operations and Maintenance Planning

Encourage municipalities to integrate detailed financial and operations and maintenance (O&M) plans into their parks and recreation initiatives by offering funding incentives and technical support. This ensures that resources are not only built to meet demand, but also maintained sustainably over their lifespans.

Action 2.2a: Revise Grant Application Criteria to Prioritize Maintenance

- Update DEM-administered grant applications to include evaluation criteria that reward municipalities for submitting detailed O&M plans and budgets as part of their project proposals.
- Assign bonus points for proposals that demonstrate improvements will be maintained by a proposed or an existing maintenance plan that includes maintenance schedules and budgets.

Action 2.2b: Provide Technical Assistance for Municipalities

- Organize workshops or training sessions to help municipalities develop robust O&M plans, including budget forecasting and resource allocation strategies.
- Develop templates and best practice guides for municipalities to follow when creating O&M components for recreation facilities.
- Explore potential to work with RI Community Colleges on Master Certificates in public finance.

Action 2.2c: Promote Peer Learning Opportunities

- Facilitate knowledge-sharing forums where municipalities can showcase successful O&M planning models and share lessons learned.
- Encourage collaboration across regions to address common challenges and explore innovative maintenance solutions.

Action 2.2d: Recognize Excellence in Operations & Maintenance Planning

- Establish an annual award program to recognize organizations that demonstrate exceptional commitment to sustainable operations and maintenance.
- Provide public recognition and additional funding opportunities to incentivize ongoing excellence.

RECOMMENDATION 2.3: Find Creative Strategies for Increased Funding for Operations and Maintenance of Our Outdoor Recreation Assets.

Action 2.3a: Foster Public-Private Partnerships to Support Outdoor Recreation Investments

- Provide incentives for businesses to invest in recreation infrastructure, such as trail maintenance, park facilities, and outdoor adventure programs.
- Encourage private-sector investment in outdoor recreation through sponsorship of amenities, events, and marketing campaigns.

Action 2.3b: Advocate, Advocate, Advocate

- Conduct studies to quantify the economic contributions of outdoor recreation, including job creation, tourism revenue, and local business growth. Then share it, celebrate it, and shout it from the mountain tops!

RECOMMENDATION 2.4: Improve Signage to Support Stewardship, Navigation, and Maintenance

Consistent, well-designed signage helps reduce environmental impacts, clarify visitor expectations, and support wayfinding. RIDEM seeks to reduce sign clutter by consolidating messaging and aligning design standards across facilities.

Action 2.4a: Implement a Unified Facility Marker System

- Develop a standardized system for trailheads, campsites, and key park features using routed signage that can be fabricated on-site.
- Use distinct colors to differentiate signage types (e.g., green for facility markers, brown/yellow for interpretive or regulatory signs) and document the rationale in a visual signage guide.
- Incorporate resource classification icons to communicate intended use and maintenance level.

Action 2.4b: Expand Kiosk and On-Site Informational Content *

- At major recreation sites, update kiosks to include:
 - Resource classification and appropriate visitor behavior;
 - Site-specific amenities (e.g., "What is offered at Lincoln Woods?");
 - Trail surfaces, distances and difficulty levels;
 - Multilingual Leave No Trace reminders.

■ **RECOMMENDATION 2.5:**

Actively Discourage the Loss of Publicly Funded Recreation and Open Space System Land through Conversion to Alternative Uses.

■ **Action 2.5a: Develop regulations which subject land development proposals that convert recreation land to the highest scrutiny**

■ **Action 2.5b: Develop regulations which incorporate Federal Energy Regulatory Commission run-of-the river policy to protect aquatic and recreational Resources**



PRIORITY AREA 3 **TIDES CHANGE, SO MUST WE:**

Meet The Evolving Recreation Needs of Rhode Islanders And Visitors

As recreation trends continue to evolve, Rhode Island must adapt its outdoor recreation programs, services, facilities, and amenities to meet the changing preferences, demographics, and lifestyles of both residents and visitors. Public engagement findings indicate that Rhode Islanders value outdoor recreation as a key part of their well-being but feel that current offerings do not fully meet the needs of all ages, interests, abilities, and cultural backgrounds. To ensure the state remains responsive to these needs, recreation planning must focus on offering experiences that reflect the interests of a broad and evolving user base.

Adapting to Changing Demographics

Rhode Island's population is becoming increasingly diverse. Growing Latino and other multicultural communities express interest in spaces that support group-oriented activities, such as cookouts, programming representative of cultural traditions, designated picnic areas with shelters, community gatherings and soccer. This feedback emphasizes the need for culturally responsive planning to create inclusive spaces that welcome users from all backgrounds.

Expanding Multi-Generational and Multi-Use Opportunities

Feedback from community engagement sessions consistently emphasized the importance of creating recreational opportunities that cater to a wide range of ages and interests. Rhode Islanders want spaces where families, youth, and seniors can enjoy activities together. Multi-use amenities, such as community gardens, fitness trails, and flexible open spaces, can provide versatile options that accommodate a variety of recreational preferences.

Embracing the Public's Ever-Changing Needs

Outdoor recreation preferences are shifting toward a mix of structured and self-directed outdoor activities, with on-going shifts in interest and demand for services and programs. The results of the engagement process indicate a growing demand for nature-based recreation; events, festivals and entertainment; and multigenerational, multicultural programs that cater to youth, teens and seniors. Continuing to introduce new programs and services into public recreation makes Rhode Island's outdoor spaces more appealing to a broader range of users.

Protecting Natural and Cultural Resources

Rhode Islanders were clear about their love of the outdoors and the relative importance of environmental stewardship. Ensuring that outdoor recreational opportunities do not negatively impact important habitats, animal and plant species, and historic resources is of paramount importance.

Adapting to a Warming Climate

Finally, providing safe outdoor recreation opportunities also means looking ahead to the challenges faced by a warming climate. Rising sea levels, increasingly frequent and intense storms, extreme heat, forest fires, and insect-borne infectious disease all bring new safety risks for outdoor recreation seekers. While not observed as a notable threat by engagement participants, it is important to plan and prepare for these climate-related challenges to prevent safety risks now and in the future. Simple additions such as sunscreen- and insect repellent-dispensers can help protect from sun and insect exposure. Shade structures and expanded tree canopies can offer respite from summer sun and moderate temperatures. Sea level rise and storm surge impacts may require more costly improvements and policy decisions at the highest levels to protect critical infrastructure or historic relics and potential solutions need careful planning and installation.

RECOMMENDATION 3.1:

Prioritize Funding for Projects that Provide Multi-Use, Multi-Generational and Culturally Responsive Recreation Opportunities.

Investing in projects that cater to a wide range of ages and interests ensures that outdoor recreation facilities remain inclusive and responsive to Rhode Islanders' evolving needs.

Action 3.1a: Develop Multi-Use Facilities *

- Prioritize the design of flexible-use spaces, ensuring that parks and recreational facilities can support a variety of activities, from structured sports leagues to casual gatherings and wellness programs.
- Ensure new recreation spaces incorporate universally accessible features, including fitness equipment for disabled users, shaded rest areas, and varied play environments for different age groups.
- Support the expansion of mixed-use trails that accommodate walkers, runners, cyclists, and mobility device users.

Action 3.1b: Expand Programming Across Age Groups

- Expand programming that reflects the needs of multi-generational users, including senior-friendly recreation classes, outdoor play and fitness areas for children, and intergenerational activities such as guided hikes, performing arts, and outdoor wellness programs.
- Prioritize expanding programming for youth and teens.



Olney Pond, Central Falls

Action 3.1c: Prioritize Group-Oriented Activities and Programs *

- Expand picnic pavilions, large-group seating areas, and event-friendly park spaces to support cultural and family-oriented outdoor activities.
- Work with organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, the Audubon Society of RI and local land trusts to expand outdoor programming that encourage participation by individuals who historically have had less access to recreation opportunities because of race, income, or other socioeconomic disparities.

Action 3.1d: Expand Engagement Efforts with Local Communities to Ensure New Facilities Are Responsive to Local Needs

- Engage community organizations, cultural groups, and local stakeholders early in the design and programming of public recreation spaces to ensure they reflect local needs, traditions, and diverse voices.
- Ensure community input is actively incorporated into recreation facility planning, particularly in areas where existing recreation options are limited or underutilized.
- Work directly with community organizations to identify culturally specific amenities and ensure they align with user needs.

Action 3.1e: Revise Grant Application Criteria to Promote Fair Access

- Award additional points for Outdoor Recreation Grant applications that document community input for the proposed project including the involvement of boards and commissions, community organizations, or other stakeholders.
- Award bonus points for Outdoor Recreation Grant applications that document how the criteria used to prioritize projects includes under-resourced communities or neighborhoods with less access to quality parks.
- Incorporate community engagement strategies into grant criteria, ensuring that municipal projects prioritize inclusive outreach and stewardship efforts.

Action 3.1f: Ensure new or expanded recreation spaces protect wildlife habitat and cultural resources *

- Consider sensitive wildlife habitats and work to reduce impacts to natural resources when expanding outdoor recreation facilities.
- Ensure that cultural heritage sites are recognized and protected when expanding outdoor recreation facilities.

RECOMMENDATION 3.2:

Plan & Design for Resilient Recreation Infrastructure

Adapt recreation facilities to withstand environmental changes from a warming climate. Parks and natural resources serve as the first line of defense against sea level rise, coastal and inland flooding, and the urban heat island effect. Integration of nature-based solutions into the design of parks and other outdoor recreation facilities can protect, restore, and/or manage ecological systems and safeguard public health, provide clean air and water, increase natural hazard resilience, and sequester carbon. Nature-based solutions include green stormwater infrastructure (GSI: constructed wetlands, rain gardens, bioretention cells, bioswales), green roofs, permeable paving, use of reflective materials, and expanded tree canopy.

Action 3.2a: Design for Climate Resilience *

- Identify infrastructure vulnerable to sea level rise, increased flooding and erosion within outdoor recreation areas.
- Use materials and construction techniques that withstand such climate-related impacts.
- Prioritize investment in proactive elements that protect the public such as sunscreen and insect repellent dispensers, weather shelters and shade and expanded tree canopy.
- Prioritize infrastructure projects that use nature-based solutions and reduce the threats of a warming climate.

Action 3.2b: Integrate Sustainable Practices *

- Ensure that new and renovated recreation spaces incorporate sustainability features, such as native landscaping, stormwater management systems, and amenities powered by renewable energy.
- Develop public education campaigns focused on the role of parks in climate change adaptation and responsible recreation, including Leave No Trace principles.

RECOMMENDATION 3.3:

Incorporate Emerging Trends into Outdoor Recreation Facility Design, Activities and Programming

In consideration of the SCORP's 10-year time horizon, stay ahead of evolving recreation trends by integrating innovative activities and user-driven recreation preferences into future facility design and programming. Whether new construction, upgrades or expansion, prioritize user needs based on current and anticipated trends in outdoor recreation.

Action 3.3a: Anticipate Recreation Infrastructure Needs to Meet Emerging Trends *

- Monitor participation and use across outdoor recreation programs and facilities, noting peaks or declining attendance to proactively plan for changes in recreation trends.
- Review annual reports and publications from reputable sources such as the National Recreation and Park Association, the Trust for Public Land, and the Sports and Fitness Industry Association to keep pace with and anticipate upcoming recreation trends to align capital funding with infrastructure improvements / expansions to support upcoming trends.



PRIORITY AREA 4 RECREATION FOR ALL:

Remove Barriers To Ensure Fair And Just Access To Rhode Island's Outdoors

The 2026 SCORP public engagement process revealed that some Rhode Islanders feel disconnected from recreation opportunities due to a variety of barriers, from the cost of parking at beaches, to transportation challenges, accessibility limitations, and restrictions on shoreline access due to private ownership. Addressing these barriers will assist in ensuring that all recreation enthusiasts—regardless of income, ability, geographic location or cultural background—can enjoy the benefits of the state's outdoor spaces. Rhode Island's commitment to recreation for all requires a holistic approach that addresses barriers to access, and ensures a fair distribution of resources and benefits.

Cost

One strategy to minimize barriers to accessing outdoor recreation opportunities is affordability. Throughout the engagement process, recreationists reported costs associated with beach parking and fishing / hunting licenses and permit fees as a hurdle. Offering a fee structure that is flexible and has options for all income levels opens more opportunities for recreation enthusiasts of all financial backgrounds to experience the benefits of Rhode Island's parks, beaches, and other assets. On the other hand, fishing/hunting license revenue provides a dedicated funding stream for conservation efforts. And charging parking fees at beaches is a tool for managing the significant regional demand for access to Rhode Islands beaches.

RIDEM already distinguishes between resident versus non-resident fees for hunting licenses and fees and provides grants for free swimming or paddlecraft safety lessons. Similarly, 80% of municipal recreation directors who responded to the survey reported providing fee structures or discounts to reduce financial burden as a barrier to participation.



80% OF RHODE ISLAND MUNICIPAL
RECREATION DEPARTMENTS OFFER FEE
STRUCTURES OR DISCOUNTS TO REDUCE
BARRIERS FOR PARTICIPATION

Many municipal parks and recreation departments are already offering broad fee structures or discounts on programs and services.

Offering a variety of fee structures allows opportunities for all recreation enthusiasts to access outdoor areas and their benefits.

Transportation & Walkability

For many, access means having outdoor recreation opportunities within a short walk, bike ride, or public transportation trip from home. One widely used measure of adequate park access is the percentage of people within a community who can reach a park or green space within a ten-minute walk. However, in Rhode Island, a ten-minute walk is often not a meaningful metric due to unsafe or disconnected sidewalks, lack of crosswalks, and limited bike infrastructure that is maintained year-round. Furthermore, in suburban and rural areas, reaching a park often requires a short drive or transit trip, making improved connectivity just as important as proximity.

Transportation barriers were among the most frequently mentioned challenges in the SCORP public engagement process. Residents in suburban and rural areas expressed frustration over the lack of safe pedestrian and cycling routes, while many urban residents cited limited transit options to major parks and beaches. Residents requested better sidewalk networks, safer biking routes, and expanded transit service to parks and beaches. RIPTA bus routes often do not extend directly to state parks, and some transit-dependent residents noted that they have difficulty reaching natural areas without a car. Addressing these barriers will require a holistic approach that incorporates sidewalk expansion, bike infrastructure improvements, and enhanced affordable public transportation options.

Accessibility & Universal and Inclusive Design

At a minimum, outdoor recreation areas should comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Public engagement participants, particularly seniors and individuals with disabilities, reported that while many facilities are technically ADA-compliant, they remain difficult to navigate due to steep slopes, lack of rest areas, or poorly maintained paths. Other reports from outdoor recreation providers and the Advisory Committee indicate some facilities at the local and state levels may not fully comply with the ADA and may need to develop ADA transition plans. This plan recognizes that while the ADA requires barrier-free access to a recreational activity, not all spaces need to be fully accessible, particularly where doing so would compromise the natural character or ecological integrity of the environment. Rhode Islanders emphasized the importance of ensuring that both new and existing recreation areas are accessible at a minimum and where possible, go beyond mere compliance. Where non-compliance exists, an ADA transition plan should be prepared.

Outdoor recreation providers have acknowledged that going above and beyond minimum requirements of the ADA to implement principles of universal and inclusive design can enhance feelings of welcome, fostering an environment where recreation enthusiasts of all ability levels can participate. While universal and inclusive design encompass ADA compliance, these strategies create spaces that are usable by all people to the greatest extent possible, considering a variety of physical, cognitive and mental abilities.

Examples includes creating clear, flat pathways to amenities, well lit public spaces, shaded and moveable seating areas in a variety of settings; consistent, multi-sensory, multi-lingual wayfinding, and use of contrasting colors and textures to help those with visual impairments navigate spaces.

Finally, listening sessions with disability advocates emphasized the need for real-time, easily accessible information about which parks and trails are fully accessible. Many participants reported arriving at parks expecting ADA-compliant facilities, only to find them inaccessible due to steep terrain, inadequate curb cuts, or blocked pathways.

A digital accessibility guide that provides up-to-date information about accessible recreation sites

should be developed as part of any effort to improve inclusive access. This kind of guide can also be incorporated into any web-based application and other improvements aimed at expanding the information available about outdoor recreation opportunities such as those recommended as part of this plan.

Coastal Access, Overuse, and Equitable Alternatives

Rhode Island's iconic coastal areas are among the state's most visited recreation destinations. However, public engagement and agency data reveal extreme pressure on state-managed beaches, with many reaching vehicle capacity by mid-morning during peak season. This has resulted in overflow demand at adjacent non-beach coastal access sites, and increased tensions between recreational demand and resource capacity.

Given the physical and environmental limitations on constructing new coastal beaches, Rhode Island could focus instead on:

- Promoting a variety of water-access points for activities such as kayaking and paddleboarding making sure to protect any sensitive conservation areas and ensuring demand for boating and fishing access is met;
- Investing in signage, wayfinding, and public awareness campaigns to guide visitors to these alternatives;
- Exploring the potential of new swimmable areas, such as improved sites along Narragansett Bay, where water quality has measurably improved;
- Encouraging regional tourism boards to help distribute visitation across a broader range of coastal experiences making sure to include education about environmental stewardship.

A targeted communication and infrastructure strategy that showcases these alternative coastal experiences—particularly those that are more affordable, less crowded, and environmentally sustainable—can help relieve pressure on overburdened beaches while expanding access for all Rhode Islanders.

■ **RECOMMENDATION 4.1:**

Reduce Financial and Access Barriers While Managing Coastal Demand

High demand at state beaches (often reaching capacity by 9:30 AM) and rising municipal fees highlight the need to balance affordability with sustainable access. Simultaneously, nearby non-beach coastal sites are under pressure without adequate infrastructure. Rhode Island should consider flexible fee structures and promote lower-cost alternatives to traditional beach access.

■ **Action 4.1a: Expand and Clarify Fee Strategies for Equity and Access**

- Conduct a statewide inventory and assessment of all outdoor recreation-related fees, and alternative fee structures in use including for beach access, parking, permits, and programming and identify best-practices that align costs with users' ability to pay.
- Develop a best practice guide for municipalities to implement sliding scales or flexible fee options in their own programming, particularly for low-income communities.

■ **Action 4.1b: Promote Equitable Alternatives to High-Cost Coastal Sites ***

- Identify and improve underutilized coastal access points suitable for paddle sports or waterfront picnicking making sure to protect any sensitive conservation areas while ensuring the demand for boating and fishing access is met.
- Develop multilingual signage, maps, and mobile tools to guide visitors to these lower-cost alternatives.
- Explore the feasibility of expanding safe swimming zones in improved water-quality areas such as Narragansett Bay.
- Partner with local and regional tourism agencies to redirect demand toward lesser known alternative water recreation sites, making sure to include education about environmental stewardship.

■ **RECOMMENDATION 4.2:**

Expand Walking, Biking and Transit Networks to Connect More Rhode Islanders to Recreation Opportunities

Creating safe and accessible walking and biking networks can improve connectivity and reduce transportation barriers to outdoor recreation. Public engagement findings indicate that while many Rhode Islanders drive to parks, those without personal vehicles have significantly fewer options to access outdoor spaces. Improving multimodal connectivity is essential for equitable access.

■ **Action 4.2a: Expand Sidewalk and Bike Path Networks ***

- Work with RIDOT, the Division of Statewide Planning, municipalities, and community advocates to identify and address gaps in sidewalks, bike lanes, and multi-use paths to connect neighborhoods to nearby parks and recreation areas.
- Improve crossings and directional signage to the parks (example – make a pedestrian gateway to Lincoln Woods at the RIPTA stop on Old Louisiquisset Pike)
- Prioritize locations of new bike and pedestrian infrastructure based on safety concerns, population density, and current barriers to pedestrian and cycling access, especially for underserved communities.
- Install secure, weather-protected bicycle parking facilities and repair stations at key recreation sites, designed according to industry best practices, such as those outlined by the Association of Pedestrian and Bicycle Professionals (APBP). These facilities should include features like durable coverings, adequate spacing, and visibility to enhance usability and security.

■ **Action 4.2b: Improve Public Transit Connections to Parks**

- As RIPTA implements its Transit Master Plan, advocate for popular recreation sites to be included as dedicated stops.
- Advocate for better/safer connections to outdoor recreation resources as part of RI's Complete Streets and Safe Streets for All planning efforts.

■ RECOMMENDATION 4.3:

Ensure Equitable Distribution of Recreation Resources, Prioritizing Funding for Underserved Communities.

Addressing gaps in the distribution of high-quality parks and recreation facilities is essential for reducing disparities and promoting fair and just access to outdoor spaces across Rhode Island. Public engagement findings revealed a perception that lower-income urban communities often have fewer well-maintained recreation facilities, while suburban and rural areas face challenges with access due to transportation limitations. Expanding resources in these areas will help bridge these gaps.

■ Action 4.3a: Undertake an Equity Audit and Target Investments in Underserved Areas *

- Map existing resources against demographic data to highlight where inequities exist in distribution and access to high-quality well-maintained parks, trails, and waterfront areas.
- Allocate funding to new park infrastructure, public transportation connections, and trail networks in areas identified as recreation deserts.
- Prioritize the creation of high quality, full-service outdoor recreation facilities
- Improve under-utilized parks in underserved areas through addition of in-demand amenities such as benches, bathrooms, and clear signage.
- Strategize ways to increase operations and maintenance funding in underserved areas

■ RECOMMENDATION 4.4:

Using Principles of Universal and Inclusive Design, Upgrade Parks to Provide Access for All Abilities

Ensure that all Rhode Islanders, regardless of age, ability, mental or cognitive function, or mobility, can access and enjoy the state's outdoor recreation resources by integrating Universal Design principles.

■ Action 4.4a: Retrofit Existing Facilities for Expanded Accessibility *

- Audit existing recreation spaces to identify barriers to accessibility, including steep inclines, poor trail conditions, limited seating, and lack of options for inclusive recreation.
- Where facilities lack ADA compliance, prepare an ADA transition plan and ensure budget and programming support for its implementation.
- Improve wayfinding and directional signage to ensure that recreation spaces are easily navigable for people of all abilities and language backgrounds.

■ Action 4.4b: Incorporate Principles of Universal and Inclusive Design *

- Encourage the use of Universal and Inclusive Design principles in upgrades, expansions and construction of new outdoor recreation opportunities such as kayak launches, disc golf, inclusive playgrounds, camping, beach access, etc.
- Prioritize Universal Design for facilities that are intended for broad public use, such as visitor centers, playgrounds, main trails, picnic areas, and restrooms. These areas should accommodate users of all abilities and provide clear, equitable access to recreation opportunities.



PRIORITY AREA 5 GATEWAY EXPERIENCES:

Cultivate Feelings Of Comfort, Safety & Confidence, And Knowledge Through Gateway Experiences.

Enjoyable time outdoors cultivates a life-long love for outdoor recreation activities that build confidence, promote health and wellness and connect people to each other and Rhode Island's natural resources. But some Rhode Islanders expressed a hesitation to explore the outdoors more due to a perceived lack of safety.

This plan suggests the creation of "gateway experiences" as a way to get people comfortable with the outdoors. These can include both promotion of existing high-amenity outdoor recreation facilities - well-manicured and maintained facilities with support amenities such as restrooms, additional parking, and weather shelters that have park staff present - as well as individual staff or volunteer-led outdoor experiences at outdoor recreation facilities. These "gateways" can be points of access for individuals who are interested in but not fully comfortable with the outdoors. This type of experience can also generate environmental stewardship and further develop a culture of care.

Guided outdoor recreation experiences provide the potential to partner with skilled partner organizations with staff familiar with navigating more rugged or remote outdoor environments to provide the education and safety net needed by first-time or amateur outdoor recreation participants. Furthermore, the presence of groups and staff in designated attire at key locations will provide natural surveillance that discourages undesired behaviors and enhances feelings of safety.

Safety

Outdoor recreation areas, whether urban parks, inland and coastal beaches, or more remote management areas, must foster feelings of safety to encourage visitation to the natural environment. As safety concerns are heard mostly from under-resourced populations (low-income and people with a disability or over the age of 55), addressing these is a way to enhance fair access to

outdoor recreation. To ensure positive yet memorable first-time interactions with the natural world, participants must perceive and experience their environment as safe. While the topic of safety is complex, people need to feel a reasonable level of safety in public spaces to use them.

Safety comes in many forms. Whether real or perceived, people can feel threatened by their physical surroundings, other people, or social inequities. Recreation providers should prioritize preventable safety issues. Routine maintenance and replacement schedules should be established for all outdoor recreation assets. A prioritized list of improvements to mitigate preventable safety issues will provide a road map for improving feelings of safety by recreation enthusiasts. Image and milieu, or the physical and social condition of properties, signals if an area is cared for or neglected. Those that are cared for are inherently perceived as safer.

While actual crime rates at outdoor recreation assets were not studied as part of this plan, engagement respondents noted feeling unsafe was a concern when outdoors. Best practice and aesthetic considerations can help improve feelings of safety. Implementing principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) has been shown not only to reduce crime rates, but improve feelings of safety. CPTED is a strategy that uses the design and management of the built and natural environment to discourage crime and the reduce the fear of crime. CPTED principles also reinforce the concept of collective responsibility and stewardship. When the public sees a space as their own, they are more likely to take care of it and work together to discourage undesirable behavior. This principle, known as territorial control, can improve feelings of safety by recreation enthusiasts.

Many engagement respondents suggested the need for additional lighting, emergency call boxes or surveillance by rangers, especially for more vulnerable populations. CPTED suggests natural surveillance, or the use of lighting, landscaping, clear sight-lines, and other design approaches to reduce fear. The addition of lighting or park rangers should be prioritized at developed parks, guiding visitors to where they can find well-lit pathways, group programs, or other amenities that bolster feelings of safety.

Comfort: Support Facilities & Amenities

The SCORP's community engagement process revealed the public generally wishes to see more support facilities and amenities, as discussed in Chapter 3. This aligns with a larger 21st Century trend that outdoor recreation participants tend to have higher expectations for comfort and convenience. Outdoor recreation users expect paved surfaces, clean restrooms, clear signage, lighting, and ample parking in close proximity to their destination. There is more demand for accessible, inclusive features, Wi-Fi, food options, shaded seating, and event programming than ever before. While mainstream recreation is trending toward more curated and manicured spaces, counter-movements seeking authentic, rugged, and minimally-developed nature encounters also exist.

The practicality of providing more structured leisure activities at manicured facilities with the comforts of modern infrastructure is challenged by the limited availability of funding and staffing resources. Identifying existing recreation facilities with these features and calling their attention to use for "gateway experiences" can manage expectations and meet current needs with little investment.

Setting Clear Expectations

Some recreation enthusiasts expect well-manicured trails, pristine beaches and campgrounds with new equipment, and well-lit paths. While safe, well-maintained outdoor recreation resources continue to be a priority, the public's expectations are often misaligned with the intended use of sites and the capacity of agency staff to operate and maintain them. Developing a classification system for outdoor recreation destinations will help guide behaviors that are encouraged in various settings while discouraging less-desirable behaviors. Similarly, the ideal classification system will clearly establish expectations for character and degree of maintenance, which varies between a highly manicured park to host annual events or milestone celebrations, versus a management area intended primarily for conservation. A centralized database of park classifications with the expected visitor experience can help set realistic expectations and guide recreationists to assets aligned with their recreation preferences.

Additional signage and information physically posted around recreation facilities describing the desired use and human behavior will reinforce proper use and limit unintended wear and tear.

RECOMMENDATION 5.1: Showcase Existing Facilities That Provide Amenities and Experiences Demanded by The Public.

Action 5.1a: Identify and Promote Gateway Facilities

- Identify existing facilities that offer clean, accessible restrooms, adequate parking, lit common areas and walkways, water fountains, shaded seating, Wi-Fi, and other comforts.
- Promote these facilities as top destinations to partners and volunteers offering "gateway activities and programming."
- Provide "gateway" experiences such as guided walks and other educational programming, to enhance feelings of safety and comfort.
- Encourage the creation of new facilities that can offer gateway experiences.

Action 5.1b: Collaborate with Non-Profits and Other Partners to Provide Staff to Facilitate Gateway Activities at Gateway Facilities

RECOMMENDATION 5.2: Improve Public Feelings of Safety Through the Built Environment.

This plan suggests a multifaceted approach to improving perceptions of safety by promoting environmental stewardship, setting clear expectations for outdoor recreation experiences, and improving the built environment to promote feelings of safety and welcome.

Action 5.2a: Encourage Safety Audits as Part of Routine Maintenance

- Work with local communities to support incorporation of safety audits into routine maintenance inspections to identify and address where appropriate:
- poor sightlines and concealed areas where one could hide

- neglected spaces that suggest undesirable behavior is acceptable
- lack of clear park boundaries
- Install emergency call systems, improved lighting, and principles of CPTED to improve feelings of safety in concealed and neglected spaces.

Action 5.2b: Consider Upgrades to Lighting Systems Where Needed *

- Identify outdoor recreation areas that would benefit from improved lighting, in alignment with the degree of remoteness, hours of operation, and intended use.
- Install energy-efficient lighting along key park features, including walking paths, parking areas, restrooms, and high-traffic zones, to improve visibility and deter unsafe behaviors.

Action 5.2c: Develop a Classification System That Combines Level of Service Standards for Maintenance Practices & Experience Expectations, Thereby Reducing User Conflicts

- Develop a classification system that aligns maintenance efforts and experience expectations to the type and intended use of outdoor recreation areas. Classification system should guide desirable uses and discourage undesirable activities. Classify outdoor recreation assets by:
 - Availability of amenities (provisions for restrooms, weather shelters, shade, frequent seating options for resting, and pathway lighting to name a few).
 - Universal accessibility (to what degree accessible accommodations are provided).
 - Level of service standards for maintenance (highly manicured or more rustic / natural).
 - Degree of remoteness (degree to which outdoor spaces have been altered due to their proximity to urban centers, or, left in-tact with little evidence of human alteration).
 - Intended use/ allowed uses (describe the intended use for the recreation asset including behaviors that are desired and discouraged).
- Maintain an on-line, central database of outdoor recreation assets with assigned classification.

- Expand on-site signage by promoting a statewide common use typology that establishes clear expectations for use and degree of maintenance.



PRIORITY AREA 6 SHOUT IT FROM THE TREE TOPS:

Promote Outdoor Recreation Resources Through Improved Communications & Marketing To Generate Statewide Support & Awareness

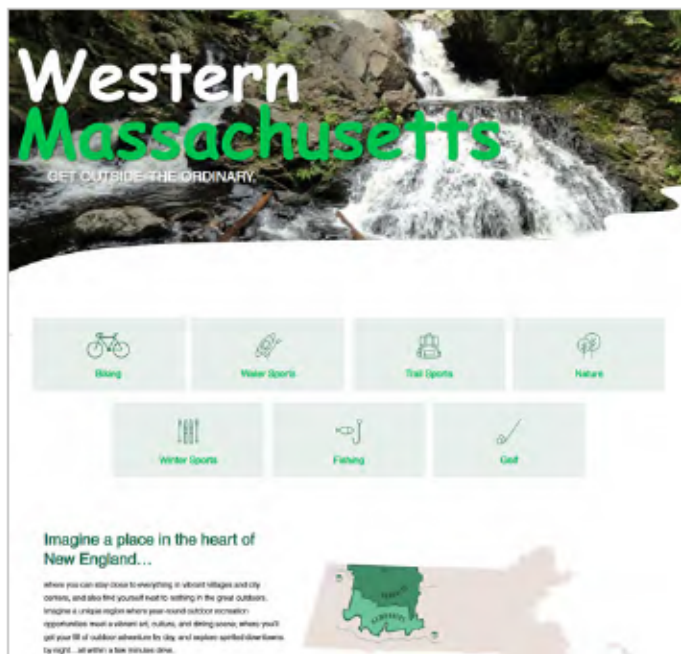
The 2026 SCORP engagement process revealed a need for more effective communication to increase awareness of the vast outdoor recreation opportunities available to the public. The benefits of spending time outdoors are many, and improving awareness about these opportunities will expand participation and benefit distribution. By raising awareness through strategic communication, marketing, and partnerships, Rhode Island can expand access to recreation while fostering a deeper connection between its residents and natural resources.

Building Awareness Through Strategic Communication

Community engagement feedback highlighted the need for multi-platform and multilingual information about Rhode Island's recreation offerings. Survey participants frequently reported challenges in accessing accurate and up-to-date information about sites, reservation systems, and seasonal programming. Addressing these gaps requires a comprehensive communication strategy that delivers accurate and user-friendly information through multiple channels, including websites, smart phone apps, social media, signage, publications, and community partnerships.

Additionally, when members of the public were asked to identify barriers to using outdoor recreation resources, they responded with a clear demand for easily accessible, clean, and safe experiences complete with amenities and staff. RI has many such outdoor recreation opportunities that could be promoted through "gateway" experiences at these facilities. A centralized, web-based hub for information regarding state-wide outdoor recreation has been a

longstanding topic of discussion by the public and recreation providers. While there are few examples of websites with a comprehensive list of state-wide recreation resources, several organizations have been successful in developing regional resources. For example, Western Mass Outdoors (wmassoutdoors.com) has consolidated information about outdoor assets, including biking, water sports, trail sports, nature, winter sports, fishing, and golf, for two counties: Hampshire County and Franklin County. This regional approach managed by Hampshire and Franklin County Regional Tourism Councils clearly defines the geographic reach and specific activities for which the joint website hosts information.



The landing page for WMO is comprehensive and easy to navigate.

Leveraging Partnerships to Amplify Outreach

Strong partnerships with schools, libraries, local businesses, and tourism organizations can play a pivotal role in promoting outdoor recreation. Trusted community organizations—such as libraries, health centers, and local businesses serve as key distribution points for recreation information. Collaboration with non-profits, schools, and healthcare providers can also increase awareness of outdoor recreation’s physical and mental health benefits, encouraging broader participation.

Fostering Public Support for Outdoor Recreation

Public awareness campaigns should not only inform but also inspire. Engaging stories, slogans, visuals, and interactive elements can foster emotional connections to outdoor spaces, motivating Rhode Islanders to explore and advocate for these resources. In turn, increased public support can strengthen funding efforts, encourage stewardship, and reinforce the value of outdoor recreation as a shared community priority.

Enhancing the Role of Recreation in Economic Development

Outdoor recreation is a significant contributor to Rhode Island’s economy, supporting jobs, tourism, and local businesses. Public engagement findings revealed that while tourism is an economic asset, residents want to ensure that local recreation needs remain the priority in funding and promotion efforts. There was also strong support for leveraging outdoor recreation to support local small businesses and cultural tourism.

RECOMMENDATION 6.1: Ensure Information about Outdoor Recreation Opportunities is Readily Available.

Create high-impact multilingual, multi-platform messaging to celebrate and promote Rhode Island’s outdoor recreation resources, fostering pride and encouraging participation among recreationist, businesses and visitors alike.

Action 6.1a: Bolster the Effectiveness of Existing Web-Based Content

- Invest in a third-party audit of Rhode Island’s outdoor recreation web-based resources to evaluate existing site analytics, design functionality, organization, and content. Explore recommendations for more effective content strategy and management, ease of navigation to priority content, closing gaps in information or desired content, and design that is inspiring and promotes stewardship statewide.
- Involve the public and recreation enthusiasts in the audit’s discovery and planning by inclusion in surveys, focus groups, questionnaires, interviews or other engagement methods.

- Include scope in the audit for developing recommendations for how to structure and organize a central hub with comprehensive information on outdoor recreation opportunities and experiences.
- Create messaging specifically aimed at engaging younger generations, using social media platforms and school sponsored incentives, to encourage exploration and outdoor activities.

Action 6.1b: Provide Multi-Platform, Multilingual Information on Rhode Island's Outdoor Recreation Resources

- Use social media or smart phone apps to promote activities and events.
- Consider crowd sourcing, the gathering of the public's outdoor recreation experiences from a large group of people through social media sites such as instagram and facebook, to tap into the knowledge, observations and creativity of the public rather than relying solely on a single organization.
- Consider the use of hard copy messaging and branded products to reach a broader audience.
- Develop PSAs for television, radio, and online platforms highlighting the benefits of outdoor recreation and featuring local success stories.
- Ensure content across all platforms is multilingual, accessible and culturally responsive to the intended audience.

RECOMMENDATION 6.2: **Expand Partnerships and Economic Strategies to Promote Outdoor Recreation**

Collaborate with community organizations, local businesses, and regional partners to enhance outdoor recreation promotion, support local economies, and attract investment. By strengthening public-private partnerships and integrating outdoor recreation into economic development initiatives, Rhode Island can maximize the benefits of its outdoor spaces for both residents and visitors.

Action 6.2a: Promote Recreation-Related Partnerships

- Encourage private-sector partnerships to support the development and maintenance of culturally significant recreation facilities, events, and programming.
- Develop sponsorship opportunities for businesses and non-profits to invest in community-led recreation initiatives.
- Create partnerships with arts organizations to incorporate public art installations that reflect Rhode Island's cultural diversity into parks and public spaces.

Action 6.2b: Strengthen Collaborations with Schools, Libraries, and Community Organizations

- Using DEM's Rhody Critter Kits as a model, expand partnerships with schools to integrate outdoor education into curricula and organize field trips to parks and recreation sites.
- Continue to partner with libraries to distribute informational materials and host recreation-themed workshops.
- Engage community groups and non-profits to promote outdoor recreation's benefits for physical and mental health.

Action 6.2c: Engage Local Businesses in Outdoor Recreation Promotion

- Partner with outdoor retailers, restaurants, and tour operators to promote recreation opportunities through cross-promotions, sponsorships, and events.
- Establish awards for businesses or individuals who make significant contributions to the promotion and enhancement of outdoor recreation.
- Encourage businesses to offer recreation-related discounts or incentives, such as free meals with bike rentals or store discounts for park visitors.

Action 6.2d: Align Outdoor Recreation with Economic Development and Tourism Strategies

- Integrate information about recreation amenities into business development materials to attract new businesses and residents.
- Continue to market Rhode Island's unique outdoor experiences and signature attractions, such as its coastal trails, historic landmarks, and iconic beaches, to attract visitors.
- Continue to coordinate with state and regional tourism boards to market Rhode Island's unique outdoor destinations and recreational experiences.
- Consider smaller, targeted marketing campaigns to highlight lesser-known outdoor sites with available capacity, helping to reduce overcrowding in high-use areas.



Castle Hill Lighthouse, Newport

ACTION PLAN & IMPLEMENTATION MATRIX

Recommendations and Actions	Timeframe	Potential Key Partners
PRIORITY AREA 1: ESTABLISHING AN OUTDOOR RECREATION OFFICE (ORO) FOR RHODE ISLAND		
Recommendation 1.1: Prioritize approvals, program planning and staffing for the ORO		
Action 1.1a: Develop a 5-year program plan for the ORO	Short	DEM
Action 1.1b: Establish the ORO and hire leadership staff	Mid	DEM
PRIORITY AREA 2: MAINTAIN A SUSTAINABLE NETWORK OF OUTDOOR RECREATION RESOURCES		
Recommendation 2.1: Foster a Culture of Care		
Action 2.1a: Establish Recreation Care Ambassadors	Mid	DEM, Friends-of groups, RIRPA, Land Trusts
Action 2.1b: Enhance Staff Training and Development	Mid	DEM, RIRPA, Land Trust Council
Action 2.1c: Educate the Public on Environmental Stewardship	Short	Governor's Office, Watershed Groups, Land Trusts
Recommendation 2.2: Incentivize Operations and Maintenance Planning		
Action 2.2a: Revise Grant Application Criteria to Prioritize Maintenance	Short	DEM, RIRPA
Action 2.2b: Provide Technical Assistance for Municipalities	Long	DEM, RIRPA
Action 2.2c: Promote Peer Learning Opportunities	Mid	DEM, RIRPA
Action 2.2d: Recognize Excellence in Operations & Maintenance Planning	Mid	DEM, RIRPA
Recommendation 2.3: Find creative strategies for increased funding for operations and maintenance of our outdoor recreation assets.		
Action 2.3a: Foster Public-Private Partnerships to Support Outdoor Recreation Investments	Short	DEM, Outdoor recreation businesses, RI Commerce
Action 2.3b: Advocate, Advocate, Advocate	Short	DEM, RI Commerce

Recommendation 2.4: Improve Signage to Support Stewardship, Navigation, and Maintenance

Action 2.4a: Implement a Unified Facility Marker System	Mid	DEM, Municipalities, Land Trusts, NGOs
Action 2.4b: Expand Kiosk and On-Site Informational Content	Mid	DEM, Municipalities, Land Trusts, NGOs

Recommendation 2.5: Actively discourage the loss of publicly funded recreation and open space system land through conversion to alternative uses

Action 2.5a: Develop regulations which subject land development proposals that convert recreation land to the highest scrutiny	Short, Mid, Long	RIDEM, Municipalities, NOGs, Land Trusts, RIDSP
Action 2.5b: Develop regulations which incorporate Federal Energy Regulatory Commission run-of-the river policy	Short, Mid, Long	RIDEM, Municipalities, NOGs, Land Trusts, RIDSP

PRIORITY AREA 3: THE EVOLVING RECREATION NEEDS OF RHODE ISLANDERS AND VISITORS

Recommendation 3.1: Prioritize funding for projects that provide multi-use, multi-generational and culturally responsive recreation opportunities

Action 3.1a: Develop Multi-Use Facilities	Mid	DEM, Municipalities
Action 3.1b: Expand Programming Across Age Groups	Mid	DEM, Municipalities, Land Trusts, NGOs
Action 3.1c: Prioritize Group-Oriented Activities and Programs	Mid	DEM, Municipalities, Land Trusts, NGOs
Action 3.1d: Expand Engagement Efforts with Local Communities to Ensure New Facilities Are Responsive to Local Needs	Mid	Municipalities, RIRPA
Action 3.1e: Revise Grant Application Criteria to Promote Fair Access	Short	DEM, RRRC
Action 3.1f: Ensure new or expanded recreation spaces protect wildlife habitat and cultural resources	Ongoing	DEM, RI Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, Narragansett Indian Tribe

Recommendation 3.2: Plan & Design for Resilient Recreation Infrastructure

Action 3.2a: Design for Climate Resilience	Short	DEM, Municipalities, Infrastructure Bank
Action 3.2b: Integrate Sustainable Practices	Short	DEM, Municipalities, Land Trusts, NGOs

Recommendation 3.3: Incorporate Emerging Trends into Outdoor Recreation Facility Design, Activities and Programming

Action 3.3a: Anticipate Recreation Infrastructure to Meet Emerging Trends	Mid	DEM, Municipalities, Land Trusts, NGOs
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PRIORITY AREA 4 - RECREATION FOR ALL: REMOVE BARRIERS TO ENSURE FAIR AND JUST ACCESS TO RHODE ISLAND'S OUTDOORS

Recommendation 4.1: Reduce Financial and Access Barriers While Managing Coastal Demand

Action 4.1a: Expand and Clarify Fee Strategies for Equity and Access	Mid	DEM, Municipalities
Action 4.1b: Promote Equitable Alternatives to High-Cost Coastal Sites	Mid	DEM, Municipalities, NGOs

Recommendation 4.2: Expand Walking, Biking and Transit Networks to Connect More Rhode Islanders to Recreation Opportunities

Action 4.2a: Expand Sidewalk and Bike Path Networks	Long	DEM, DOT, Municipalities
Action 4.2b: Improve Public Transit Connections to Parks	Long	RIPTA, DEM, Municipalities

Recommendation 4.3: Ensure Equitable Distribution of Recreation Resources, Prioritizing Funding for Underserved Communities.

Action 4.3a: Undertake an Equity Audit and Target Investments in Underserved Areas	Mid	DEM, Municipalities, Land Trusts, NGOs
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Recommendation 4.4: Using Principles of Universal and Inclusive Design, Upgrade Parks to Provide Access for All Abilities

Action 4.4a: Retrofit Existing Facilities for Better Accessibility	Mid	Governor's Commission on Disabilities
Action 4.4b: Incorporate Principles of Universal and Inclusive Design	Mid	Governor's Commission on Disabilities

PRIORITY AREA 5 - GATEWAY EXPERIENCES: CULTIVATE FEELINGS OF COMFORT, SAFETY & CONFIDENCE, AND KNOWLEDGE THROUGH GATEWAY EXPERIENCES

Recommendation 5.1: Showcase Existing Facilities That Provide Amenities and Experiences Demanded by The Public

Action 5.1a: Identify and Promote Gateway Facilities	Mid	DEM, Municipalities, NGOs, RI Commerce
Action 5.1b: Collaborate with Non-Profits and Other Partners to Provide Staff to Facilitate Gateway Activities at Gateway Facilities	Long	DEM, Municipalities, Land Trusts, NGOs

Recommendation 5.2: Improve Public Feelings of Safety Through the Built Environment.

Action 5.2a: Encourage Safety Audits as Part of Routine Maintenance	Mid	DEM, Municipalities, NGOs
Action 5.2b: Consider Upgrades to Lighting Systems Where Needed	Mid	DEM, Municipalities, NGOs
Action 5.2c: Develop a Classification System That Combines Level of Service Standards for Maintenance Practices & Experience Expectations, thereby reducing user conflicts	Long	DEM, Municipalities, Land Trusts, NGOs

PRIORITY AREA 6: PROMOTE OUTDOOR RECREATION RESOURCES THROUGH IMPROVED COMMUNICATIONS & MARKETING TO GENERATE STATEWIDE SUPPORT & AWARENESS

Recommendation 6.1: Ensure Access to Information about Outdoor Recreation Opportunities is Readily Available.

Action 6.1a: Bolster the Effectiveness of Existing Web-Based Content	Mid	DEM, Municipalities, NGOs, RI Commerce
Action 6.1b: Provide Multi-Platform, Multilingual Information on Rhode Island's Outdoor Recreation Resources	Mid	DEM, Municipalities, NGOs, RI Commerce, Tourism Bureaus

Recommendation 6.2: Expand Partnerships and Economic Strategies to Promote Outdoor Recreation

Action 6.2a: Promote Recreation-Related Partnerships	Mid	RI Commerce, Tourism Bureaus
Action 6.2b: Strengthen Collaborations with Schools, Libraries, and Community Organizations	Mid	Educational institutions
Action 6.2c: Engage Local Businesses in Outdoor Recreation Promotion	Short	RI Commerce, Tourism Bureaus
Action 6.2d: Align Outdoor Recreation with Economic Development and Tourism Strategies	Mid	RI Commerce, Tourism Bureaus

Timeline definitions:

Short = 1-3 years

Mid = 3-5 years

Long = 5-10 years

Acronyms and abbreviations

RIRPA – RI Recreation and Parks Association

RI Commerce – RI Commerce Corporation

Key Partners

- NGOs
 - o The Nature Conservancy
 - o The Audubon Society of Rhode Island
 - o RI Land Trust Council
 - o Save the Bay
 - o Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council
 - o Blackstone River Watershed Council
 - o Groundwork Rhode Island
 - o Movement Education Outdoors
 - o RI Environmental education Association
 - o Health Equity Zones
- Tourism Bureaus
 - o Blackstone Valley Tourism Council
 - o Block Island Tourism Council
 - o Providence Warwick Convention & Visitors Bureau (PWCVB)
 - o South County Tourism Council
 - o Warwick Department of Tourism, Culture & Development
 - o Discover Newport RI

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PLAN

APPENDIX 2: RHODE ISLAND WETLAND PRIORITY PROTECTION PLAN

APPENDIX 3: RECREATION GRANT SELECTION PROCESS

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PLAN

OVERALL ENGAGEMENT APPROACH

State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plans (SCORP) help fulfill the purpose of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) Act of 1965:

*Its purpose is to stimulate a nationwide action program to assist in preserving, developing, and assuring accessibility to all citizens of the United States of **present and future generations**, and visitors who are lawfully present within the boundaries of the United States, such **quality and quantity of outdoor recreation resources** as may be available and are necessary and desirable for individual active participation in such recreation; and to **strengthen the health and vitality of U.S. citizens.***

WHAT IS VITALITY?

“The state of being strong and active; the power running through all living things, the continuance of life.”

HOW DOES VITALITY MANIFEST THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

Community-wide vitality can be achieved when individuals feel empowerment, productive, and creative and enjoy good health and well-being.

This Community Engagement plan examines the symbiotic relations between people and parks and recreation resources owned and managed by the State of Rhode Island and answers the question: how can state parks revitalize communities and individuals? And how can communities and individuals revitalize parks? Can all the outreach events and activities for the SCORP Community Engagement Plan be organized to revitalize people, communities and the state parks themselves?

GOALS

Goals of the Community Engagement process include:

1. **EMPOWERMENT** - Reach and engage under-represented / underinvested communities (the unaware, non-users)
2. **EMPOWERMENT** - Promote an inclusive, accessible and authentic engagement process
3. **EMPOWERMENT** - Connect participants to the engagement process so they feel invested in the outcome
4. **PRODUCTIVITY** - Provide opportunities for learning
5. **PRODUCTIVITY** - Co-create a vision for 2025 SCORP
6. **HEALTH & WELL-BEING** - Increase number of park users
7. **HEALTH & WELL-BEING** - Build long-term relationships for ongoing dialog
8. **HEALTH & WELL-BEING** - Foster long-term stewardship
9. **CREATIVITY** - Have fun!

AUDIENCE: WHO ARE WE TRYING TO REACH?

The Community Engagement Plan attempts to reach a diverse audience: participants residing in Rhode Island. They may be current users as well as people who don't currently use or aren't even aware of parks and recreation resources owned and operated by the state. These participants should be geographically spread across Rhode Island. Special focus was given to capturing the voices and unique individual experiences of cohorts not captured in past SCORP updates, including youth and seniors.

This plan seeks to connect with and capture perspectives about recreation from five primary cohorts:

GENERAL PUBLIC- This cohort encompasses a broad spectrum of Rhode Island's population, including frequent users of outdoor recreation facilities, occasional visitors, and residents who benefit indirectly from these resources. It represents a wide range of demographics, including families, working adults, seniors, and youths, with varying degrees of interest and engagement in outdoor recreation. The goal is to understand the general public's awareness, usage patterns, needs, and expectations regarding outdoor recreation facilities and programs.

THE AWARE, NON-USER - These individuals are knowledgeable about the state's outdoor recreation opportunities but choose not to participate or use these resources. Reasons for non-use could range from personal preferences, perceived barriers to access (such as costs, transportation, or physical limitations), to a lack of interest. Understanding this cohort's awareness but non-participation can highlight potential barriers to recreation and opportunities for increasing engagement and inclusivity.

THE 2019 SCORP UNHEARD VOICES - This cohort zeroes in on youth (under 18) and seniors (65 and over), groups identified by RIDEM and past consultants as inadequately engaged during the 2019 SCORP drafting process. Focusing on these demographics is critical to understanding their unique recreational needs, preferences, and barriers. Adequately engaging with school aged children can inform us on the trends and gaps in Rhode Island's youth-oriented outdoor activities and programs. For seniors, it can reveal necessary accommodations and facility modifications to ensure accessibility, safety, and enjoyment. Directly involving these groups will ensure the RI SCORP better reflects and serves the diverse needs of Rhode Island's population, enhancing outdoor recreational planning and offerings for a more inclusive future.

THE UNAWARE, NON-USER - Individuals in this category are not only non-users but also lack awareness of the outdoor recreation opportunities available in Rhode Island. This lack of awareness could be due to a variety of factors, including new residency in the state, lack of information dissemination in their communities, or previous lack of interest. Engaging with this cohort can uncover strategies to better promote outdoor recreation opportunities to a wider audience and understand the obstacles preventing awareness and participation.

Target Audience	Tabling Events	Pop-Ups	Public Opinion Survey	Listening Sessions	SCORP Ambassadors	Public Comment
The general public	X		X			X
The aware, non-user	X	X	X			X
2019 SCORP Unheard Voices (youth, seniors, rec directors)				X	X	
The unaware, non-user		X			X	

The following organizations are sources contacted to engage these four cohorts:

THE GENERAL PUBLIC

- Under-represented communities
- Special interest groups
- Current users
- Current non-users
- Age cohorts (Youth, Seniors who were missed in 2019)

BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS

- Grow Smart RI
- Statewide Technical Committee

STATE-WIDE ADVOCATES

- AARP
- Commission on Disabilities

LOCAL AGENCIES

- Local P&R agency directors
- Summer rec programs
- Rec / Senior centers and programs

COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

- Community Action Programs
- Boys & Girls Club
- Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council
- YMCA's
- Health Equity Zones

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

- RI School of Design (RISD)
- Bryant University
- CCRI
- RI College
- University of RI
- Roger Williams Univ.
- Salve Regina Univ.
- Providence College
- New England Institute of Technology

UNDER-ENGAGED

- Environmental Justice Communities
- Hard-to-reach populations (youth, seniors)
- ESL
- Immigrants / refugees

ENGAGEMENT TIMELINE

The community engagement process “informed” and “consulted” with participants during the spring and summer of 2024. Consultants “looped back” to participants for review and comment of the report during winter 2025. The diagram below describes the four engagement phases.

INFORM

The Inform phase aims to raise awareness about the RI SCORP, highlighting its objectives and how the public can get involved. It is focused on disseminating key information to ensure the community understands the project's scope and the various ways they can contribute to its development.

CONSULT

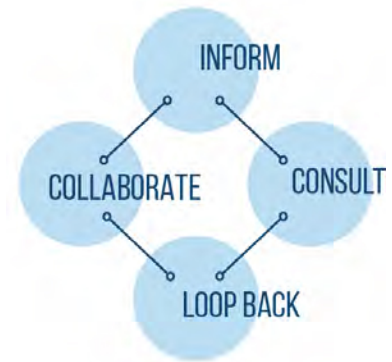
During the Consult phase, the goal is to solicit input from a broad range of stakeholders, gathering diverse perspectives and preferences related to outdoor recreation needs and priorities in Rhode Island. This phase involves actively listening to the community's ideas and concerns to inform the planning process.

LOOP BACK

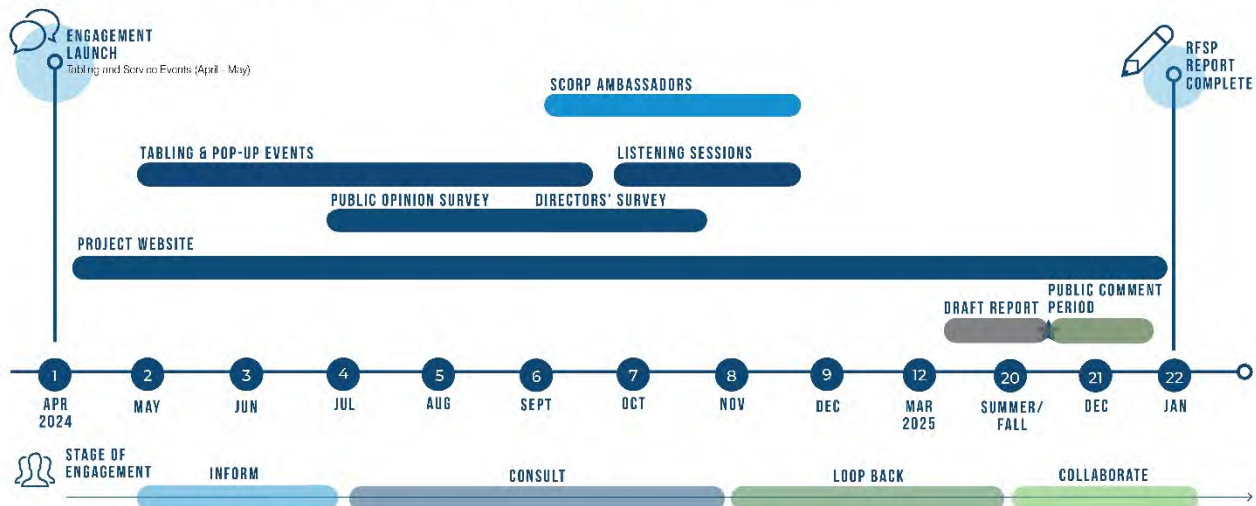
The Loop Back phase is designed to demonstrate how public feedback has been incorporated into the SCORP, reinforcing the value of stakeholder contributions. It ensures transparency in the planning process by showing tangible examples of how input received during the consultation phase has influenced the plan's direction.

COLLABORATE

In the Collaborate phase, the focus shifts to partnership and co-creation, inviting stakeholders to work alongside planners to refine and finalize the SCORP. This phase emphasizes shared ownership and decision-making, encouraging a deeper level of involvement and commitment to the plan's successful implementation.



RHODE ISLAND STATE COMPREHENSIVE OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN PROJECT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TIMELINE



ENGAGEMENT METHODOLOGY: TABLING EVENTS

CAMPAIGN ACTIVITIES

The Community Engagement Commencement Campaign was launched through several touchpoints, bringing awareness to the SCORP project, its purpose, and ways to stay informed and engaged. The campaign occurred over several weeks with boots-on-the-ground in several locations across the state. RIDEM promoted the events through social media, and E-blasts; and press releases sent to RIDEM's news outlets throughout the state.

The consultant team 'got the word out' and solicited initial feedback at multiple touchpoints and locations: in-person attendance at three existing community events and seven tabling locations. Environmentally sensible and well-branded giveaways that encourage repeat engagement were distributed.

- Tabling at a pre-existing / scheduled event in the community
- Potential to reach specific communities / interest groups
- Short, interactive, and fun touch points

TABLING EVENTS

1. **Mayor Smiley's Earth Day "Wonder of the Waters"**

Date: Friday, April 19, 2024

Location: Roger Williams Park, Providence, RI

2. **Party for the Planet**

Date: Saturday, April 20, 2024

Location: Roger Williams Park, Providence, RI

3. **RI Parks and Recreation**

Date: Friday, April 26, 2024

Location: Roger Williams Park Casino

4. **HEZ Learning Community Event**

Date: July 29, 2024

Location: Crown Plaza Warwick

5. **Washington County Fair**

Date: August 18, 2024

Location: Washington County Fair, Richmond, RI

6. **Bristol Beach**

Date: August 23, 2024

Location: Bristol Beach, Bristol RI

7. **Lincoln Woods State Park**

Date: August 23, 2024

Location: Lincoln Woods State Park, Lincoln, RI

8. **Misquamicut Beach**

Date: August 26, 2024

Location: Misquamicut Beach, Westerly, RI

9. **Pulaski State Park**

Date: August 26, 2024

Location: Pulaski State Park, Chepachet, RI

10. **Scarborough Beach**

Date: August 27, 2024

Location: Scarborough Beach, Narragansett, RI

GOALS

- Solicit initial feedback – quick activity (<5 minutes)
- Digital and print materials developed for advertising future engagement events and to drive participants to the website
- Giveaways and prizes
- Inform attendees about the project purpose and upcoming ways to engage
- Short, fun activity
- Opportunity to give back

AUDIENCE

- Aware non-users
- The general public
- Special Interest Groups

PHASE

- Inform the public about the SCORP project, its purpose and goals

CONTENT AND ACTIVITIES

- Mini-Survey
- Maps of recreation sites
- Make-A-Wish
- Wheel spin for giveaway
- Postcard with General Public Survey to win a chance for a free beach pass

COMMUNICATIONS

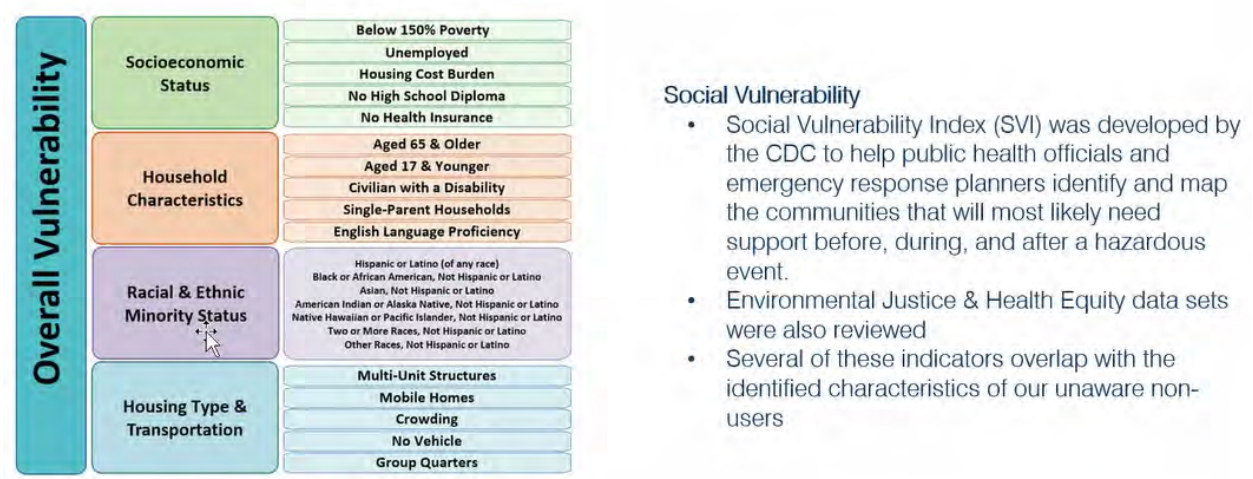
- Public notices
- Press release in top state and local newspapers
- E-blasts with digital posters to partner organizations and significant list serves available through RIDEM
- Social Media
 - Facebook
 - Instagram
- Merchandise and giveaways

ENGAGEMENT METHODOLOGY: POP-UPS

ACTIVITIES & INTENT

- Meet the under-engaged non-users in the places they frequent most
- Reach groups whose voices aren't well represented and do so in a familiar, safe & casual setting
- Capture feedback and ideas that might otherwise be missing
- Give-aways to give back

Locations for pop-ups were selected through a consideration of social vulnerability index data to identify areas where underrepresented community members might be living.



POP-UP EVENTS

Two days, 4 venues were identified as places frequented by members of under-engaged communities.

1. **Woonsocket Harris Public Library**
Date: Wednesday, September 18, 2024
Location: Woonsocket Harris Public Library, Woonsocket, RI
2. **Providence Community Library**
Date: Wednesday, September 18, 2024
Location: Providence Community Library, Providence, RI
3. **Payne Park**
Date: Wednesday, September 25, 2024
Location: Payne Park, Pawtucket, RI
4. **Hopkins Square**
Date: Wednesday, September 25, 2024
Location: Hopkins Square, Providence, RI

GOALS

- Reach historically underrepresented communities

AUDIENCE

- Unaware Non-users

PHASE

- Inform
- Consult
- Collaborate

CONTENT AND ACTIVITIES

- Create space for conversations with that community
- One wish board write-in
- Kid activity wheel
- Give-aways
- Short Surveys Polling (5 questions or less)

COMMUNICATIONS

- Multi-lingual collateral material for survey
- Bilingual interpretation
- Branded t-shirts and hats
- Topline Message: State Parks are for everyone! Break barriers to use by sharing information about what's available at state recreational resources. Your input is needed.

PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY

CONTENT / INTENT

- Virtual and hard copies for broad accessibility.
- Public opinion to complement scientific data.
- Solicit feedback on:
 - Recreation needs and wants.
 - Quality of facilities/experience.
 - Barriers to use.
- Demographic questions for diverse insights.

TIMELINE

- Available online from July 2024 to October 2024

GOALS

- Identify the recreational activities and facilities most valued by Rhode Islanders
- Understanding the barriers preventing or limiting the use of state parks and recreational resources, especially among underrepresented groups.
- Gathering actionable insights to guide the improvement and expansion of Rhode Island's outdoor recreation offerings, ensuring they meet the current and future needs of the community.

AUDIENCE

- General public
- Aware non-users
- Special interest groups

PHASE

- Inform
- Consult

CONTENT AND ACTIVITIES

- General public survey available online

COMMUNICATIONS

- Distributed QR code flyers at engagement events and recreational sites.
- Used E-blasts and social media campaigns to reach broader audiences.
- Circulated press releases in newspapers and online platforms.

ENGAGEMENT METHODOLOGY: LISTENING SESSIONS

ACTIVITIES & INTENT

- Outreach to identified cohorts of unheard and under-represented cohorts: youth and 65+ seniors
- Provide an opportunity for youth and 65+ seniors to voice thoughts on recreational needs, preferences and barriers in a familiar, safe & casual setting
- Topic / cohort specific
- Opportunity to reach participants not engaged in the 2019 plan
- Develop specific questions or problems for the group to solve
- Asset engagement
- Discuss barriers and ways to overcome through audience-based activity (mad lib, game board, etc.)

VENUES AND EVENTS

- Geographically different - Urban, coastal, inland
- Youth – Schools, Community Center/Boys and Girls Club/YMCA, Nature Field Stations within Parks,
- Seniors – Senior Center, Council on Aging, AARP
- Recreational Directors

YOUTH LISTENING SESSIONS

1. [Groundworks RI](#)
Date: Wednesday, November 9, 2024
Location: 583 Harris Ave, Providence, RI
2. [Community Prep Charter School](#)
Date: Wednesday, November 15, 2024
Location: 135 Prairie Ave, Providence, RI

65+ SENIOR LISTENING SESSIONS

1. [South Providence Community Library](#)
Date: Monday, October 7, 2024
Location: South Providence Community Library, Providence, RI
2. [Edward King House Senior Center](#)
Date: Monday, October 28, 2024
Location: Edward King House Senior Center, 35 King Street, Newport, RI
3. [Cranston Senior Center](#)
Date: Thursday, November 7, 2024
Location: Cranston Senior Center, 1070 Cranston Street, Cranston, RI

RECREATION DIRECTORS LISTENING SESSIONS

1. [Recreation Directors #1](#)
Date: Wednesday, October 25, 2024
Location: Virtual
2. [Recreation Directors #2](#)
Date: Wednesday, October 29, 2024
Location: Virtual

GOALS

- Reach historically unheard communities
- Solicit feedback from specific cohorts or on focused topics
- Bring like-minded participants together
- Problem solve collaboratively

AUDIENCE

- Unaware Non-users, aware user, aware non-user
- The 2019 SCORP unheard voices
 - Youth
 - Seniors
 - Recreation Directors

PHASE

- Inform
- Consult
- Collaborate

CONTENT AND ACTIVITIES

- Presented overview of the project
- Create space for conversations with that community
- Round table discussions on prepared questions

COMMUNICATIONS

- Direct contact / invitation by RIDEM or consulting team

ENGAGEMENT METHODOLOGY: SCORP AMBASSADORS

METHODOLOGY

- Identify three (3) under-represented groups and assign an appropriate ambassador
- Establish goals for ambassador's to achieve
- Develop materials for dissemination by SCORP Ambassadors OR Co-create materials and approach with SCORP Ambassadors
- Train three (3) community leaders / SCORP Ambassadors, one assigned to each under-represented group, to disseminate plan information & seek input
- Compensate ambassadors for their time
 - Ambassadors will be provided a monetary stipend. Working with the consulting team each ambassador will develop an appropriate use of the stipend that gives back to their group in a personal manner. Approved stipend use includes providing citrus fruit in the food pantry, GrubHub gift cards, and purchase of art materials.
- Integrate play or fun activity, aspects of "giving back" and building community

SCORP AMBASSADOR EVENTS

1. West End Community Center Mobile Food Pantry

Date: October 1, 2024 & October 18, 2024

Location: West End Community Center, 109 Bucklin Street, Providence, RI

2. Groundworks RI

Date: October 24, 2024

Location: 583 Harris Ave, Providence, RI

3. RI Governor's Commission on Disabilities

Date: October 31, 2024

Location: Save The Bay, 100 Save The Bay, Providence, RI

CONTENT AND ACTIVITIES -

- Conversations
- Interactive signs

GOALS

- Reach new communities
- Educate about the benefits of parks and what's available
- Understand [unexpected] barriers to participation
- Build long-term relationships for ongoing dialog
- Give back
- Have fun!

AUDIENCE

- Unaware non-users
 - Under-engaged / under-estimated

PHASE

- Inform
- Consult

COMMUNICATIONS

- Collateral Material - posters, social media post

PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD

CONTENT / INTENT

- Solicit feedback on draft plan to inform final priorities.

TIMELINE

- Available online from December 8 to 22, 2025

GOALS

- Inform and seek feedback on draft plan
- Ask for comments on priority recreational activities, facilities, and proposed improvements by Rhode Islanders
- Gathering actionable insights to guide the improvement and expansion of Rhode Island's outdoor recreation offerings, ensuring they meet the current and future needs of the community.

AUDIENCE

- General public
- Aware non-users

PHASE

- Consult
- Loop Back

CONTENT AND ACTIVITIES

- Draft plan and comment form made available online

COMMUNICATIONS

- Used E-blasts and social media to reach broader audience.

RHODE ISLAND WETLAND PRIORITY PROTECTION PLAN

Background

In Rhode Island, it is estimated that more than 53% of historic salt marsh acreage has been lost. Similarly, it has been estimated that 37% or more of freshwater wetlands have been lost to physical alteration. Significant physical alteration of the upland buffers to both coastal and freshwater wetlands has occurred as well. Some 30% of Narragansett Bay's marshes have inadequate or non-existent buffer zones. The various physical disturbances in salt marshes and freshwater wetlands can leave areas vulnerable to invasive species, such as Phragmites, which outcompetes native salt marsh vegetation and reduces local biodiversity. Some 1,200 of the existing 3,700 acres of salt marsh in Narragansett Bay are impacted by Phragmites and other invasive plant species.

According to the Rhode Island Water Quality 2035 report, today an estimated 88,052 acres or approximately 12.8% of Rhode Island's land area is composed of freshwater wetlands including but not limited to swamps, marshes, bogs and fens. In addition, there are about 3,800 acres of salt marsh located along Rhode Island's coastal shorelines.

Both coastal and freshwater wetlands attract various recreational uses including hiking, birdwatching, boating, and other naturalist activities. In addition, as prominent features along many of Rhode Island's bike paths and hiking trails, wetland resources enhance recreational experience for the user by providing scenic views and nature observation opportunities. They are an integral part of the outdoor recreational experience in Rhode Island. Coastal and freshwater wetlands perform other critical functions including purifying and maintaining groundwater supplies, flood and stormwater control, erosion and sedimentation control, fish and wildlife habitat, nutrient production and cycling, open space, and education and scientific research opportunities.

Wetland protection is a top priority for the State. Protection measures utilized in Rhode Island include federal and state regulation of alterations to wetlands, acquisition of land and interests in land, programs to restore degraded wetlands, and efforts to educate and involve the public in the protection of wetlands. The federal Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986 authorizes federal funds, including the Land and Water Conservation Fund, for wetlands acquisition. The statute also directs the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and each state to prepare a Wetlands Priority Plan to guide and direct protection efforts. State plans are to be included as part of their SCORP and are to identify wetland types or areas that are priority for protection through acquisition programs.

State Regulation

State wetlands protection regulations administered by the Department of Environmental Management (DEM) and the Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) play the most important regulatory role in protecting Rhode Island's freshwater and coastal wetlands. Rhode Island state laws protect both freshwater and coastal wetlands and require that impacts to wetlands be avoided and minimized. Rhode Island's Freshwater Wetlands Act, Chapter 2-1 Part 2 of the General Laws, is one of the oldest and strongest state wetlands protection measures in the nation. The DEM Office of Water Resources operates the Freshwater

Wetlands Program, which investigates citizen complaints and referrals from DEM divisions and offices relating to freshwater wetlands. The technical and public review of development proposals provided for under this regulatory program have been largely responsible for Rhode Island's avoidance of the substantial wetlands losses which other states have experienced in recent years. A change to state law in 2015 broadened the State's jurisdiction regarding freshwater wetland protection and directed stronger protection of the lands adjacent to wetlands via the establishment of buffer standards, which require buffers to be kept or restored to their natural condition.

Saltwater wetlands in Rhode Island are regulated by the Coastal Resources Management Council. Established by Chapter 46-23 of the Rhode Island General Laws, the CRMC has a broad legislative mandate for coastal resource planning, management, and regulation with jurisdiction over all construction, filling, removal, and grading within 200 feet of the coast and of coastal features, as well as over moorings, docks, dredging, and other activities through its permitting program. Under the Coastal Resources Management Program, the Council's regulatory document, uses of shoreline areas are regulated according to the characteristics of the resource involved and the intensity use designation of the adjacent coastal waters. Since about 90 percent of the State's salt marshes are adjacent to waters having the two lowest intensity usage categories or have been designated as areas for preservation and restoration, only minor alterations to most of the State's saltwater wetlands are permissible. Only about 37 acres of saltmarsh statewide are located adjacent to higher intensity water classes where significant alterations could be allowed.

Protection Programs

Conservation of important wetland habitat through land acquisition has been and will continue to be an important strategy for the long-term protection of high-quality wetlands. DEM will continue to identify protection of wetlands as a priority, consistent with Section 303 of the Federal Emergency Wetlands Resources Act. State and local governments and private sector organizations all play important roles in protecting wetlands. The following components play an integral part in preserving and protecting the State's wetlands and natural resources:

- State Land Acquisition Program, DEM Planning and Development Section
- Municipal, local and non-profit land conservation organizations

In 2002, pursuant to Rhode Island General Law 46-23.1, RI established the Coastal and Estuarine Habitat Restoration Program and Trust Fund which is administered by CRMC. The program allocates about \$225,000 per year, to support a range of projects to plan, design, implement and monitor habitat restoration actions for saltmarshes, submerged aquatic vegetation, fish passage and shellfish beds. Projects are selected through a competitive process with input from a Technical Advisory Committee.

Wetlands Conservation Priorities

Several existing state planning efforts further inform and refine wetlands conservation priorities.

Rhode Island State Wildlife Action Plan (RIWAP) – Developed by the DEM Division of Fish & Wildlife Division, the RIWAP identifies twenty freshwater wetland habitats, excluding rivers and lakes, along with estuarine salt marshes and brackish marshes as key habitats for RI's Species of Greatest Conservation Need. The RIWAP identifies threats to wetland habitats, including:

- Modification to the natural system, including water withdrawals and dams
- Climate change – specifically sea level rise and increases in storms and droughts
- Invasive species
- Residential and commercial development
- Pollution – from various sources

- Impacts from poorly managed agriculture and forestry activities

For rivers, lakes and wetlands, the impacts associated with development in areas adjacent to shorelines is a priority concerns for habitat. Conversion of land for development near water resources results in fragmentation and loss of habitat that is important to wildlife that utilize aquatic habitats. While certain lands adjacent to rivers, lakes and wetlands have been protected by laws which restrict development in these “buffer” areas, many properties had been previously altered or developed before regulatory protection came into place. Most of these wetland habitats were included in the planning analysis that identified priority conservation opportunity areas (COAs) for RI in the RIWAP. The COAs will help direct collaborative efforts to acquire or strengthen protection of these prioritized, intact habitat areas.

- [2025 State Wildlife Action Plan \(SWAP\) | Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management](#)

Water Quality 2035, State Guide Plan Element 731 – Developed by the Division of Statewide Planning and The DEM Office of Water Resources, this State Water Quality Plan is part of the State Guide Plan. It offers a long-range plan for effective management of RI’s water resources. It contains policies and action items for aquatic habitat and freshwater and coastal wetlands:

- 1) protect wetland functions and values by avoiding and minimizing alterations and wetland loss, and
- 2) facilitate restoration of the quality and quantity of wetlands and adjacent buffers.

- [Water Quality | Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management](#)

Rhode Island Coastal Wetland Restoration Strategy – Developed by the CRMC, the RI Natural History Survey, and the Narragansett Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, this strategy outlines a vision, goals and objectives for identifying and prioritizing restoration of the ecosystem functions and services provided by coastal wetlands on a statewide, rather than a strictly site-specific scale. It describes the State’s coastal and estuarine habitats, restoration goals, inventory of restoration projects, projected comprehensive budget and timeline to complete the goals, funding sources, an outreach element, and contains provisions for updating the plan and project inventory

- [RI Coastal Wetland Restoration Strategy](#)

Together, the *Rhode Island State Wildlife Action Plan*, the wetland sections of SGP 731, *Water Quality 2035*, and the *Rhode Island Coastal Wetland Restoration Strategy* fulfill the requirement to produce a wetlands priority plan for Rhode Island consistent with the National Wetlands Priority Conservation Plan.

RECREATION GRANT SELECTION PROCESS

Introduction

This part of the Rhode Island State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) describes the Recreation Grant Selection Process (RGSP) and procedures governing the RI Recreation Resources Review Committee (RRRC). The State of Rhode Island utilizes the RGSP to solicit, evaluate, and select outdoor recreational land acquisition and facility development projects eligible for grant assistance under the State Outdoor Recreation Development and Acquisition Grant Program funded through State bonds in accordance with 250-RICR-110-00-7. In addition, the RGSP serves as the state's Open Project Selection Process (OPSP), as required by the National Park Service in its allocation of the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The National Park Service requires that the procedures be designed to ensure that projects are selected for funding in a rational and systematic manner open to public scrutiny, that all sectors of the general public can participate in the benefits of the Fund, and that projects selected meet priority recreational needs.

The Governor has designated the Department of Environmental Management (DEM) as Rhode Island's state liaison agency for administering the federal LWCF monies. DEM also administers the State bonds supporting the State Outdoor Recreation Development and Acquisition Grant Program, which are allocated to municipalities and Native American tribes. DEM establishes the Recreation Resources Review Committee to assist in the review of grant applications and advising the DEM Director in funding project applications.

The RGSP considers the allocation of funds, funding categories, criteria for applicant eligibility, the level of public participation required in project formulation, and criteria for scoring project proposals. Scoring criteria is based on how well the application meets the goals, objectives, and action items identified in the SCORP and other applicable State plans. Scoring criteria also considers the accessibility of proposed projects to all segments of the population including minority populations, the elderly, individuals with disabilities, other underserved populations, and other LWCF requirements (found in Chapter 3, Section B of the LWCF Grants Manual).

The Recreation Resources Review Committee

The Recreation Resources Review Committee (RRRC) is established in accordance with 250-RICR-110-00-7 for the purposes of evaluating and establishing the relative priority of recreation grant projects and submitting funding recommendations to the DEM Director.

The RRRC consists of at least six but not more than twelve experts in outdoor recreation, natural resource management, and conservation of open space, selected with the objective of providing balanced representation of state, municipal, public, and private constituencies. Permanently represented on the RRRC are the Governor's Office, the Department of Environmental Management (which serves as the State Liaison Office to the National Park Service), and the RI Department of Administration's Division of Statewide

Planning. The DEM Director shall appoint additional committee members for terms of up to three years and shall make every effort to include minority representation and representation from: urban, suburban and rural communities; outdoor recreational interests; municipal interests; environmental and land conservation interests; planning interests; and local parks and recreation interests. The DEM Director may periodically reach out to established municipal, planning and recreation organizations to identify people who may be interested in serving on the RRRC. The DEM Director will recruit and maintain a list of people interested in serving on the RRRC. Existing members may be reappointed. Vacancies are filled in the same manner as regular appointments. Upon expiration of a member's term, that member may continue as a member until that member's successor is appointed.

The chairperson of the committee shall be the State's designated State Liaison Officer to the National Park Service LWCF program. Chief of the DEM Division of Planning and Development or his/her designee. The chairperson may name a designee to appear and vote at committee meetings on his/her behalf. There shall be a vice-chairperson appointed by the chair at the first regular meeting of each calendar year. If a member misses three consecutive meetings, the RRRC will report the absence to the DEM Director and may make a recommendation to remove the individual from the Committee.

Allocation of Federal and State Funds

Allocation of Federal Land and Water Conservation Funds Under the LWCF, states are given the prerogative of determining the most equitable allocation of available funds among the various categories of applicants (generally state and municipal). The State may use up to 10 percent of the total LWCF apportionment for planning projects and for maintaining an updated SCORP. The remaining funds (not less than 90 percent) shall be allocated in support of DEM projects to implement the SCORP.

Allocation of State Acquisition and Development Bonds, Appropriations, and other Sources of Funds State funds are allocated as provided in the authorizing legislation, or regulations issued pursuant thereto, of the specific funding program. The Department of Environmental Management establishes the amount of State funding to be made available within a grant round, consistent with applicable laws and regulations governing the source of the State funding.

The Recreation Grant Selection Process

Funding Cycle

Funding cycles are determined by the availability of funds, coordination with other State funding processes and shall occur not less than every two years pending availability of funds. Following the proposal submission closing date, DEM staff and the RRRC undergo evaluation and ranking of the proposals. Funding cycles conclude with notification to all applicants and the transmittal of funding commitment letters to those applicants selected for funding.

Setting Funding Categories and Limits for Each Funding Cycle

DEM staff is responsible for informing the RRRC of LWCF and State funds available and any restrictions on those funds. The RRRC shall establish funding categories which, at a minimum, shall include:

- a. Recreation development projects which include renovation of existing recreational facilities and construction of new outdoor recreational facilities
- b. Acquisition of land for outdoor recreation

At the outset of each grant round the RRRC may also:

1. Set a minimum required rating score for each proposal to promote selection of the highest quality projects. If a proposal does not attain the minimum score, it will not be recommended for funding.

2. Set minimum scores in a particular scoring category to highlight specific focus area(s) in the grant round.
3. Set a maximum per project funding limit for each funding category
4. Establish a maximum number of submissions per municipality for project proposals.
5. Establish additional funding categories and allocations for each category.

Note: If a surplus occurs because: 1) total funding requests are less than the available monies for a category, or, 2) state or local projects do not score high enough to qualify for funding, the RRRC may recommend to the DEM Director that such funds be reallocated to another category or reserved for a future grant round.

Financial match requirement

Grant recipients will generally be required to match a percentage of the total project cost as outlined in 250-RICR-110-00-7.

Applicant Eligibility

DEM, Rhode Island municipalities, and federally recognized Native American tribes may apply for funding under these RGSP procedures. DEM projects applying for LWCF monies will be ranked by the RRRC according to the Priority Rating System on page 6. Municipal and tribal projects will compete for funding under the guidelines that follow. Non- municipal and non-tribal entities can partner in grant proposals with a municipality or tribe, which must be the applicant. DEM reserves the right to revoke eligibility status from municipal or tribal applicants that have unresolved protected open space or recreation conversion issues on either LWCF-assisted sites or State-assisted properties.

Solicitation of Proposals

DEM initiates the solicitation of grant proposals. DEM shall notify the Chief Elected Official and the manager/administrator of all cities, towns, and tribes of the upcoming funding cycle. Such notification shall include the procedures to be followed when submitting a grant application, information about project eligibility and match requirements, the deadline for submission of grant applications, and other relevant information and materials. DEM shall also advertise and post information on the DEM website regarding application procedures for the grant round.

Public Participation Requirements

The RGSP requires public involvement to ensure that the projects selected have widespread public acceptance and support, reflect current needs and desires of State residents and are, to the maximum extent possible, free from potential problems. The required minimum public participation for a grant application to qualify for review is as follows:

- a. Consent of the local governing body.
- b. Public notice and at least one public hearing or meeting held not more than 6 months prior to the grant submission at which the proposed project / design plan is presented to the public.

These are stated as the minimum public participation requirements and all project sponsors are encouraged to conduct much more extensive public participation through additional public informational meetings, neighborhood surveys, and other measures.

Preliminary Evaluation of Applications

Upon the close of the application period, DEM staff will conduct a preliminary evaluation to determine the completeness of applications. Completeness is determined by:

1. Determination that the submission is made by an eligible applicant
2. Documentation demonstrating the public participation requirements have been met
3. Determination that the application has been completed in accordance with directions and contains sufficient information to allow the proposal to be rated
4. Determination that the proposed project is in accordance with the Guidance Document applicable to the relevant funding cycle and available on the DEM website.

DEM staff will also review the applicant's compliance with program requirements including conversion issues. As part of the preliminary evaluation, DEM staff will prepare a brief report for each application to be reviewed by RRRC members.

Final Evaluation of Applications

Following the preliminary evaluation period, the RRRC will hold public meetings at which all complete applications will be evaluated and RRRC members will assign points to each application under the criteria contained in the priority rating system established in this Appendix.

Project Selection and Funding Commitment

When RRRC evaluation and scoring of all eligible projects within the funding cycle has been completed, the RRRC will hold a meeting to review the list(s) of proposals ranked by final score. Proposals will be recommended for funding in rank order of final score within the limit of available funding within each category.

The RRRC will, by vote, adopt a recommendation for proposals to be funded based upon the ranked list(s) of projects and funding available within each category and will forward this recommendation to the Director of DEM. The Director of DEM shall review the RRRC grant award recommendations and shall have authority to adjust such grant awards, including consideration as to whether one community may be receiving a disproportionate amount of the funds available and so that a reasonable geographic distribution of funds is achieved. DEM will notify all applicants in writing of the Director's decision and the grant amount offered for those applications selected for funding.

The grant amount offered is contingent on the proposed scope of work as presented in the application. Therefore, if any element of the proposed project scope of work changes, applicants are required to notify DEM and obtain approval for the proposed changes. DEM is in no way obligated to support a project outside of the approved project description and scope of work.

Awarded applicants may request contract amendments seeking additional funding in support of existing projects, which may be approved by DEM without re-scoring by the RRRC.

Priority Rating System Overview

The RRRC uses a rating system to identify which project proposals will best serve communities and Rhode Islanders. The Priority-Rating System form used by the RRRC for scoring all applications follows this section.

***RI Recreation Resources Review Committee Priority Rating
System Recreation Grant Selection Process***

		Recreation Development		
	Criteria Name	Criteria Description	Maximum Points	Points Awarded
1	Community Demand and Need	a. The applicant demonstrates intentional multi-stakeholder community involvement in the development of the proposed project and its future stewardship commensurate with the scale of the project., b. The applicant has a 5-10 year recreation asset management or capital improvement plan. c. The project addresses needs identified both by the community and in the applicant's 5-10-year recreation asset management or capital improvement plan.	7 7 7	
2	Fair Access	The applicant documents how the criteria used by the municipality to prioritize the project includes under-resourced communities or neighborhoods with less access to quality outdoor recreation resources.	8	
3	Multiple Users	The project provides a variety of recreational opportunities for a mix of age groups and abilities.	5	
4	Improved User Comfort or Safety	The project provides for the addition of bathrooms, appropriate lighting, shade trees, shelters over picnic tables etc.	5	
5	Group Usage	The project adds amenities for group-oriented activities and programs such as picnic pavilions, event-friendly park spaces and related infrastructure.	5	
6	Connectivity	The project creates or substantially enhances bike, pedestrian, and/or transit connections between two existing recreational resources or from a population center to a recreational resource.	5	
7	Expanded universal accessibility	The project fully incorporates principles of universal and inclusive design to create environments usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible.	5	
8	Signage	a. The project incorporates interpretive signage that educates the public about the site's wildlife, historic, and/or cultural resources. b. The project incorporates appropriate signage identifying the site and directing users.	3 3	
9	Culture of Care	The project contains elements that encourage proper stewardship of the site and facilities.	5	
10	Equity	The project is located within a DEM-designated Environmental Justice Area.	5	

11	Climate Change and Resiliency	The project incorporates innovative ways to account for impacts associated with climate change such as site/landscape construction to provide adaptations for sea level rise, shade, storm buffers, stormwater infiltration, etc. beyond standard design requirements.	10	
12	Maintenance	The applicant demonstrates that the facility proposed for renovation has been maintained consistent with industry standards.	0 or - 5	
13	Water body access	The project creates new or expanded coastal- or fresh-waterbody access suitable for swimming, paddling, boating, fishing or related use(s).	5	
14	Environmental Stewardship	The project avoids or minimizes impacts to habitat and wildlife and demonstrates a consideration of natural resources.	5	
15	Multi-community or Regional Needs	The applicant demonstrates how the project will address multi-community or regional needs.	5	
16	Brownfield Redevelopment	The project involves the redevelopment of a brownfield as defined by DEM Remediation Regulations.	5	
TOTAL POINTS			100	

RI Recreation Resources Review Committee
Priority Rating System Recreation Grant Selection Process

		Recreation Acquisition		
	<i>Criteria Name</i>	<i>Criteria Description</i>	<i>Maximum Points</i>	<i>Points Awarded</i>
1	Recreation asset management Planning	a. The applicant has a 5-10 year recreation asset management plan b. The acquisition addresses needs identified in the applicant's 5-10-year recreation asset management plan.	5 5	
2	Community involvement	The applicant documents significant community involvement in the development of the proposed project and its future stewardship commensurate with the scale of the project, including involvement from community organizations and neighbors	10	
3	Fair Access	The applicant documents how the criteria used by the municipality to prioritize the project includes under-resourced communities or neighborhoods with less access to quality outdoor recreation resources.	10	
4	Historic & Cultural Preservation	Acquisition of the site will preserve significant historical, cultural, or scenic resources.	10	
5	Environmental Stewardship	The application details the existing natural resources found at the site and demonstrates how impacts to habitat and wildlife will be minimized in any future recreation development.	10	
6	Brownfield Redevelopment	Acquisition of the site will provide for the redevelopment of a brownfield as defined by DEM Remediation Regulations.	10	
7	Connectivity	Acquisition of the site will provide for a pedestrian/bike/transit connection between two existing recreational resources or from a population center to a recreational resource.	10	
8	Equity	The acquisition is located within a DEM-designated Environmental Justice area.	10	
9	Climate Change Resiliency	Acquisition of the site will enhance an area's resiliency to climate change through elements such as a coastal buffer, flood storage, future marsh migration, etc.	10	
10	Water body access	The acquisition will create new coastal- or fresh-waterbody access suitable for swimming, paddling, boating, fishing or related use(s).	10	
TOTAL POINTS			100	