

# The Forestry *Source*

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## To Share and Sustain: Stewarding Recreation Resources in the US Forest Service

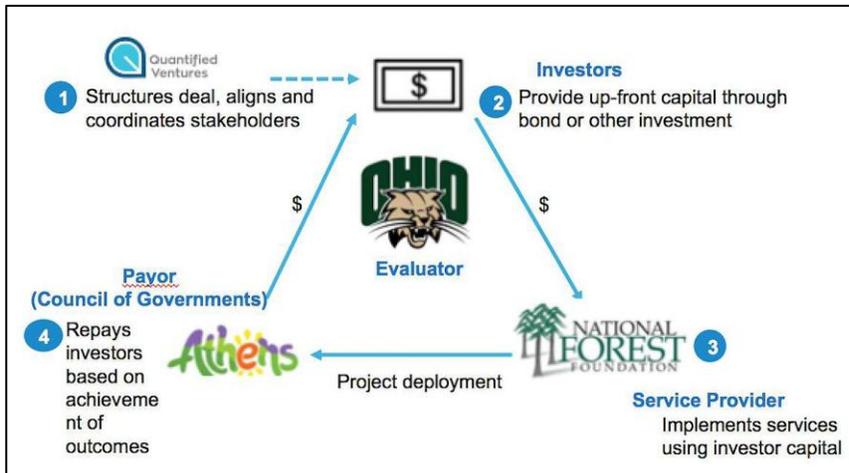
By **Monika Derrien, Lee Cerveney, Michiko Martin, Matt Arnn**

The residents of rural Athens County, Ohio, saw an opportunity to address their public health and economic challenges by tapping into the natural and social capital of the Wayne National Forest. Community visionaries pulled together local business owners, government officials, and university faculty to develop a concept for an expansive mountain bike trail system with trailheads in several small towns, connecting them to federal, state, and local public lands. The trail system would promote physical activity for residents, create new jobs to serve out-of-town trail enthusiasts, and improve the community's overall quality of life. US Forest Service officials began working with a network of national and community partners to solidify local investment in the proposed Baileys Mountain Biking Trail System. With an innovative financing strategy being structured through a social impact bond (see [tinyurl.com/yyd5z93o](https://tinyurl.com/yyd5z93o)), this on-going community visioning and investment process exemplifies how the Forest Service is building recreation capacity through shared stewardship.



*Mountain biking on the Pisgah National Forest. Forest Service photo by Cecilio Ricardo.*

What is shared stewardship? The U.S. Forest Service uses the term to describe an agency-wide commitment to work with others on relevant scales to identify, prioritize, plan, and accomplish mutually beneficial work on national forests and grasslands and beyond. Shared stewardship approaches are motivated by a common vision for how lands might be managed, in a way that achieves shared benefits. The approach is implemented through partnerships and capitalizes on shared interests, values, and interdependence, encouraging the engagement of long-standing partners as well as new and diverse groups. [See



Transaction model for the Baileys Mountain Biking Trail System on the Wayne National Forest in Athens, Ohio. See [tinyurl.com/yyd5z93o](http://tinyurl.com/yyd5z93o).

of diverse partners. It recognizes local and indigenous knowledge alongside corporate and scientific knowledge, extending one of Gifford Pinchot’s maxims for foresters, to “Get rid of the attitude of personal arrogance or pride of attainment of superior knowledge.” Theodore Roosevelt invoked the “sense of common duties and common interests, which arise when [people] take the trouble to

“Federal–State Shared Stewardship’ Strategy Takes Hold,” *The Forestry Source*, June 2019] In California, for example, the Eastern Sierra Sustainable Recreation Partnership helps gateway communities, such as Mammoth Lakes, invest in mutually beneficial projects across public lands (Eastern Sierra Sustainable Recreation Partnership, [essrp.org](http://essrp.org)). Here, local tax measures fund trails projects on the Inyo National Forest as well as a trails website, supporting local tourism interests in a way that Town Council member John Wentworth describes as “...innovative, replicable, and necessary.”

What might a national commitment to shared stewardship mean for outdoor recreation? It means more creative, collaborative efforts such as the Baileys and Eastern Sierra partnerships. While recreation partnerships in the U.S. Forest Service are as old as the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (founded in 1925), the agency’s nationwide commitment to ensuring that partnerships are empowered, inclusive, and better supported is new. It marks a change from a culture of expertism, to one in which the agency acknowledges that important insights will emerge from the collective knowledge

understand one another, and to associate together for a common object.” Elinor Ostrom posited that sustainable resource management can be achieved through building trust, cooperation, and institutions for collaborative governance. Shared stewardship for outdoor recreation builds on these traditions.

### Recreation Today

As foresters across the country know, outdoor recreation is popular. The Bureau of Economic Analysis recently estimated that outdoor recreation industry contributes to 2.2 percent of the nation’s gross domestic product, with more consumer spending than the pharmaceutical and gasoline/fuels industries combined. The growth of outdoor recreation has outpaced the overall economy. At the same time, many public land agencies have experienced declines in budgets for operations and maintenance as well as personnel, alongside increasing levels of deferred maintenance for recreation facilities and infrastructure. A 2013 audit from the Government Accountability Office found that only about one-quarter of the Forest Service’s trail miles met the agency’s standards.

Shared stewardship is more than a new catch phrase for getting help from others. National forests and grasslands already get a lot of help, benefitting from tens of thousands of generous volunteers and service participants putting in millions of hours annually to maintain trails, patrol the backcountry, and manage campgrounds. Partners extend the reach and relevancy of this work in many communities. While all of this is an important component of shared stewardship, the shared stewardship concept encourages broadening, deepening, and weaving together new and existing commitments. Shared stewardship is about sharing not only in the work itself, but also in the risk and returns of shared investments. For example, by encouraging longer-term special-use permits to recreation service providers, the agency is helping reduce uncertainty and de-risk capital investments, encouraging private businesses to invest in public-land infrastructure projects (such as deferred maintenance in campgrounds), that will serve business interests and further the agency's goal to facilitate high-quality outdoor experiences for the public.

Shared stewardship requires building social capital, nurturing nascent partnerships, and sharing leadership and decision-making space. For many people, this represents a different work culture, and is leading the Forest Service to think more broadly about the skills needed to be a natural resource professional. For Forest Service employees accustomed to agency-centric decision-making, sharing leadership with a range of stewards might be a challenging transition. How can the Forest Service recruit and cultivate leaders who are collaborative team workers and team builders and who share leadership, power, and decision-making space? How can the agency incentivize and reward personnel for growing and advancing partnerships? And how can partnerships be sustained over time, given staff turnover and

a workforce whose capacity is already stretched? A commitment to shared stewardship causes us to reflect on the need to enhance our capacity to ensure strong partner relations.

## Shared Stewardship Networks

Shared stewardship for recreation takes many forms. Networks of partners operate on different temporal and spatial scales, and vary based on management needs. These are examples of the types of recreation networks:

- **State offices of outdoor recreation:** Since 2013, about a dozen states have developed offices of outdoor recreation, recognizing the benefits of a nature-based tourism economy and the need to facilitate sustainable recreation and tourism development. State agencies link statewide initiatives in outdoor recreation, tourism, rural economies, and resource conservation, focusing on cross-boundary coordination of investments and marketing.
- **State, regional, and local tourism planning entities:** Tourism planning by local and regional entities, such as chambers of commerce, destination marketing groups, rural development agencies, and trade associations are increasingly working to integrate and coordinate recreation-promotion efforts with land management agencies.
- **Recreation collaboratives:** Collaborative groups consisting of conservation organizations, activity-based groups, state and local agencies, and community-based organizations, form to plan and

manage outdoor recreation across boundaries to work toward common goals for recreation infrastructure, planning, employment, restoration, communication, and public engagement.

- **Trail partnerships:** Many nationally designated trails and trail networks cross multiple jurisdictions and are supported by conservancy groups that formally facilitate partnerships among land management agencies, private landowners, and tribal groups.
- **Public-private partnerships:** Partnerships with government, non-governmental organizations, private industry groups, foundations, and investors help envision, restore, protect, and enhance public recreation resources through new models for financing infrastructure projects.
- **Public-public partnerships:** Intergovernmental partnerships serve locally identified needs, supporting seasonal tourism and recreational visitor volumes, investing in trail systems, and enhancing information services for visitors

## Future Directions

As the Forest Service charts its path towards truly sharing stewardship for recreation, it faces many philosophical and pragmatic questions. How does the agency truly share power in its stewardship, as it moves away from “we do it all” to “we are all part of it”? Cultural change occurs slowly and growing pains are to be expected as the agency shifts the way it does business and re-envision its place among partners. How can the agency better address entrenched institutional memory and plan for succession in

partnerships? What institutional frameworks are needed to sustain partnerships that aspire to be inclusive, so that public lands can be truly democratic and egalitarian places? How can it address environmental injustices related to the amount of social, cultural, and financial capital that community partners bring to many shared tables across the country? Do agency language practices alienate some partners by calling upon specific cultural models of human-nature relationships (such as the dominion implicit in the term “stewardship”)? How can the Forest Service share decision-space with groups that have been historically marginalized and have not seen public lands as theirs to share in the first place?

The Forest Service is grappling with these questions as it navigates how to share in stewardship networks that harness local communities’ expertise and interests. Recreation is a primary connection people forge with public lands; it offers powerful inroads for engaging more people in sharing in their stewardship. As people get to know and deeply value special places on public lands through their outdoor experiences, those connections can be a precursor for stewardship. When communities and people who care about their public lands become part of a network of stewards, we gain capacity to complete shared objectives, but more important, we build relationships and cultivate a shared passion for our forests and grasslands that endure well beyond specific projects and initiatives.

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