

National Caucus of Environmental Legislators

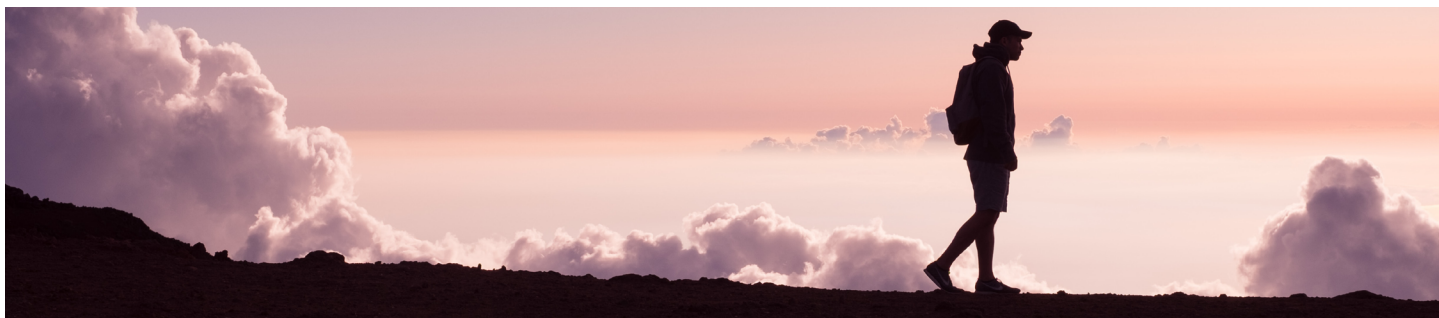
Outdoors as a Climate Solution Briefing Book



NCEL

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Introduction

States increasingly recognize outdoor policies – outdoor education, recreation, access, and equity – as critically-needed, high impact climate solutions. Highly effective climate solutions rethink and restore human-nature relationships. Accessing the benefits of time outdoors – such as improved health, learning, equity, economic growth, and resilience – improves behavior towards the environment in a [feedback loop](#). More benefits from nature lead to more behaviors that protect nature, and so on. **Outdoor policies provide the time in nature required to grasp the urgency of climate change, offer immediate relief for many emerging climate issues, and ground humanity in the knowledge that humanity is [inextricable](#) from the environment.** This briefing book offers examples of how outdoor policies are being implemented as climate solutions by states across six key areas:

- 1. Nature-Based Solutions** p. 3
 - » **Summary:** Outdoor policies are nature-based solutions that rebuild and rethink stronger human-nature relationships, creating immediate climate resilience and long-term inroads for future environmental policies.
- 2. Outdoor Access and Equity** p. 4
 - » **Summary:** Equitable access to nature is a high-impact climate solution that directly reduces climate inequity and improves public health.
- 3. Green Connections** p. 5
 - » **Summary:** Green transportation policies like trails, green streets, and bike lanes create equitable outdoor recreation and access opportunities that improve safety and climate resilience.
- 4. Outdoor and Climate Education** p. 6
 - » **Summary:** Outdoor education and climate education policies make kids and schools safer, healthier, and more resilient to climate change.
- 5. Outdoor Economies, Workforces, and Industries**..... p. 7
 - » **Summary:** Outdoor opportunities can solve economic challenges of climate change and moving away from climate-intensive industries, offering a better quality of life for all.
- 6. The Future of the Outdoors**..... p. 8
 - » **Summary:** Outdoor education, recreation, and access depend on a healthy environment; Protecting and expanding access to nature protects the future of the outdoors.
- Key Resources** p. 9





Overview

Nature-based solutions, sometimes called engineering with nature, build resilience by learning from and designing with natural landscapes and ecosystems. Nature-based solutions [often cost less](#) than traditional infrastructure and offer [improved disaster resilience](#), [green jobs](#), [increased property values](#), [economic growth](#), [greenspace equity](#), and [improved public health](#). Environmental policy can engage and build nature-based solutions through outdoor recreation, education, access, and equity.

Examples of Nature-Based Solutions



Land Conservation



Stormwater Parks



Green Streets



Greenway and Trails



Waterfront Parks



Tree Canopy

Figure 1: Nature-based solution examples for three scales/locations: watershed or landscape scale, neighborhood or site scale, and coastal areas. Source: FEMA.



Case Study: Outdoor Access as a Climate Solution in North Carolina's North Waterfront Park

North Carolina established, improved, and continues to expand urban waterfront parks as part of the [North Carolina Climate Risk Assessment and Resilience Plan](#) developed by their Office of Recovery and Resiliency (NCORR).

North Waterfront Park will be a 7-acre park developed with local organizations and constituents to meet community needs. Restoring natural floodplains and waterfronts grows outdoor opportunities while protecting communities and critical infrastructure from flooding, erosion, and extreme heat.

State legislators were crucial in supporting NCORR ([H.B.200](#), [H.B.259](#)), which inspired South Carolina ([S.B.259](#)) and Louisiana ([H.B.526](#)) to establish offices of resilience. States can also create a competitive policy environment (e.g. Rhode Island [S.B.172](#)) empowering localities to dedicate land as public trust land in perpetuity. Perpetual trust land is more competitive for federal funds (e.g. [America the Beautiful](#)).

Photo Source: City of Wilmington North Carolina Parks and Recreation ([original](#)).

Policy Options

- **Empower Local Resilience:** Maryland ([S.B.457](#)) allows and offers guidance for local governments to establish Resilience Authorities to fund climate infrastructure and resilience.
- **Commit to Climate:** Washington's [Climate Commitment Act \(S.B.5126\)](#) expands on California's cap-and-invest program with robust environmental justice and directing funds generated to climate adaptation.
- **Expand and Protect Greenspace:** Maryland ([S.B.923/H.B.503](#)) established a Greenspace Equity Program to increase greenspace in overburdened and underserved communities funded by an existing property tax.



Overview

Spending as little as [15 minutes a day](#) with some form of nature promotes environmental responsibility. [Decades of research](#) prove that **time outdoors promotes hope for the future, increases interest in climate solutions, and reduces fear and stress about climate change, especially in children.** Other wellness benefits of time outdoors include [increasing happiness](#), [decreasing stress](#), reducing risk of [cardiovascular disease](#), and [decreasing symptoms](#) of ADHD, PTSD, depression, and anxiety. However, access to these benefits is unequal, with 74% of communities of color and 70% of low-income communities living in “[nature-deprived areas](#).” Climate change disproportionately impacts the [same areas](#). Outdoor equity, sometimes also described as “opportunity for all” or “access for all,” reduce climate inequity and defend overburdened populations against the worst of climate change.



Case Study: Growing the New Mexico Outdoor Equity Fund

New Mexico’s Outdoor Equity Fund ([S.B.462](#)) is a first-of-its-kind program promoting outdoor equity and inspired outdoor equity programs in Colorado and California. New Mexico builds on No Child Left Inside programs first launched in Washington ([H.B.1677](#)) in 2001 and Minnesota ([H.F.3348](#)) in 2018. New Mexico’s fund has already awarded over \$1.16 million, brought 24,700 youth outdoors, and built excitement in funding shared outdoor heritage, ultimately buoying the Land of Enchantment Permanent Fund ([S.B.9](#)). The Land of Enchantment Fund permanently funds the New Mexico Outdoor Equity Fund as part of a \$100 million investment in conservation and recreation.

Policy Options

- **Outdoor Equity Programs:** New Mexico ([S.B.462](#)), Colorado ([H.B.21-1318](#)), and California ([A.B.209](#)) offer grant programs for tribal nations, state agencies, local governments, community organizations, and schools improving access to the outdoors among historically excluded communities.
- **Outdoors/Parks Rx:** Washington’s [successful](#) Parks Rx pilot program ([S.B.5292](#)) and the new Illinois Outdoor Rx program ([H.B.1526](#)) provide guidance and funding to promote health through outdoor access. States can encourage providers to promote outdoor access with [free park passes](#) through medical facilities, outreach programs in parks, and studying the use of state land in healthcare such as in Maine ([L.D.1317](#)).
- **State Park Access for Youth:** New York ([S.261](#)) and Utah ([H.C.R.4](#)) created interactive park passports for youth. Oregon ([ORS 390.124](#)) offers free parks access for children in foster care, and many states honor the [Every Kid Outdoors](#) pass in state and local parks.
- **State Park Access for Veterans:** 22 states offer free state park access for disabled veterans based on military disability ratings. Unfortunately, disability ratings [drastically under-count](#) mental health. States can reduce disability ratings in existing law or follow Alabama ([H.B.58](#)), Oklahoma ([S.B.1185](#)), and Maine ([L.D.56/H.P.31](#)) in free parks access for all veterans.
- **State Park Access for Tribal Citizens:** Minnesota honors Indigenous treaty rights with [free state parks access](#) to tribal citizens. Nevada ([A.B.84](#)), Arizona ([A.B.2237](#)), Maine ([L.D.25](#)) and South Dakota ([H.B.1142](#)) all proposed free state parks access for tribal citizens.



Overview

Walking and bicycling are among the most popular forms of outdoor recreation, and most people report they would walk and cycle more [if conditions improved](#). Improving the availability of recreation-friendly transportation infrastructure can also increase access to nature, increase safety, conserve habitat, and mitigate climate hazards like droughts, flooding, and extreme heat.

Even as the economic benefits of active transportation [remain under-counted](#) and [under-valued](#), research shows strong returns on investment through *either* [health and safety](#) savings or [climate resilience](#) savings alone. Climate-resilient infrastructure is often eligible for federal funding (e.g. [non-competitive FEMA funds](#)), removing upfront costs to public health, sustainable economic growth, and reduced maintenance burdens.



A Closer Look: Universal Design Trails Are Climate Resilient Trails

Climate change [worsens trail degradation](#) from extreme weather, temperatures, wildfires, and overuse. The same strategies that reduce erosion, ecological damage from trail widening, and risk to trail users create [physically-accessible](#) trails, sometimes called 'whole-access' or 'universal design' trails. Policies that incentivize disability-inclusive trails increase trail resilience. Minnesota [H.B.2310](#) prioritizes funding disability-inclusive trails, Vermont [H.467](#) would require 10% of new trails to be disability-inclusive, and Colorado ([H.B.1296](#)) is studying disability rights and inclusion in the outdoors.

Policy Options

- **Green Streets:** Permeable paving and plantings can prevent collisions, manage extreme heat, protect from flooding and drought, and increase access to nature. California ([A.B.464](#)) offers enhanced financing for green infrastructure; New Jersey ([N.J.S1073](#)) funds green streets with stormwater utility fees. Green streets can also save lives by reducing [collisions with wildlife](#).
- **Protect Bike Lanes:** Climate change will increase annual cycling by [hundreds of millions of hours](#). Barriers save lives, increase property values, and create economic growth. Washington ([S.B.5975](#)) is investing \$1.3 billion in non-motorist safety with [bicycle-friendly federal funds](#), Tennessee ([H.B.685/S.B.728](#)) identifies roads endangering cyclists and pedestrians, and Maine ([L.D.1674](#)) requires large construction projects to protect cyclists.
- **Greenways and Trails:** Trails mitigate extreme weather while increasing conservation, outdoor access, safer transportation, and connect rural communities to economic opportunity. Alabama ([S.B.298](#)) is strategically linking and improving existing trails and Texas [H.B.4499](#) would authorize a study on connecting trail systems.
- **Non-Motorized Trails in Wildlife Corridors:** Shared pedestrian and bike trails in wildlife corridors, like Florida's ([C.S./S.B.106](#)) new trail network, protect critical conservation areas with transportation and recreation opportunities. Pennsylvania [H.R.87](#) would authorize a study of the recreation and transportation benefits of conservation corridors.
- **Electric Vehicle Charging in State Parks:** At least 8 states including Nevada ([S.B.448](#)) incentivize and require park systems to [offer electric vehicle charging](#), helping rural communities avoid becoming [isolated](#) and ensuring access to state parks.



Overview

Nearly 60% of youth are so worried about climate change that it [impacts their daily lives](#). Schools are [increasingly vulnerable](#) to extreme weather and heat, dangerously poor air quality, mold, and reduced facility lifespans. Outdoor and climate education policies can offer critical opportunities to provide safe schools at [lower overall costs](#) and [promote resilience](#) in children, including increased environmental stewardship, confidence, attention, and reductions in disruptive behavior. Outdoor and environmentally-focused education gets children outside, [reducing fear and anxiety](#) about climate change and increasing their sense of [personal responsibility](#) for their futures.



Investing in Green Schools Would Save States Nearly \$4 billion Annually

Green schools cost an average of **2% more** to build upfront; this \$3 per square foot upfront cost saves:

- [\\$10 per square foot](#) on direct maintenance, energy, and water costs over the life of the building.
- [\\$54 per square foot](#) in indirect benefits from higher productivity, teacher retention, and lower rates of asthma and other illnesses over the life of the building.
- An average of over \$100,000 per year for each green school.

States can use green schools to promote outdoor and climate education by:

- Establishing a Green Schools Coordinator position (ME [L.D.612](#))
- Requiring the calculation of lifetime costs and efficiency in new school planning and design.
- Directing the estimated state share of green school savings to a Green Schools Fund, Outdoor Education Fund, or Climate Education Fund.

Policy Options

- **Climate Science in State Curriculum:** 26 states and the District of Columbia have voluntary climate science requirements for middle and high school students, which require school districts to locally fund and develop any curriculum improvements. Connecticut ([H.B.5506](#)) and California ([S.B.720](#)) mandate climate change education in state curriculum and provide resources to school districts.
- **Outdoor Education in State Curriculum:** New Hampshire [S.B.266](#), New Jersey [A.5313](#), and New Mexico [S.B.289](#) would require outdoor education in state curriculum. Georgia [S.B.202](#) would establish an outdoor education pilot program to develop state-wide recommendations on outdoor education facilities and curriculum.
- **Outdoor Education Resources:** New Mexico [S.B.32](#) would establish Outdoor Learning Specialist positions and funds for outdoor learning. Washington ([H.B.2078](#)) created an outdoor learning grant program for public schools.
- **Climate Resources for Teachers:** Teachers often [do not have adequate materials or resources](#) to teach climate science. Maine ([L.D.1902/H.P.1409](#)) established a state environmental science coordinator position and professional development pilot program; Washington ([S.B.6032](#)) provides \$3-4 million annually to schools and nonprofits to support environmental and climate science teachers.
- **Climate-Safe and Green Schools:** Maryland ([S.B.383/H.B.531](#)) dedicates state funding to increase the number of green schools and annually evaluates the impact of these funds. California [S.B.499](#) would require schools to provide adequate facilities for extreme heat, including providing shade, low heat surfaces, and greenery.





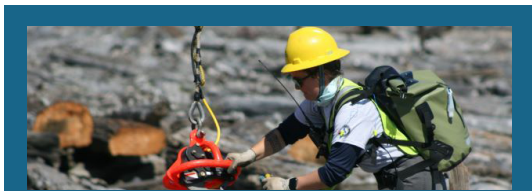
Overview

Without stable economic alternatives, rural and urban communities [often resist](#) moving away from climate-intensive industries and [face intensifying depopulation, infrastructure decay, growing economic inequality, and worsening environmental injustice](#). Outdoor recreation and tourism economies are in-demand, stable alternatives for many [rural](#) and [de-industrializing urban](#) communities most at risk economically, socially, and environmentally from climate change. **State support for outdoor industries has [proven to be a lifeline](#) in both rural and urban communities.** Research consistently predicts strong, sustainable outdoor economic growth available to nearly every community [willing to invest](#) in climate change resilience and support for outdoor industries.

Benefits of Outdoor Recreation & Sustainable Tourism Development

Economic & Workforce						
Local Investment & Entrepreneurship	Increased Local Incomes	Employment Opportunities	Employment Stability	Local Tax Revenue	Economic Resilience	Local Business Viability
Social, Cultural, & Health						
Quality of Life & Wellbeing	Reduced Depopulation	Social Mobility & Stability	Health & Food Security	Cultural Heritage Preservation	Community Identity & Pride	Technological Skills & Access
Environment & Climate						
Biodiversity	Sustainable Infrastructure	Land Kept Natural/Wild	Land Kept in Families	Environmental Awareness	Sustainable Consumerism	Environmental Health & Safety

Figure 1: Adapted from [“The Benefits of Tourism for Rural Community Development”](#) and [“Outdoor Recreation, Nature-Based Tourism, and Sustainability.”](#)



Case Study: Washington Conservation Corps

Washington Conservation Corps (WCC) employs over 350 members and staff, offering youth and veterans on-the-job training in restoring critical habitat, building trails, and responding to disasters. In addition to helping meet the need for skilled outdoor workers, the conservation corps provides at least [\\$1.5 million annually](#) in state benefits. State legislators continue to strengthen WCC over time (e.g. [H.B.760](#) 1985, [H.B.2289](#) 1990) and reduce costs by contracting a state employment program through the WCC to expand conservation (e.g. [H.B.1168](#) 2021).

Photo Source: Washington Department of Ecology ([original](#)).

Policy Options

- **Recreation, Tourism, and Conservation Funds:** New Mexico’s Land of Enchantment Legacy Fund ([S.B.9](#)) leverages a \$100 million state investment to access hundreds of millions in federal funding. Wyoming’s perpetual fund for outdoor recreation and tourism ([H.B.74](#)) opens up tens of millions in federal funding.
- **Establish or Expand State Outdoor Recreation Offices:** First launched by Utah ([S.B.18](#)), at least [17 states](#) have offices or positions that support the outdoor recreation industry, which develop best practices, promote outdoor recreation, and link hundreds of partner agencies, organizations, and businesses.
- **Mobilize Existing Tourism Development Resources:** Arkansas ([S.B.464](#)) now funds outdoor recreation as tourism development, Oregon [H.B.2839](#) would include scenic tourism in tourism districts, and Minnesota ([S.F.3035/H.F.3028](#)) includes outdoor recreation on tourism committees.
- **Develop Outdoor Workforces:** States can meet demand for skilled outdoor workers by directing workforce development funding to outdoor industry jobs (e.g. conservation corps). Oregon ([H.B.2910](#)) invested \$3.5 million in outdoor workforce programs, and Texas [H.B.2179](#) would expand student preparedness incentives to reward placing students in AmeriCorps programs.





Overview

Outdoor policy builds relationships between humans and nature, making the mutual benefits of human-nature relationships [more visible](#). Centering the benefits of strong relationships to nature is the [most effective motivation](#) for environmental policy and research [increasingly supports](#) integrating human culture, health, and lives into successful land and wildlife conservation projects. Just as the success of outdoor recreation, education, access, and equity depends on strong relationships with healthy and safe environments, ecosystems depend on [strong, mutually-beneficial relationships](#) with humanity. Combining the rights of humanity and the rights of ecosystems offers unique protections for the relationships between humanity and ecosystems. **Relationship-centered environmental policy has the [highest impact](#), best recognizes tribal sovereignty, and offers more comprehensive legal protections.**

Green Amendments (Human Rights)

[Green Amendments](#), sometimes called “environmental rights amendments,” or “rights to nature” recognize human rights to environmental health and safety in a state constitution’s bill of rights. Green amendments are enacted in three states and have been introduced in 12, including growing support in New Hampshire ([S.B.164](#)).

[Pennsylvania](#) (1971), [Montana](#) (1971), and [New York](#) (2019) have constitutional Green Amendments which have been applied to address mining, sewage sludge in neighborhoods, and accessibility of environmental protection resources.

Rights of Nature Amendments (Ecosystem Rights)

Rights of nature amendments recognize the rights of ecosystems to a healthy and safe existence when properly implemented. Representatives of the ecosystem, including constituents, may take legal action if an ecosystem’s rights are violated (e.g. environmental degradation). Rights of Nature have been introduced in at least three states and enacted in over [60 U.S. cities and counties](#).

The Rights of the Haw River Ecosystem River Act ([H.B.795](#)) in North Carolina would recognize specific rights of the Haw River ecosystem, including the right to naturally exist, flourish, regenerate, and evolve. It would empower residents and the state attorney general to enforce and defend the rights of the ecosystem.

Policy Options

- **Expand Greenspace:** States can incentivize and direct localities to protect and expand everyday outdoor life. West Virginia ([H.B.3215](#)) directs localities to require public green space, paths, trails, parks, playgrounds and recreation in large developments. Virginia ([H.B.1510](#)) allows localities to reduce fees or streamline approval processes for projects that preserve, restore, or create public greenspace.
- **Youth Recreation as Conservation:** Access to nature and outdoor recreation in childhood is the single greatest predictor of lifelong time outdoors. In addition to outdoor equity and education programs, New Mexico ([S.B.392](#)) and Maryland ([S.B.327](#)) offer youth outreach programs to foster interest in recreation, field sports, stewardship, and conservation.
- **Land Back:** Returning public lands to tribal nations protects land by restoring it to special collective, perpetual trust. Returning land to tribal control [improves biodiversity](#), [increases land access for all](#), and [restores social and decision-making powers](#) to tribal governments. California [A.B.408](#) would improve climate resilience by encouraging tribal co-management and returning land to tribal control.





NCEL Resources

1. [Outdoor Engagement Issue Page](#)
2. [Climate Justice Policy Options](#)
3. [Transportation Briefing Book](#)

4. [Water Briefing Book](#)
5. [Wildlife Corridor Policy Options](#)
6. [Building Decarbonization Fact Sheet](#)

Additional Resources

1. [The Youth Outdoor Policy Playbook](#) | *Youth Outdoor Policy Partnership*

Youth outdoor policy background, bill tracking, and case studies with comprehensive policy resources and infographics.

2. [Equity in State Based Outdoor Recreation and Education Programs](#) | *Outdoor F.U.T.U.R.E*

Outdoor equity background, state policies, case studies, and talking points.

3. [Outdoor Recreation Office Resources](#) | *Confluence of States*

State office of outdoor recreation directory, resources, and programs.

4. [Hazard Mitigation Guide and Nature-Based Solutions Guide](#) | *Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)*

Climate mitigation and adaptation background, policies, case studies, and funding resources.

5. [Land Return for Tribal Restitution](#) | *University of Wisconsin Public Health Institute*

Land back or tribal land return background and case studies.

6. [America the Beautiful Challenge](#) | *National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF)*

Federal grant program for locally led conservation and outdoor access projects.

7. [Children & Nature Resource Library](#) | *Children & Nature Network*

Youth outdoor access resources ranging from research papers to policy briefs.

8. [Environmental Education Resources for Policymakers](#) | *North American Association for Environmental Education*

Environmental education policies and best practices across school districts, states, and countries.

9. [Bicycling Policy Tracker](#) | *People For Bikes*

Bicycling and active transportation state and federal policy tracker; People for Bikes also offer background and case studies.

10. [Recreation Economy Development Resources for Rural Communities](#) | *USDA*

Outdoor tourism and outdoor recreation economy background, case studies, and funding resources especially for rural development.

11. [Transportation Alternative Data Exchange \(TrADE\)](#) | *Rails to Trails Conservancy*

Active transportation resources, including existing and past state programs with funding breakdowns.

12. [How Cities Use Parks for Economic Development](#) | *American Planning Association*

Greenspace as outdoor economic development background, case studies, and talking points.



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