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FEBRUARY 2024

LETTER FROM DIRECTOR

Katherine Andrews



Happy New Year from the Arkansas Office of Outdoor Recreation!

As we move into 2024, I've taken a moment to reflect on how far we've come. We had a transformative and productive second year. The structure of the office, relationships that were built, and priorities and goals that were established in year one paved the way for the OOR to launch major initiatives in year two.

The mission and importance of the OOR were further defined throughout the second year as we established a strong, solidified message of being the bridge between the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism and the Department of Commerce. Outdoor recreation has now become a 'must-have' in the toolkit for economic development organizations in Arkansas and we will continue to share that message in year three.

In 2023, Governor Sanders established the Natural State Initiative (NSI) and NSI Advisory Council. I was appointed to serve on that council and asked to lead the NSI Economy Subcommittee. After interviews with multiple Arkansas outdoor recreation companies, we drafted a report that included recommendations to the Governor. The NSI Opportunity Zones were established, which include four state parks and an area of 1/8th mile around them. In addition to the establishment of these zones . . .

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Lacaída is Spanish for “the fall” hence, the name of this new Arkansas-based, veteran-owned and Latino-owned company producing the “safest, prettiest, and most useful” climbing rope in the world. Based in Rogers, [Lacaída](#) is setting itself apart with an innovation called Metered Rope. One of the main benefits of Metered Rope is being able to keep track of how much rope you have left before reaching the end of your rope. If using two strands or two ropes, you know instantly if your ropes or strands are misaligned by matching meter marks. Also, it helps with precise route development so you know exactly how tall your project is and exactly how much space exists between each bolt before you drill. Metered Rope also helps with faster coiling and easy end cutting. Lacaída's Metered Rope was featured as one of the “[hottest new outdoor products](#)” by the Outdoor Business Journal in 2023.

While the company believes it can help advance the state of modern climbing through product innovation, it also plans to advance the sport through inclusivity. The company strives to ensure representation of all climbers in its marketing materials.

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GRANT UPDATES

State Grants

The **Outdoor Recreation Grants Program** will present all successful FY 2024 applicants with commemorative checks at the annual Big Check Day on March 7 and 8 in Little Rock at the Division of Heritage Building. Letters will be sent to winners soon.

Federal Grants

Arkansas Tech University has earned a **\$500,000 grant** from the Arkansas Department of Transportation that will be directed to the establishment of the Arkansas Trail Management Institute.

The funds were made available through the U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration Transportation Alternatives Program and Recreational Trails Program. The grant program provides for an 80 percent federal share with a 20 percent match required from the eligible sponsor.

Stated goals of the [Arkansas Trail Management](#) Institute are to provide trail management training to aid in workforce development, increase the safety of trail construction, maintenance and use, provide more practical and efficient use of natural resources, increase the sustainability of the design, use and maintenance of trails and continue the trajectory of Arkansas being a leader in trail offerings.

The Greenhouse Outdoor Recreation Program (GORP), a business incubator led by the University of Arkansas Office of Entrepreneurship and Innovation (OEI) that is focused on developing entrepreneurs creating innovative products and services within the outdoor recreation industry, has received a \$1.2 million grant from the U.S. Economic Development Agency to expand statewide.

The grant, which is matched by an additional \$1 million in funding from the State of Arkansas, will allow GORP to focus on four key areas of Arkansas that were recently designated as opportunity zones for the outdoor recreation economy: Queen Wilhelmina State Park (Mena), Petit Jean State Park (Morriston), Pinnacle Mountain State Park (Roland), and the Delta Heritage Trail State Park (West Helena).

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Arkansas Outdoor Economy Annual Summit

Arkansas' Office of Outdoor Recreation hosted its inaugural Arkansas Outdoor Economy Annual Summit with the theme, "Partnering for Growth in the Natural State," in December of 2023 to discuss the state's investment in and growth of outdoor recreation. The summit featured contributors from all segments of the outdoor economy. The goal was to establish how important outdoor recreation is to Arkansas' economy and create partnerships and communication between its many facets. More than 100 people from all across the state and country participated. The second Arkansas Outdoor Economy Summit will be in the fall of 2024.

Greenhouse Outdoor Recreation Program (GORP) Cohort Applications

Applications for the next Greenhouse Outdoor Recreation Program (GORP) Cohort will open in mid-June. GORP offers a 12-week program with comprehensive support, including workshops, mentorship, consulting, co-working space, network connections, up to \$15K per company of non-dilutive funding, product/service design and an intern from the Venture Intern Program. Admittance into the GORP Cohort is competitive and offered twice a year. Companies accepted into the Cohort will be expected to commit an average of 15 hours per week to the program and their businesses. Residents from both Northwest Arkansas and the broader Heartland region, as well as current University of Arkansas students, are eligible for the GORP program.

Game and Fish to sponsor two GORP cohorts

The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission announced they are sponsoring two companies in the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville's Greenhouse Outdoor Recreation Program. Osage Creek Camps and Big Sky Rentals will join six other startups in the Greenhouse Outdoor Recreation Program which has supported more than 300 entrepreneurs through a la carte services such as workshops, networking events, access to co-working space and consulting.

"As we continue to see more Arkansans with a desire to connect with wild places and wild things, removing barriers to entry is a critical step to help these people enjoy those experiences," Austin Booth, director of Game and Fish, said.

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"Build to Scale" Grant

The University of Arkansas has received \$1.2 million from the U.S. Department of Commerce to expand the Greenhouse Outdoor Recreation Program across the state. The "Build to Scale" grants were awarded to 60 organizations across the country, including to the University of Arkansas. The money awarded goes towards programs that will support technology entrepreneurs, catalyze innovation, and fuel economic growth. GORP will launch the regional programs in the first quarter of 2024.

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Expanding Public Lands Recreation Experiences Act

In late November, OOR Director Katherine Andrews testified in front of the Subcommittee on Federal Lands to speak in support of the Expanding Public Lands Recreation Experiences Act. The Explore Act was brought forth by House Committee on Natural Resources Chairman Bruce Westerman of Arkansas. Congressman Westerman is seeking to pass the comprehensive, bipartisan bill that will improve access and opportunities for recreation across our public lands and waters.

[READ THE BILL >](#)

New Pinnacle Mountain State Park Visitor Center

In December, [Pinnacle Mountain State Park](#) near Little Rock opened a new visitor center housed in an innovative architectural space. Here you will find new indoor and outdoor exhibits, a trail entrance to the base of the [West Summit Trail](#), and more. The building has massive glass windows that let the surrounding nature shine through. An outside pavilion in the back has interpretive exhibits and access to the trails. It also has [Loblolly Ice Cream](#) as a concessionaire.

Maumelle Pinnacles Conservation Area (MPCA) recreation master plan

Crafton Tull, in partnership with the Office of Outdoor Recreation and other agencies, is working on the [Maumelle Pinnacles Conservation Area \(MPCA\) recreation master plan](#) that addresses conservation, recreation, and adventure in Central Arkansas. The primary goal of this plan is to provide a unified vision and direction for balancing conservation of the natural realm with the recreation needs of the residents of Central Arkansas. In its early stages, this plan will explore the current and desired recreational amenities expressed by those who live and recreate in the region, as well as identify opportunities for investment in new types of recreation. The MPCA has a wide-ranging spectrum of recreation types, some resembling city parks in urbanized areas and others serving a more secluded and natural recreation role. This plan seeks to connect these many parks, conservation areas, and trailheads with an equally diverse system of pathways. Mountain bike trails, paved bike and pedestrian trails, soft surface trails, and even the 223-mile-long Ouachita Trail are all different types of recreation amenities, and even serve as connecting corridors between some destinations. The various destinations in the MPCA can be described with one of four “transects”: wilderness, rural, suburban, and urban.

National Statistics and State-Level Data

Each year, the U.S. Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) releases updated national statistics and state-level data on the outdoor recreation economy that recognizes the critical role the industry plays in supporting economic growth in the United States. Outdoor recreation saw record-breaking numbers in 2022, logging \$1.1 trillion in economic impact. Arkansas itself generated \$4.1 billion of that! We are excited and encouraged for the future of outdoor recreation not only nationally, but here in The Natural State!

[SEE THE DATA >](#)

Economic Development Toolkit

The Outdoor Recreation Roundtable unveiled the second edition of its widely regarded rural economic development toolkit on Jan. 24 to support communities from around the United States looking to diversify their economies through outdoor recreation. The new toolkit features many new resources including:

1. Modules on Deconstructing Economic Development, Funding 101, Housing 101, Climate Resiliency, Accessibility in Recreation Infrastructure, Upholding Tribal Leadership and Legacies, Using Data to Make the Case, and many others.
2. Library of Outdoor Recreation economic development examples in every state in the country.
3. New list of federal grants and technical assistance supporting outdoor recreation economy development.
4. Community Self-Assessment Tool.
5. Library of Recreation Infrastructure Toolkits from Outdoor Recreation Roundtable Members.
6. Detailed funding breakdowns in rural communities

As part of the release of their new [Rural Economic Development Toolkit](#), Outdoor Recreation Roundtable (ORR) wants to highlight for federal agencies all the rural communities around the United States seeking support (financial, technical assistance, or otherwise) to diversify their economies through outdoor recreation. If you'd like to have your community included, please fill out their [short survey](#) here.

OOR Economic Impact Study

A statewide economic impact study will begin this quarter. Heartland Forward was chosen to complete the study, which will take about a year. Heartland Forward will construct a single report describing the analysis and key findings from these five categories:

1. Statewide Economic Impact of Outdoor Recreation
2. Economic Impact of Outdoor Recreation in Substate Regions
3. Distribution of Recreation Activity Across the State
4. Visitation to and Economic Impact of Key Recreation Assets
5. Economic Impact of the Health Benefits Arkansans Receive from Outdoor Recreation

The Natural State Initiative Recommendations

The Natural State Initiative advisory council released a report in December detailing the group's recommendations to increase access to outdoor recreation and grow Arkansas' outdoor economy. The Natural State Initiative's topline recommendations are below.

1. Invest in enhancing the Arkansas State Park experience
2. Establish Arkansas as a year-round tourism destination
3. Further enhance Arkansas' outdoor economy
4. Educate Arkansans to the personal and economic benefits of a thriving outdoor economy
5. Promote careers in outdoor recreation, tourism, and hospitality
6. Provide greater investment in and support to those engaged in Arkansas' outdoor economy
7. Grow the Arkansas Delta Recreation Economy, and;
8. Use mobile technology as a driver to fuel the outdoor economy

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The Office of Outdoor Recreation works to grow and support the outdoor recreation economy at the state level through collaboration with outdoor businesses, local communities and stakeholders.



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