

CHAPTER **7**
*Parks and
Recreation*

Morning fishing at Douthat State Park | Bill Crabtree, Jr./Virginia Tourism Corp.



Cozy cabins nestled in natural setting at Staunton River State Park | Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation

Background

Local, regional, state and federal parks, recreation providers and land managers provide essential public services for outdoor recreation. Across the nation, there is growing interest in increased park funding. The Trust for Public Land reported in a 2017 article, “Voters pass \$1.5 billion for local parks,” that 88 percent of the 41 recreation and land conservation bonds proposed across the nation passed. These local parks and open space initiatives total more than \$2 billion.

Reasons citizens support parks spending are summarized in a National Recreation and Park Association article, “Why Parks and Recreation are Essential Public Services.” The contributions of parks to the economy, value, health, the environment and social opportunities are shown below.¹

Economic Value

- Increase property values and increase local tax base.
- Improve environmental quality and save community costs for stormwater management in urban areas.
- Attract businesses to communities.
- Provide indirect revenue to local economies (e.g., hospitality, tourism, fuel, recreation equipment sales).

Health and Environmental Benefits

- Provide places to exercise and opportunities to stay fit.
- Improve individual and community health.
- Protect and enhance the environment and natural conditions affecting health.

Social Importance

- Improve quality of life.
- Provide gathering places for all populations and generations.
- Reduce crime, vandalism and juvenile delinquency.
- Provide a sense of public pride and community cohesion.

Virginians Recognize the Importance of Publicly Owned Parkland

The 2017 Virginia Outdoors Demand Survey (VODS) asked Virginians their opinions about development of publicly owned parkland. Responses show Virginians support parks and land protection. Figure 7.1 indicates almost half (49.8 percent) want publicly owned parkland to be permanently protected. Another quarter (24.3 percent) think publicly owned parkland should be permanently protected only if the park is essential to water quality or threatened species. Less than 10 percent (6.70 percent) replied that publicly owned parkland should be available for conversion to private development.

Figure 7.1 Publicly Owned Parkland and Development

Permanently protect from conversion to private development in all cases	49.80%
Permanently protect from conversion to private development only if the park protects water quality or threatened species	24.30%
Don't know/prefer not to say	19.20%
Available for conversion to private development based on future community needs	6.70%

Source: 2017 Virginia Outdoors Demand Survey



There's nothing quite like a lunch in the great outdoors | Bill Crabtree, Jr./ Virginia Tourism Corp.

The 2017 VODS results about parks include Virginians' preferences for access to parks, desired park improvements, types of parks needed, electronic accessibility in parks and park safety. According to the Virginia Auditor of Public Accounts, "Comparative Report on Local Government Revenues and Expenditures," the 2016 statewide parks and recreation per capita expenditure was \$71.06.

Access to Parks

To better understand how to meet the changing needs for parks, the survey asked why Virginians did not visit parks. The top two reasons, "lack of time" (57.4 percent) and "lack of money" (25.0 percent) cannot be changed by parks professionals. Twenty-one percent reported "a lack of parks nearby". This represents a call to action across Virginia. Eighteen percent, mostly older populations reported both health and physical mobility to be limiting factors for visiting parks. This means during the next five years, parks must continue to address accessibility and universal design. While only 6.1 percent of those surveyed reported that transportation was an issue for visitation, there may be a greater need, especially in rural areas, for park access.

Park Improvements Desired by Citizens

Over one-third of Virginians think hours of operations and parking are the most important park features. About 20 percent of Virginians asked for improved trail signage and trails that comply with Americans with Disabilities Act guidelines. The following park improvements were mentioned most in comments by survey respondents.

- Easy-to-walk, paved trails
- Restrooms
- Benches
- Access for mobility chairs
- Access to parks from neighborhood trails
- Special programming for people with disabilities
- Senior discount and low-cost access

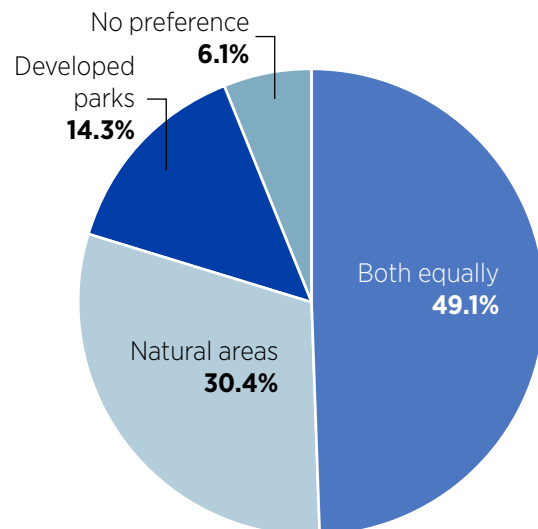
Defining a Close-to-Home Park

According to the 2017 VODS, over half of the respondents (63 percent) indicated that parks should be within a 15-minute walk or 15-minute bike ride. When it comes to driving distance, over half of the respondents indicated that a close-to-home park should be within a 20-minute drive.

Developed Parks vs. Natural Areas

Figure 7.2 shows the need for both developed parks and natural areas. Almost half (49.1 percent) of those surveyed prefer both developed parks and natural areas. Youth between the ages of 18 and 24 reported a higher preference (49.1 percent) for visiting natural areas. Those 25 years and older reported a 31.7 percent preference for natural areas over developed parks.

Figure 7.2 Developed Parks vs. Natural Areas



Park Safety

The 2017 VODS asked citizens to rank their top three park improvements for safety. Figure 7.3 shows park and trail maintenance and facility equipment as the highest priority.

Figure 7.3 Improvements for Safety

Well maintained parks, equipment and trails	71.40%
Lighting	54.50%
Park personnel out and about	43.60%
Signage	36.90%
Litter cleanup	29.90%
Law enforcement personnel visible	27.60%
Paper maps on site	22.10%
Age-appropriate facilities	17.10%
Online wayfinding	6.30%
Other	2.90%

Source: 2017 Virginia Outdoors Demand Survey

Wi-Fi, Internet and Cell Phone Service in Parks

Results of the 2017 VODS show many view cell service as a personal safety issue. More than half (57.3 percent) of park users would continue to use parks without cell phone service. Survey results also indicate that 85.3 percent of Virginians would likely use a park with no Wi-Fi or Internet access.

National Agencies and Organizations that Support Outdoor Recreation

While the survey addressed preferences at the state level, national agencies and organizations provide information related to specific programs and resources.

Outdoor Recreation Industry

The Outdoor Recreation Industry prepares an annual Outdoor Recreation Participation Report. This information may be used to supplement the 2017 VODS.

National Park Service

Virginia and the National Park Service have worked closely for many years to protect and conserve the state’s important resources and rich heritage. The partnership has resulted in the creation of a network of river corridors, trails, heritage sites and conservation areas that bring numerous benefits to the citizens of Virginia. In Virginia, the National Park Service manages 22 parks with a combined acreage of approximately 400,000 acres. The park service prepares an annual summary of the 22 park facilities that attract over 25 million visitors in Virginia.

Figure 7.4 Park Area Standards

type	acres/1,000 People	urban/suburban service area	rural	minimum acres
Neighborhood park	3	2 Miles	1-1.5 Miles	5
Playground	no minimum	2 Miles	no minimum	no minimum
Community park	3	1 Mile	3-7 Miles	20
District park	4	5-7 Miles	10-15 Miles	50
Regional park	based on local guidelines	25 Miles	25 Miles	100
State park	10	1 Hour	50 Miles	600

Source: 2007 Virginia Outdoors Plan Appendix C, page 671

Forest Service

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service administers the 1.8 million-acre George Washington and Jefferson National Forests in Virginia. This national forest constitutes nearly 50 percent of the public outdoor recreation land in the Commonwealth. It stretches the length of the western portion of the state and has acreage in 31 western counties.

Fish and Wildlife Service

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages 15 national wildlife refuges and one national fish hatchery in Virginia, which totals more than 161,032 acres. While the refuges are managed primarily to provide habitat and to protect valuable ecosystems, they also provide significant outdoor recreational opportunities.

Other Federal Lands

In addition to national forests, parks and wildlife refuges, the federal government manages more than 426,000 acres in Virginia. Although most of these areas are managed primarily for military purposes.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers operates Flannagan, Kerr and Philpott Reservoirs. These reservoirs comprise a total 99,000 acres. Legislation for the operation of these reservoirs requires consideration of recreation, fish and wildlife conservation, hydroelectric power, water supply, and the preservation and enhancement of natural beauty.

State Agencies Providing Outdoor Recreation

Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation

On June 15, 1936, in one day, Virginia opened an entire state park system consisting of six parks that totaled nearly 19,000 acres. By 1965, there were nine state parks, three recreational areas, several historic sites and six natural areas. “Virginia’s Common Wealth,” the state’s first comprehensive outdoor recreation plan, evaluated the demand for outdoor recreation and assessed resources.

Key reasons identified in the 1965 plan for developing state parks remain relevant today.

- Being in nature serves as a tonic to the mind, body and spirit.
- Parks protect significant natural and cultural resources for future generations.
- Parks serve as regional and community economic engines.

Identifying and addressing resources within state parks minimizes impacts and maximizes the public’s enjoyment of parkland. Virginia follows the guidelines below to evaluate potential state parks. The acreage requirements for linear, urban and rural state parks may vary from this traditional guidance. Appendix 7 provides park planning guidance for different types of parks.

In 2017, Virginia State Parks attendance exceeded 10 million people who spent an estimated \$226.1 million in the Commonwealth. Compared to 2012, visitors to the Virginia State Parks exceeded 8.3 million with an economic impact of \$199 million. Figure 7.5 shows how survey respondents ranked State Park accommodations and camping amenities.

Figure 7.5 State Park Most Preferred Accommodations and Camping Amenities

preferred overnight accommodations	
Cabins	73%
Drive-in campsites with water and electric hookups	35%
Camp cabins or yurts	27%
Tent-only campsites	23%

popular drive-in camping amenities	
Flush toilets	85%
Showers	84%
Security patrol	70%

Source: 2017 Virginia Outdoors Demand Survey

DCR launched the Virginia Natural Area Preserve System in 1990. It now contains 63 Natural Area Preserves supporting some 760 exemplary natural communities and rare plant and animal populations on 56,648 acres. Twenty-one of the preserves offer public access facilities consisting in most cases of a parking area, 85 miles of self-guided hiking trails and water access. The 2017 Virginia Outdoors Demand Survey found the No. 1 activity is visiting natural areas.

Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries

The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries has statutory responsibility to manage the Commonwealth’s wildlife and inland fisheries, and to protect state and federally threatened or endangered species (excluding plants and insects). As a special fund agency, DGIF has specific authority to acquire and develop lands and waters for public hunting, fishing and public boating access to enhance recreational use of fish and wildlife resources. The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries maintains 42 management areas totaling more than 203,000 acres for the benefit of all citizens for a variety of outdoor recreational opportunities.

Virginia Department of Forestry

The Virginia Department of Forestry manages 24 state forests that total 68,626 acres. Citizens may hike in state forests by purchasing a permit. The state forests of Virginia are self-supporting and receive no taxpayer funds for operation. Operating funds are generated from the sale of forest products. In addition, up to 25 percent of the revenue received from the sale of forest products is returned to the counties in which the forests are located.

Regional and Local Parks Providing Outdoor Recreation

Local parks and recreation departments and regional supporting groups, like those for multijurisdictional trails and water trails, along with the regional planning district commissions, all work together to provide planning and identify funding sources for parks, trails and outdoor recreation implementation.

The Virginia Recreation and Park Society (VRPS) is a private, nonprofit professional organization, founded in 1953 and incorporated in 1956. Its purpose is to unite all professionals, students and interested laypersons engaged in the field of recreation, parks and other leisure services. Members work together to promote and improve the profession in all its diversity. VRPS is affiliated with the National Recreation and Park Association. Opportunities are growing for local parks and recreation professionals to connect and partner on statewide initiatives that promote and increase the visibility and accessibility of outdoor recreation for all Virginians.

Local and Regional Park Authorities

Separate from local government departments, these organizations can be multijurisdictional and are outdoor recreation providers.

Localities Without Parks and Recreation Departments

Not all localities have parks and recreation departments. Many of these localities rely on private facilities as well as federal, state and regional parks to meet local outdoor recreation needs. The caveat in this approach is the regional, state and federal agencies managing recreation lands in these localities are mission driven to meet their own land management needs and not necessarily the needs within the community.

Figure 7.6 Localities Without a Full-time Parks and Recreation Director



Assets and Opportunities

The Virginia Outdoors Plan Technical Advisory Committee identified the many assets parks and recreation bring to communities.

- Parks are places to meet and create a sense of community and belonging for every age group and gender, uniting cultural differences.
- Parks support healthy living and community wellness.
- While recreation funding has steadily declined, public-private partnerships, tourism and sports tourism are growing to broaden outdoor recreation opportunities.
- Protection of Virginia's lands and natural resources fosters citizen stewardship of land, trails and parks.

Three main benefits to parks and recreation in Virginia are:

1. The VRPS has an established system for networking and legislation advocacy to support local parks and recreation departments.
2. Public-private partnerships, tourism and sports tourism are growing to broaden outdoor recreation opportunities.
3. Land protection is a local issue that can support parks and recreation and increase stewardship of public land.

Challenges

There is a need for state funds to support parks across Virginia. Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund and Recreational Trails Program grants are inadequate to meet growing outdoor recreation needs. Localities are creative in seeking funding partnerships with the Virginia Department of Health, the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and the Virginia Tourism Corporation, but to sustain the growing demand from both residents and tourists for outdoor recreation, additional sources of income are needed (see Chapter 4). Challenges include:

- Proposing bond referendums to support local parks and recreation, state parks and natural areas and collaborative regional recreation projects.
- Identifying a source of consistent, stable funding for local parks outside LWCF and federal dollars associated with transportation enhancement projects.

Recommendations

- The VRPS should host a statewide forum at a conference or VRPS webinars to engage forum participants in developing statewide strategies to address and advocate for local, regional and state recreation needs. Potential Outcomes: Advocacy document supporting increased state and local recreation funding.
 - Assessment of statewide recreation planning and technical assistance needs. (Virginia Outdoors Plan Technical Advisory Committee, VRPS, DCR)
- Develop partnerships with health professionals to integrate outdoor recreation into health initiatives. (VRPS, DCR, Virginia Department of Health)



Vintage Photograph, Douthat State Park | Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation

- Develop educational programs or a webinar series to support the needs of diverse populations and increase cultural awareness in outdoor recreation. (VRPS, DCR - Virginia State Parks)

Works Cited

1. “Why Parks and Recreation are Essential Public Services”, National Recreation and Parks Association, 2010.