

Access to Nature and Its Economic Implications

A Nature Economy Info Brief

Background on Issue

Access to the natural environment is a critical element of the economic, social, and ecological resilience of communities (Rogers & Garlick, 2021). In New Hampshire, outdoor recreation contributes an estimated \$2.5 billion dollars yearly to the economy (BEA, 2019), which at 3.2% rivals the economic impact of the state's entire food and accommodations sector. Nature's role in broader economic development and quality of life is even larger and is one of the State's greatest advantages for business, workforce attraction, and youth retention, becoming even more apparent during the global pandemic. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, outdoor recreation was increasing in popularity throughout the United States, with 154 million Americans participating annually (Outdoor Foundation, 2020). Throughout the pandemic, outdoor recreation participation rates have increased even further.

Over the last two years, New Hampshire has experienced record recreation and tourism visitation, soaring home prices, and growing and thriving rural communities and economies as visitors and new residents want greater access to nature and a less crowded lifestyle. These changes create opportunities, but also pose potential challenges for the State, including land use conflicts, a lack of available and affordable housing, and workforce gaps.

Exploring Access to Nature through Interviews

We conducted 19 interviews with people involved in nature economy, economic development, recreation, and community development sectors, including representatives from New Hampshire state and local government agencies, city committees and volunteer boards, nonprofit organizations, and local businesses. We focused part of the research on Rochester, NH, a community that is working on supporting access to nature for economic development and quality of life in some unique ways. Our interview questions asked about how people use and value nature and how access to nature impacts economic issues.

Interview Questions

1. Please describe your position in your organization and how your work relates to New Hampshire's economy as it relates to the use and value of nature (trails, parks, rivers, etc.).
2. When you consider NH's natural assets – what comes to mind?
3. From your perspective, do you think everyone has access to nature? If not, what barriers exist? If so, what and how is data tracked and collected?
4. Have you or your organization identified opportunities to expand access to nature with the goal of improving economic vibrancy in the community / New Hampshire? Can you tell me about your efforts?
5. Is your organization involved in any efforts to expand access to nature focused on economic recovery from the COVID pandemic?
6. What kinds of challenges does your organization face in trying to expand access? Examples?
7. How do you view the impact of your work on the economy?
8. Do you track how your work involving NH natural resources impacts the local, regional, or state economy?

Major Themes

Among New Hampshire’s natural assets, interview participants most frequently mentioned water-based resources and mountains (18 of the 19 participants mentioned both). As one government participant stated, “We are so lucky to have a sea-coast in addition to the White Mountains...We have beautiful lakes, rivers, and mountains, as well as our seacoast. It’s the backbone of our natural assets”.

Interview participants varied in how they defined what it means to access nature. For example, one business participant stated, “We believe that selling plants and flowers is a way to bring nature to their own living space and get the benefits of nature.” In contrast, a nonprofit participant stated, “[Nonprofit Organization] has identified several opportunities to improve and expand access to nature by cutting and maintaining back country skiing glades on private and public land and allowing public access.”

Interview participants had mixed opinions about whether everyone in New Hampshire has access to nature; 9 of the 19 participants said they don’t think everyone has equal access to nature. However, all 19 interview participants identified barriers that prevent people from accessing nature in New Hampshire (see table 1). The most frequently mentioned barrier was transportation.

Nine participants identified the limited availability of sites that are compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as a barrier. One

government participant stated, “ADA compliance issues are some of the biggest roadblocks we’re encountering with accessibility of nature”. In addition, a nonprofit participant stated, “Conservation commissions seem to be afraid of discussing ADA compliance trails due to the cost of building and maintaining these trails”. When discussing issues leading to inequitable access, participants also mentioned that it can be hard to find where recreation sites are, recreation sites may not be close by, and sites may lack trailhead parking and facilities. Eight participants identified cost as a barrier to participating in outdoor recreation activities.

All 19 participants described some way in which their work impacts the economy. One nonprofit participant, for example, stated, “...we commissioned an economic impact study four years ago. Three of our ski glades contributed over \$1 million to the economy and 16 full time jobs over the course of just one season”. Similarly, a business participant said, “We’re a driver or a catalyst of the local economy, but it is mutually beneficial. Some people are coming to Rochester specifically for [Business], not always for any other reason”. Two participants track how their work impacts the economy, with one nonprofit participant stating, “...we do some survey work to collect some data, like how much money is spent on local food, what local food did you buy, how did you use the local food in school programs, what farm did you buy the local food from”. Three participants said

Table 1: Frequency of Barriers Identified by Interview Participants

Barrier	Number of Times Mentioned
Transportation	13
Site Characteristics / ADA	9
Financial	8
Information	5
Time	5
Infrastructure	2
Environmental Justice	1
Sense of Belonging	1

“From a transportation aspect, we live in a state that has very limited public transportation, from public bus systems to parking at trail heads. Some towns don’t even have sidewalks. So, if you don’t have a car, it becomes a lot harder to access nature”.

- Non-profit and business participant



Shaded walking path along river with bistro style seating, offering a moment of respite to sit in the shade and admire the natural beauty.

“...we have been advocating for the aggregation of this data to a local or county level. This would be helpful in measuring impact, charting progress, and it also helps with advocacy. This would help to show state legislatures the impact their constituents are experiencing”.

- Non-profit participant

they collect demographic data about clients who are accessing nature related to their work. Four of the interview participants said they would be interested in demographic data about who is accessing nature.

11 of the interview participants said they believe their organization is involved in efforts to expand access to nature with the goal of improving economic vibrancy in their community or New Hampshire. One government participant said, “Yeah, right now we are working on a grant to create an ADA compliant walking trail within one of the [City] recreation areas”.

7 of the interview participants said they believe their organization is involved in efforts to expand access to nature focused on economic recovery from the COVID pandemic. One of the government participants stated, “Yes, so there is an Economic Recovery and Expansion Strategy, referred to as ERES. ERES sets the groundwork for saying we need to recover from the pandemic as well as being resilient”.

All 19 participants described some way in which their organization experienced challenges when trying to expand access to nature. What kinds of challenges does your organization face in trying to expand access. One nonprofit participant stated, “One is internally, bandwidth or capacity. It is difficult to find people to bring into the fold or to retain workers. The other challenge to expanding access is caused by a succession issue with sitting leadership. It is difficult to get people to move away from the “old guard” mentality for leadership positions in many different municipalities and groups making it difficult to bring in new ideas and concepts”.

Adopt-a-spot location close to downtown showcasing beautiful flowers and welcoming appearance.



Actions Communities Can Take to Improve Access to Nature

Based on the interviews, we identified several recommendations for how to improve access to nature and support local economies in New Hampshire.

- Make it easier to locate information about the accessibility of State Parks, for example through an online website or database.
- Initiate discussions on how to reduce and remove barriers to accessing nature.
- Form connections to nature where people are: backyards, downtown greenspaces, and community spaces. Nature doesn't have to be something "wild" or difficult to access.

- Better connect access to nature and economic development. Bring together groups that work on these topics but are often siloed for dialogue about connection between their work.
- Collect data about: (1) the demographics of who is accessing nature and how, and (2) how organizations' work impacts the economy.

These are some of our preliminary suggestions for improving access to nature. We look forward to hearing from other communities across the state and region about their ideas, suggestions, and success stories.

For More Information

- [The Nature Economy Collaborative – University of New Hampshire](#)
- [Outside Our Doors: The benefits of cities where people and nature thrive. – The Nature Conservancy](#)
- [Recreation Economy for Rural Communities – Environmental Protection Agency](#)
- [Urban Nature For Human Health and Well-being – United States Department of Agriculture](#)

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