



## Open Space Conservation: Connecting People to Outdoor Recreation Opportunities

**R**elected in America’s Great Outdoors (AGO) Report, the goals to “Conserve Rural Working Farms, Ranches, and Forests through Partnerships and Incentives” and to “Protect and Renew Rivers and Other Waters” ensure conservation and recreation enjoyment of beloved lands and waters. Wisconsin shares this view by incentivizing landowners to conserve public recreation opportunities on private lands, and prioritizing safe access to waterways.

Through focus groups discussions, Chapter 5 examines open space conservation roles from public lands and the programs that support them to private lands leveraged financially—deemed necessary by stakeholders—for preservation and public recreation access (AGO Recommendation 7.5). AGO supports expanding federal and state partnerships with private landowners through federal programs (AGO Action Item 7.5a), collaborating with local, state, and tribal governments to conserve and restore large landscapes (AGO Action Item 8.1d), and fostering networking among communities to improve access and enjoyment of waterways (AGO Action Item 9.2b).



## Overview

This chapter of the SCORP addresses the relationships between open space conservation and outdoor recreation in Wisconsin, and provides an inventory of existing recreation and conservation lands. Related work serves to support one of the overarching goals of the 2011-2016 SCORP by connecting urban and rural populations to the outdoors. The comprehensive guide to such local outdoor recreation planning can be found in Appendix F.

Recreation lands and facilities are provided by two major groups in Wisconsin. Governments at the state, federal, county, and local level provide important resources to enhance recreation access opportunities. Equally important are the private landowners that own and provide access to recreation lands. A relationship exists between all of these providers. To understand this relationship, various stakeholders were asked to think about the challenge of connecting urban and rural people and to help identify possible strategies. Stakeholders were asked to discuss four major themes:

1. Identifying priorities that help the State of Wisconsin to be a more effective partner in open space conservation.
2. Building a framework to focus existing and new state actions for open space conservation.
3. Training natural resource managers to help them fully use the resources and skills from all parts and levels of the State to improve coordination.
4. Identifying collaborative approaches and partnerships that support open space and conservation programs.

## The Public and Private Outdoor Recreation Landscape

Both public and private lands are important contributors to Wisconsin's outdoor recreation supply. This section discusses Wisconsin's land resources for public and private outdoor recreation and conservation. Table 5-1 is a comprehensive list of public and private land types broken down by ownership and/or program. The largest public land category is county parks and forests, accounting for 42.7% of all public lands. For private lands, the largest category is open managed forest lands, accounting for 31.8% or over 1.1 million acres. Appendix G provides a complete listing of state-owned lands.

Table 5-1: **Public and Private Recreation and Conservation Lands in Wisconsin: Acres by Ownership (2011)**

Land Ownership Type	Total Acreage	Percent of Subtotal	Percent of Total
<b>Public Ownership</b>			
<b>Federal government</b>	1,500,000	26.6%	16.3%
<b>Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources</b>			
Forests and wild rivers	820,379	14.6%	8.9%
Park and natural areas	203,209	3.6%	2.2%
Fisheries and wildlife	668,755	11.9%	7.3%
Total DNR program lands	1,705,772	30.3%	18.6%
<b>County parks and forests*</b>	<b>2,368,099</b>	<b>42.0%</b>	<b>25.8%</b>
<b>City, village, and township</b>			
City	38,571	0.7%	0.4%
Village	12,677	0.2%	0.1%
Town	10,754	0.2%	0.1%
Total city, village, and township	62,002	1.1%	0.7%
<b>Subtotal public lands</b>	<b>5,635,873</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>61.3%</b>
<b>Private Ownership</b>			
<b>Managed forest law lands</b>			
Open lands	1,132,412	31.8%	12.3%
Closed lands	2,010,014	56.5%	21.9%
Total managed forest law lands	3,142,426	88.3%	34.2%
<b>Forest legacy program lands</b>	<b>136,751</b>	<b>3.8%</b>	<b>1.5%</b>
<b>Land trust</b>	<b>280,000</b>	<b>7.9%</b>	<b>3.0%</b>
<b>Voluntary public access</b>	<b>6,500</b>	<b>0.2%</b>	<b>0.1%</b>
<b>Subtotal private lands</b>	<b>3,559,177</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>38.7%</b>
<b>Total all lands</b>	<b>9,195,050</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

\*County parks and forests represent lands enrolled under County Forests Law only.

## Public Recreation Lands

### Federal Government

Federal recreation providers in Wisconsin include the National Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Land Management, all under the U.S. Department of the Interior; the Forest Service, under the U.S. Department of Agriculture; and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, under the U.S. Department of Defense, Department of the Army. These providers offer opportunities for both active and passive recreation and are also actively involved in the conservation of forest, prairie, and water resources. Federally owned recreation lands in Wisconsin are therefore tied to the preservation of open space and natural resource management. Recreational activities provided in these areas are generally nature-based and non-destructive: hiking, camping, fishing, hunting, nature study, canoeing, boating, swimming, and similar activities.<sup>1</sup>

### Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has two divisions, Land and Forestry, which provide the majority of state-owned recreational lands and facilities. The DNR plays a significant role in identifying and conserving areas of unique and valuable natural resources across the state. DNR lands that include park and natural areas provide a wide variety of outdoor recreation resources within Wisconsin. Recreation opportunities provided by the DNR are similar in type to those provided by federal agencies. As on federal properties, the preservation of open space and conservation of natural resources are critical components of state-owned land management.

### State Forests and Wild Rivers

People most often associate Wisconsin's state forests with recreational opportunities including fishing, camping, hiking, snowmobiling, and skiing. But the state forests were originally created to preserve important watersheds and unique ecosystems. Today those forests are managed for multiple uses.<sup>2</sup> The DNR manages six state forests that provide diverse landscapes for recreation and conservation.

The Wisconsin system of state wild rivers was established in 1965 in order to provide Wisconsinites with an opportunity to enjoy natural streams, to attract out-of-state visitors and assure the well-being of Wisconsin's tourism industry, and to preserve selected rivers in a free flowing condition protected from development. Wild rivers are designated by legislative acts. The following rivers, or portions of rivers, are currently designated as wild rivers:

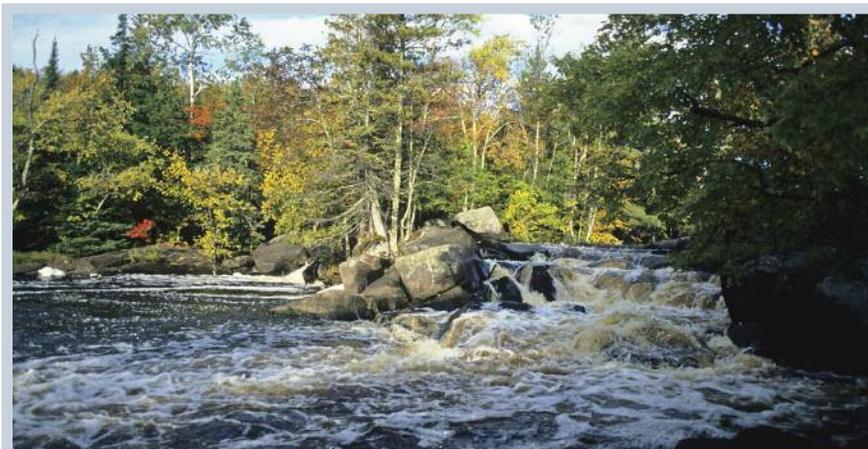
- Pike Wild River – Marinette County
- Pine and Popple Wild Rivers – Florence and Forest Counties
- Martin Hanson Wild River – a portion of the Brunswiler River in Ashland County
- Totagatic Wild River – Bayfield, Burnett, Sawyer, and Washburn Counties

The DNR owns land within Pike Wild River and Pine and Popple Wild Rivers.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> From SCORP 2005-2010, Chapter 3

<sup>2</sup> WDNR State Forests: <http://dnr.wi.gov/forestry/StateForests/>

<sup>3</sup> WDNR Wild Rivers: <http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/facilities/wildrivers/>



The Wisconsin system of state wild rivers was established in 1965.

### State Park and Natural Areas

There are 49 state parks, 42 state trails, 9 state recreation areas, and 653 state natural areas.<sup>4</sup> State natural areas (SNAs) protect outstanding examples of Wisconsin's native landscapes and communities, significant geological formations, and archeological sites. Wisconsin's state natural areas encompass over 358,000 acres. SNAs are valuable for research and educational use, preservation of genetic and biological diversity, and provision of benchmarks for determining the impact of use on managed lands. They also provide some of the last refuges for rare plants and animals; more than 90% of the plants and 75% of the animals on Wisconsin's list of endangered and threatened species are protected in SNAs.<sup>5</sup>

### County Parks and Forests

All Wisconsin counties have county parks, but not all have county forest land. State legislation mandates that county forests land enrolled under the Wisconsin County Forests Law be open to hunting, camping, hiking, and bird watching. With the exception of a few sensitive areas, there are no lands enrolled under the County Forests Law that are closed to the public. These county forests provide more than 1,200 campsites and thousands of miles of hiking, skiing, and snowmobile trails, as well as public access to hundreds of lakes and streams.<sup>6</sup>

Enrolled county forests represent the state's largest public forest landholding and are extremely important to Wisconsin's forest products industry and economy; each

year they generate anywhere from \$25 to \$30 million in timber revenues for the counties and towns in which they are located. Approximately 16,000 jobs and \$4.6 billion in the generation of forest products result from the timber harvested from county forests. County forests also provide many recreation and tourism opportunities.<sup>7</sup>

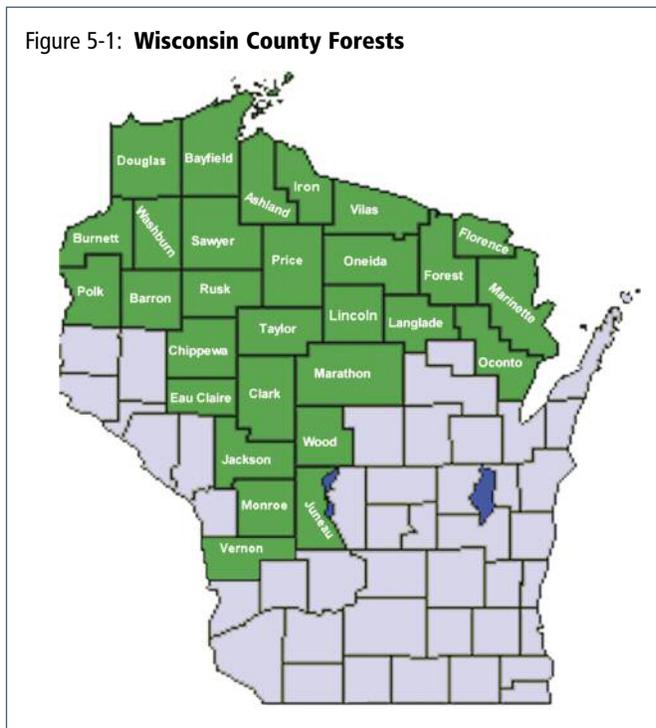
There are enrolled county forests in 29 of Wisconsin's 72 counties, totaling more than 2.36 million acres. Figure 5-1 shows which counties in Wisconsin maintain county forest lands.

### Wisconsin Stewardship Program

Wisconsin has a long and successful history of bipartisan financial support for the conservation of the state's natural resources and the provision of outdoor recreation opportunities. The state's first comprehensive, long-term land acquisition and recreational development program was the Outdoor Recreation Action Program (ORAP); it was first enacted in 1961, then revised in 1969 and 1981. The program is funded by general obligation bonds, and in turn provides funding to state and local governments for the acquisition of conservation lands and the development of recreational facilities. The original ten-year stewardship program (FY1991-2000) created in 1989 (Wis. 1989 Act 31) authorized approximately \$23.1 million annually to be used by the DNR, local units of government, and nonprofit conservation organizations. The success of this program resulted in an extension and redevelopment of the original program. Consequently, the next ten-year program, dubbed Stewardship 2000, became the state's primary funding source for state government, local government, and nonprofit conservation organizations to acquire land and easements for conservation and outdoor recreation purposes.

Stewardship 2000, also known as the Knowles–Nelson Stewardship Program, was created in 1999 for FY2001-2010 (Wis. 1999 Act 9). This program remains comprehensive and addresses a broad spectrum of land conservation and nature-based recreation needs across the state. For Stewardship 2000, the original stewardship program's fund subprograms were reorganized to allow for more flexibility of use depending on need. In addition, local assistance grants were redefined from broad spectrum community outdoor recreation to nature-based outdoor recreation.

Figure 5-1: Wisconsin County Forests



<sup>4</sup> National Association of State Parks Directors: Statistical Report of State Park Operations 2010-11

<sup>5</sup> State Natural Areas Program: <http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/er/sna/>

<sup>6</sup> Wisconsin County Forests Association: <http://www.wisconsincountyforests.com/wcfa-acr.htm>

<sup>7</sup> WDNR County Forests: <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/CountyForests/>

Today, Stewardship II (FY2011–2020) provides \$86 million per year. The program includes several subprograms, each with its own goals and priorities. These subprograms provide funds to improve visitor amenities at state and local parks; restore wetlands and prairies; and acquire land for trails, natural areas, state and county forests, wildlife habitat, urban green space, state and local parks, river and stream corridors, and flowages and wild lakes.<sup>8</sup>

**Land and Water Conservation Program**

The Land and Water Conservation Program is a visionary program established by Congress in 1965 to preserve, develop, and assure accessibility to quality outdoor recreation resources for active participation in recreation and “to strengthen the health and vitality of the citizens of the United States” (Public Law 88-578). The program is funded by the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), which is administered by the DNR and supported through a combination of federal dollars and matching grants provided at the state level. In 2009, Wisconsin received \$495,242 through the LWCF. This is a portion of the estimated \$50 million needed annually by the state to enhance parks and recreation facilities.<sup>9</sup>

**Private Recreation Providers**

Privately owned lands play a critically important role in open space conservation and outdoor recreation through the Managed Forest Law Program, Forest Legacy Program, Voluntary Public Access Program, and non-profit land trusts. Most land in these programs is held in private ownership and conserved through open space easements. These programs allow landowners to maintain their land while providing Wisconsinites with access to natural areas and outdoor recreation.

**Managed Forest Law Program**

The Managed Forest Law Program is a landowner incentive program that encourages sustainable forestry on private woodland. The Managed Forest Law (MFL) was enacted in 1985 and replaced the Woodland Tax Law and the Forest Crop Law. The MFL is currently the only forest tax law that is open to enrollment in Wisconsin. Enrolled program lands must be managed by the landowner in accordance with a forest management plan written by a certified consulting forester.<sup>10</sup> In exchange for following sound forest management, the landowner pays reduced property taxes.

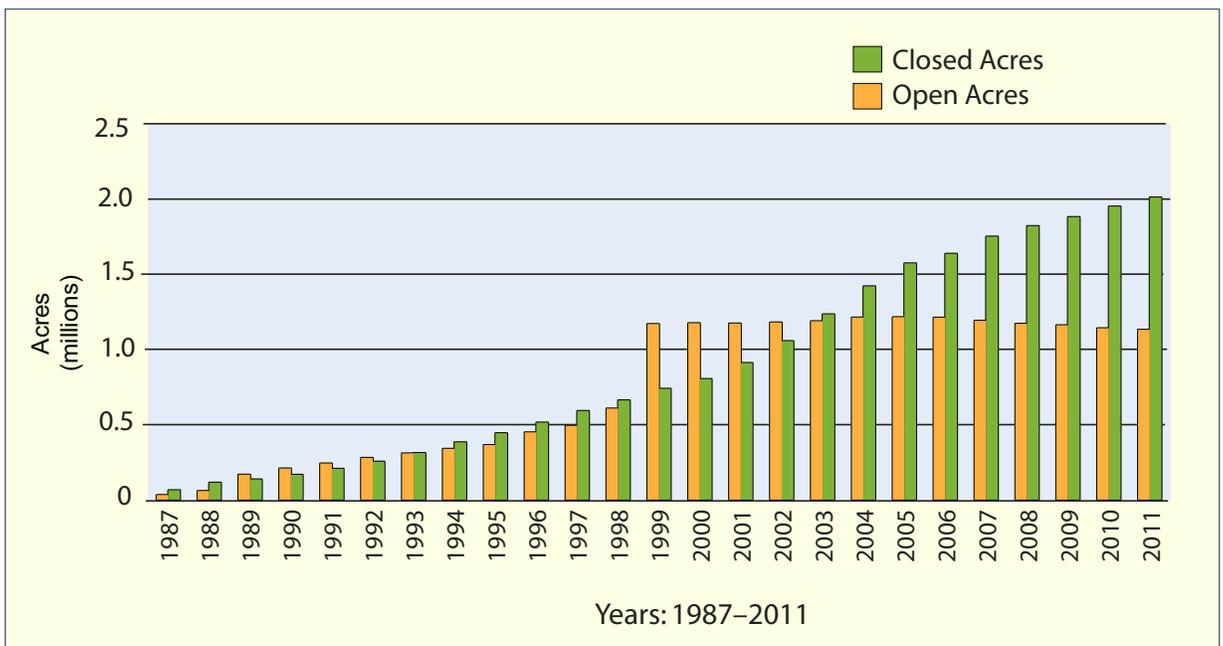
Lands enrolled under MFL can be designated as open or closed to public recreation. Open designation allows public access to the property for hunting, fishing, hiking, sight-seeing, and cross country skiing without additional permission from landowners. Closed designa-

<sup>8</sup> WDNR: <http://dnr.wi.gov/stewardship/>

<sup>9</sup> LWCF: State Assistance annual report 2009. [http://www.nps.gov/lwcf/2009\\_lwcf\\_annual%20\\_rpt.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/lwcf/2009_lwcf_annual%20_rpt.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> WDNR: <http://dnr.wi.gov/forestry/feeds/faqsFull.asp?s1=ForestTax&s2=MFL&inc=ftax>

Figure 5-2: **Managed Forest Law Lands (by Year, all Landowners)**



tion gives landowners the right to restrict or permit access to their lands. Figure 5-2 illustrates the growth of MFL lands in acreage by open or closed designation since 1987. Table 5-2 shows the 10 counties with the largest acres of MFL program lands, as well as the percentage of open acres in each county.

Table 5-2: **Top Ten Counties with Most Acreage Enrolled in Managed Forest Land Program**

Top 10 Counties by Total MFL Acreage	(Open Lands %)
1 Oneida County	195,835 (74.9%)
2 Forest County	127,436 (77.4%)
3 Lincoln County	126,488 (37.3%)
4 Price County	123,430 (52.6%)
5 Sawyer County	116,348 (77.0%)
6 Langlade County	113,042 (47.7%)
7 Marinette County	112,182 (25.6%)
8 Adams County	100,136 (37.4%)
9 Marathon County	96,025 (16.0%)
10 Ashland County	84,915 (75.6%)

### State and Federal Forest Legacy Program

In 2001, the Natural Resources Board granted the Department the authority to establish a Forest Legacy Program. The goal of the program is to minimize fragmentation and conversion of significant forested areas to non-forest uses. To help maintain the integrity and traditional uses of private forest lands that enter the program, the state prefers the acquisition of conservation easements that focus on the sustainable use of forest resources. Easements allow the Department to acquire land at a reduced value since only the rights necessary to protect the land from conversion and to ensure it remains in a forested state are purchased. Another main goal of the program is to allow public access on these lands where appropriate. To help further the state's contributions toward these acquisitions, the Department can apply for funding through the U.S. Forest Service Forest Legacy Program. As part of the 1990 Farm Bill, Congress created the program to identify and protect environmentally important private forest lands threatened with conversion to non-forest uses. At the close of 2010, Wisconsin had partnered with landowners to conserve more than 133,000 acres through the Forest Legacy Program.<sup>11</sup>

### Voluntary Public Access Program

The Voluntary Public Access (VPA) Program allows Wisconsin private landowners to open their property for public recreational use such as hunting, fishing, trapping, and wildlife observation. In return for joining this

voluntary program, landowners enjoy financial incentives from the 2008 Farm Bill for leasing qualified property. VPA enrollments pertain to 37 Wisconsin counties in four geographical focus areas: northeast, south central/southeast, southwest, and west central. As of December 2011, the state has active leases on about 6,500 acres until 2014.<sup>12</sup>

### Land Trusts

Land trusts are established by private, community-based, and non-profit organizations to protect land and water resources for the public benefit. These organizations permanently protect important resources in their communities from overdevelopment. Most often, the resources under protection have natural, recreational, scenic, historic, or productive value. Land trusts that have been incorporated as non-profits operate like charities—any donation, including money, land, or equipment, is tax deductible. They are independent, non-governmental organizations whose mission is determined by their members and volunteers.<sup>13</sup>

### Other Open Space Conservation Programs

Additional outdoor conservation programs are available at multiple government levels. These programs typically focus on conservation with a combination of limited public access. Programs offered in Wisconsin include the Conservation Reserve Program, Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, and conservation easements. These programs enhance outdoor recreation and protect the state's scenic beauty.

### Conservation Reserve Program

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a voluntary program for agricultural landowners.<sup>14</sup> The federal Farm Bill allocates funding by distributing annual rent payments and up to 50 percent of cost-share assistance to establish long-term resource conservation on eligible farmland. The Conservation Reserve Program safeguards Wisconsin's natural resources by protecting topsoil, groundwater, and wildlife populations. Wetlands are also included under this program, and a detailed summary is provided in Appendix H. In 2011, 399,835 acres were enrolled in CRP status in Wisconsin.

<sup>11</sup> From WDNR Website: <http://dnr.wi.gov/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/wildlife/vpa.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Gathering Waters Conservancy: <http://www.gatheringwaters.org/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://dnr.wi.gov/forestry/private/financial/crp.htm>

**Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program**

The state-sponsored Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is a further rendition of Conservation Reserve Program initiatives. The program is run by the DNR and local land conservation departments in conjunction with federal agencies that contribute partnership support through the USDA's Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service along with the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection. CREP targets long-term conservation practices through restoration of grassland habitat and water quality. In exchange for participating in the program, landowners receive financial incentives and cost share payments. The program encourages specific long-term practices by offering 15 year or permanent contracts. In 2011, 40,962 acres were enrolled in CREP status by the State.



**Conservation Easements**

Conservation easements allow property owners to protect their land while also enjoying associated financial benefits. A conservation easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and an organization like a private land trust or a government agency. Land in an easement remains in private ownership, and easements may be purchased or donated. Conservation easements permanently limit specific uses on a property to protect its conservation or historic values. Conservation purposes in an easement may include outdoor recreation or education; protection of fish, wildlife, agricultural, and plant habitat; and preservation of scenery.

Wisconsin has many easements held by federal and state government, and by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as land trusts. Tables<sup>15</sup> 5-3 through 5-5 provide information about easement holder types, landowner types, and easement purposes.

Table 5-3: **Easements by Holder Type**

Easement Holder	Count	Acres
Federal	727	64,835
State	27	77,301
NGO	79	5,574

Table 5-4: **Easements by Landowner Type**

Landowner Type	Count	Acres
Federal	2	39
Local	2	10
NA	8	377
Private	142	83,474
State	679	63,810
Total	833	147,710

Table 5-5: **Easements by Purpose**

Purpose	Count	Acres
Data Not Available	126	6,719
Environmental System	608	56,950
Open Space – Farm	41	4,331
Open Space – Forest	27	77,326
Open Space – Other	18	1,469
Recreation or Education	13	916

**Connecting Urban and Rural Populations to Outdoor Recreation**

State and local governments face a challenge as they attempt to conserve natural places while also promoting and accommodating recreational use. This has been made more difficult in light of decreasing funding to land management agencies and state policy shifts that prioritize economic development and jobs over preservation and recreation development. How can Wisconsin maintain state lands, assist local governments and private landowners with maintenance, and increase the health and availability of outdoor recreation lands?

To some extent, the quantity of natural amenities found in Wisconsin is fixed: there are only so many miles of high quality, accessible shoreline, and the state's terrain will not become mountainous anytime soon. The quality of these resources is more malleable and will be shaped, in part, by private actions and public policies. Communities in Wisconsin can take action to protect and enhance their natural resources to better attract new households and maintain vitality.

A guide for future considerations in large-scale recreation planning comes from the recent federal out-

<sup>15</sup> The data for these tables come from the National Conservation Easement Database. [http://nced.conservancyregistry.org/reports/easements?report\\_state=Wisconsin&report\\_type=All](http://nced.conservancyregistry.org/reports/easements?report_state=Wisconsin&report_type=All)

door recreation framework, America's Great Outdoors Initiative. The AGO is a national plan that presents a set of goals and actions intended to connect people to the outdoors, to conserve and restore the outdoors, and to establish partnerships in part to accomplish this vision. There are 10 sections of the report, each containing a series of goals, recommendations, and action items considered for the overarching goal of connecting people, both rural and urban, to open space lands.

Even in good times, these would be ambitious goals for local, state, and national agencies. When resources are scarce and the economic outlook is cloudy, it becomes a greater challenge to effectively connect people with the outdoors. To help overcome these challenges, the 2011-2016 SCORP establishes a framework for creating and/or enhancing collaborative approaches and partnerships that better support open space and conservation programs and effectively connect the physical pieces of our recreational assets.

In short, there needs to be a better way of doing the work of planning and creating our open space system. The ideal system of the future would be:

- **Seamless:** Private lands are open to recreation and local, county, state, and national recreation and open space assets would be tied together through greenways, trails, and water blueways (water trails).
- **Accessible:** Citizens would be able to enjoy these resources regardless of their wealth or location.
- **Leveraged:** Multi-party collaborations and funding strategies would be needed to acquire, improve, and protect Wisconsin's open space system.

To help develop a framework for this kind of a recreation system, recreation professionals and landowners from across the state were asked to propose concrete examples and creative ideas. Proposing major changes in how recreational space is planned for and provided may sound daunting, but Wisconsin has a his-

tory of developing and implementing revolutionary ideas in outdoor recreation. The state government itself is uniquely positioned to enact such change due to its resources (\$86 million annually from 2011-2020 in Stewardship bonding authority plus millions spent in complementary programs to protect and enhance natural resources), its authority (state and county laws impact the vast majority of open space land in Wisconsin), and its expertise and experience (the State has already been a key actor in creating our current outdoor recreation and open space resource). This SCORP aims to capture new ideas and set the stage for more detailed planning, implementation, and follow-through.

### Collaborative Approaches to Support and Improve Outdoor Recreation Landscapes

To begin the work of connecting open space to communities, several focus group meetings were held involving public parks and recreation directors and managers; land trust directors; owners of woodland and agricultural land; and managers of public lands at the county, state, and federal levels. Focus groups allowed participants to respond to questions in an open-ended, small group format. The purpose of these meetings was to understand the kinds of challenges and future themes that those involved in recreation in Wisconsin are facing. The following section reports on the focus group meetings and questions that were asked.

#### Focus Group Meetings

Six focus group meetings were held around the state. Table 5-6 shows each group, the number of participants in the focus group, meeting dates, and the location of the focus group meeting.

At each focus group meeting, all participants were asked the same questions. The questions were grouped around the idea of open space conservation into four broad categories: successes, challenges, strategies, and big ideas. Participants were asked to record their com-

Table 5-6: Focus Group Meetings

Group	Number of Participants	Date	Location of Meeting
WI Parks and Recreation Association	3	March 25, 2011	Wisconsin Dells
Land Trusts	8	April 14, 2011	Milwaukee
Woodland Owners	6	August 23, 2011	Stevens Point
Lakes	7	August 24, 2011	Stevens Point
Agriculture	9	August 25, 2011	Baraboo
County Forest	5	November 3, 2011	Minocqua

ments, and comments were recorded on flip charts. After the meetings, the flip chart comments and participant notes were typed and saved.

### **Focus Group Findings**

Upon completion of all six focus group meetings, the comments and notes were reviewed and categorized but not tallied. Part of the purpose was not to vote, but to identify themes from all groups. While the participants and organizations in each focus group helped us to gather ideas pertaining to open space conservation, the findings represent a compilation of focus group discussions and do not represent the views of any particular organization or group or individual.

### **Successes**

In order to consider the direction open space conservation and protection should take in the future, it is important to first understand where current successes are being found. To that end, participants were asked to provide examples of instances when their organization was able to work effectively with the State to protect open space in Wisconsin. Examples of these cooperative efforts included the availability of grants and funding opportunities, the provision of technical assistance, formation of partnerships, and other efforts.

### **Challenges**

Understanding the challenges to open space conservation is the first step in creating new solutions and strategies focused on open space. We asked focus group participants to respond to the following questions: What are the challenges for maintaining open space collaborations? What other challenges inhibit better coordination across interested parties in Wisconsin? The responses fell into one of five possible categories: responses specific to how the DNR works and functions; the political environment within which these collaborations and partnerships operate; the specific challenges to collaboration and coordination; how the external environment affects open space conservation; and finally, education and engagement about open space conservation.

### **Strategies**

Once participants had described some of the challenges to the collaborative protection of open space, they were asked to think about strategies that could be used to address some of these challenges. These strategies fall into seven categories: grants and funding, existing programs and opportunities, education, partnering, communication, being strategic, and politics.

### **Big Ideas**

One of the final questions asked of all focus group participants was, “What is the next big idea in open space and recreation planning and protection over the next 50 years?” Although a question of such magnitude was challenging for participants, it elicited much discussion. The question was framed within the context of identifying ideas that may take 10–20 years to accomplish because of their complexity, lack of political popularity, or long-range goals. Through the many responses, the following five categories were identified: education, research, funding, green infrastructure, and a catchall “other” category.

### **Major Themes**

Throughout each of the focus group discussions, three major themes consistently emerged. Participants regularly discussed the importance of collaboration, grants and funding, and education in aid of outdoor recreation. Although these three categories were consistent among all groups, participants also provided a variety of other comments that were not easily categorized. Each of these categories are discussed below, in turn looking at successes, challenges, strategies, and big ideas.

### **Collaborative Approaches to Support Outdoor Recreation**

Partnerships and collaborations were seen as critical to success in open space protection and management. Specifically, participants cited the accessibility of DNR staff in attending meetings, providing guidance on conservation issues, and partnering with outside groups to accomplish goals (e.g., invasive species control). Other examples of collaboration mentioned by participants focused on acquisition and management of land for recreation and conservation, including the state trails system, Rails to Trails, the Ice Age Trail, the Wild Rivers program, and land swaps between the counties and the State.

Consistent responses from many of the focus groups concerned challenges of collaboration and coordination. Here the participants saw challenges related to coordination among state and federal agencies in terms of programming and grant opportunities. Many also cited the need for collaboration in developing engineering standards for trails. The DOT and DNR need to coordinate levels of engineering appropriate to sections of a trail rather than have the same standard for all trails. Participants also indicated that they did not understand the range of agency program goals and requirements under one umbrella. Increased collaboration at the state government level could help coordinate the timing of grants, for example.

Because much of the previous discussion had focused on challenges to open space collaboration and coordination, the strategies discussion focused on partnering and communication as major themes. Many of the responses listed here are short-term and could be addressed internally by the DNR. The responses included the following:

- Improve communication across jurisdictional boundaries.
- Increase networking/sharing of information among a variety of stakeholders.
- Provide opportunities for people to share ideas.
- Work at bringing the non-hunting community to the table.
- Work/interact with individuals/public.
- Communicate to the public the challenges that the DNR faces. Let the public help identify ways to deal with the challenges.
- Follow up on next steps when meetings are held.
- Use technology to integrate and update data/reports/documents/plans.
- Create a mechanism for communication and collaboration.

Within the partnering category, the responses apply both to the DNR and a potential partnering organization. Responses included the following:

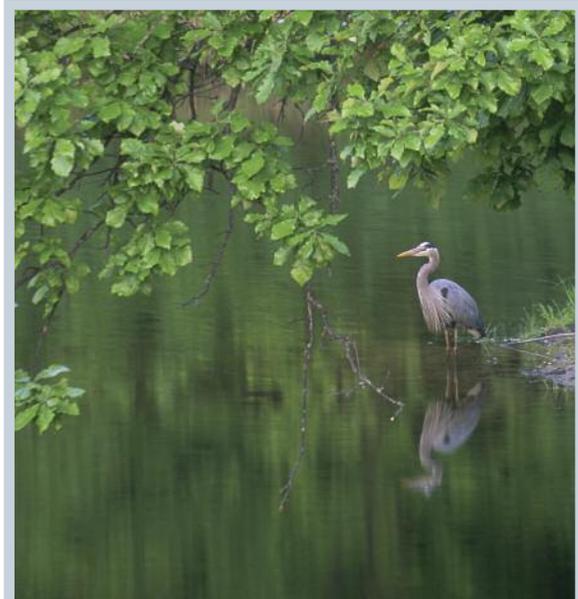
- Use volunteers/take advantage of volunteerism.
- Work with sportsmen's groups to provide incentive funds to private landowners for conservation easements that protect fish and wildlife habitat and specific recreation opportunities.
- Work together for common goals. Use outside organizations when appropriate for tasks.
- Find a way for organizations to work together toward common goals.
- Get a broad spectrum of people involved.
- Work with the Secretary of Tourism.

In summary, collaboration, cooperation, and partnerships—all words to describe the efforts of federal, state, and local agencies, user groups, non-profit organizations, and others to make the work each does more effective—are recognized as critical and necessary to accomplishing individual organizational missions and goals. Such group efforts need organizational recognition and institutional support to work effectively.

### Coordinated Funding and Grants for Outdoor Recreation

One theme that was consistent among each of the focus groups was the importance of grants and funding programs for the protection of open space and water resources. Many participants cited the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program as an important mechanism for protecting open space, stating that Stewardship funds have been important for leveraging other monies; without available Stewardship funds, many projects would have been impossible. Participants also discussed the importance of the Forest Legacy Project, recreation and trail grants, lake protection and river planning grants, and collaboration with the DNR to apply for external funding sources.

The following challenges may find easier solutions because many of them can be addressed internally by the DNR. Consistent responses from focus groups concerned grants and easements, specifically the participants' frustration about the decision-making and ranking process related to the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program. This program could be reviewed in light of the comments to see if changes can be made to the grant-making process. A barrier to this program is the requirement that all easements under Stewardship must grant access to the public. This prevents valuable lands from being part of the easement process.



**It is important to diversify funding opportunities and strategies as a key mechanism for outdoor recreation and open space conservation.**

Not surprisingly, because the emphasis both in successes and challenges focused on grants and funding, a group of responses also addressed this topic. All focus groups recognized the importance of diversifying funding opportunities and strategies, including grant funding, as a key mechanism to further their work for outdoor recreation and open space conservation.

Some of the strategies listed below are administrative in nature and others would need legislative involvement:

**Administrative Considerations:**

- Establish a single date for grant applications, plus an open application process as funding allows.
- Look for ways to join and leverage resources.
- More and better information about grants and funding.
- Grant resources better connected and linked together.
- Bring in a larger constituency and diverse users.

**Programmatic and External Partners:**

- Explore opportunities for bequeathment.

**Legislative Considerations:**

- Continue to use state and federal funds and explore other funding sources to purchase working forest easements on large blocks.
- Establish a state landowner fund to cover costs of conservation easement donations to land trusts.
- Provide state money for regional liaisons who promote and process easement donations.
- Plan and create a mechanism if a land trust fails.

Throughout the focus group discussions, grants and funding were a large part of the conversation. Several ideas for funding included the following:

- Better funding and more authority for Gathering Waters.
- Tap resources in the federal Farm Bill for recreation and open space.
- Sales tax and real estate transfer tax for Stewardship.
- On state income tax forms, include a line for donating a specific amount towards open space conservation.
- \$200 million bond issue for private development rights to maintain agriculture production.

Each of these ideas would need legislative action and some would be controversial.

**The Role of Education in Aid of Outdoor Recreation**

Education was recognized by all focus groups as an important and critical ingredient to aid in outdoor recreation and open space conservation. Many of the successes attributed to education were focused on the important contributions of the DNR with regard to technical assistance. Specifically, participants mentioned the assistance of the DNR in navigating the legal processes involved in easement acquisition and in working with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. Participants also mentioned the importance of DNR assistance with aquatic invasive species management.

Participants identified a lack of education across the state for open space and recreation and the need to engage citizens on the topic of open space conservation. Participants also suggested more assistance from UW-Extension to help all aspects of agriculture, including open space conservation and tourism efforts.

The education category was seen as a top priority for many of the focus groups, and several of their suggestions for the next big idea were related to education. All focus groups identified forms or topics of education. A careful examination of the responses yielded four sub-categories: audience, topics, delivery methods, and large and well-funded organized efforts.

In terms of audience, the discussions focused on whom to educate about open space conservation. Suggested audiences included youth, public officials, the legislature, farmers, and the general public.

Along with audience as a discussion point, every focus group identified educational topics. Many topics were identified that could be part of a larger effort or separate efforts from a variety of organizations, partnerships, and collaborations. Topics suggested included the following:

- What is open space and how much is lost to development?
- Benefits of open space and business attraction
- Generational transfer of land and knowledge
- The values of resources beyond economics
- Better understanding of ecosystem services
- Public access and activities
- Better understanding and marketing of the Stewardship program; a potential program name change to increase program accessibility
- The work and benefits of land trusts
- Clarification and promotion of the public interest
- Public rights versus private profit potential
- Comparison of the costs and benefits of open space conservation

These diverse topics would need some background research and identification of individuals with respective expertise. In addition, refinement of the topics would be necessary depending on the audience and delivery mechanism.

Many of the groups recognized a need to deliver education in a variety of methods. A key strategy recognized by all focus groups was exposure to and contact with open spaces (e.g., outside the classroom). Delivery mechanisms to accomplish this type of education included the following:

- Internships and volunteering
- Summer camps using DNR land
- Environmental education programs and staff at recreation resources
- Inclusion of open space and recreation as part of school curriculum

There are many opportunities to partner with current programs and organizations, but an organized effort would be necessary.

Finally, a small set of large and well-funded organized efforts were identified and included the following new ideas:

- Create a land use and open space institute.
- Organize an annual forest or open space event akin to farm technology days.
- Establish a confederation/conference of recreation areas' friends groups.



**There is a need to engage Wisconsin citizens on the topic of open space conservation.**

Each of these ideas would need an organized, collaborative effort and funding to make it happen.

Focus group participants identified education as critical to their success in outdoor recreation and open space conservation. The groups generated many creative ideas that will need additional consideration by both the DNR and other organizations.

### **Additional Focus Group Findings**

In addition to the successes mentioned above, focus group participants also cited the important contribution of local comprehensive planning efforts (e.g., the identification of existing and potential recreation corridors in southeast Wisconsin county forest plans), as well as extension work such as the Ultimate Land-Use Tour and the Wisconsin Woodland Owners' Association Field Days, which often include participation from the DNR.

Many of the challenges discussed by the groups have no short-term solutions. Other challenges have more direct and simple solutions that can be addressed more easily. First, the most difficult challenges should be examined. Consistent responses within the focus groups involved concerns about DNR staffing and funding.

Focus group participants recognized that, in addition to existing grant opportunities, there is an array of other funding programs and opportunities. Rather than establishing new programs, the State should work toward identifying and promoting these existing programs. Other responses in this category emphasized a diversification of open space and recreation plans. These ideas suggest eliminating the requirement that specific recreation be available based on state land type (e.g., promote agriculture on non-agricultural land) and encouraging and supporting small projects.

Many groups discussed green infrastructure as a component of the big ideas discussion. Suggestions from this discussion are listed below in order of increasing implementation difficulty:

- Modify engineering standards, i.e. to use renewable energy or recycled material, where appropriate at connecting trails under/across highways.
- Increase and improve riverway and lake frontage trails.
- Promote greenbelts and green networks around and between cities.

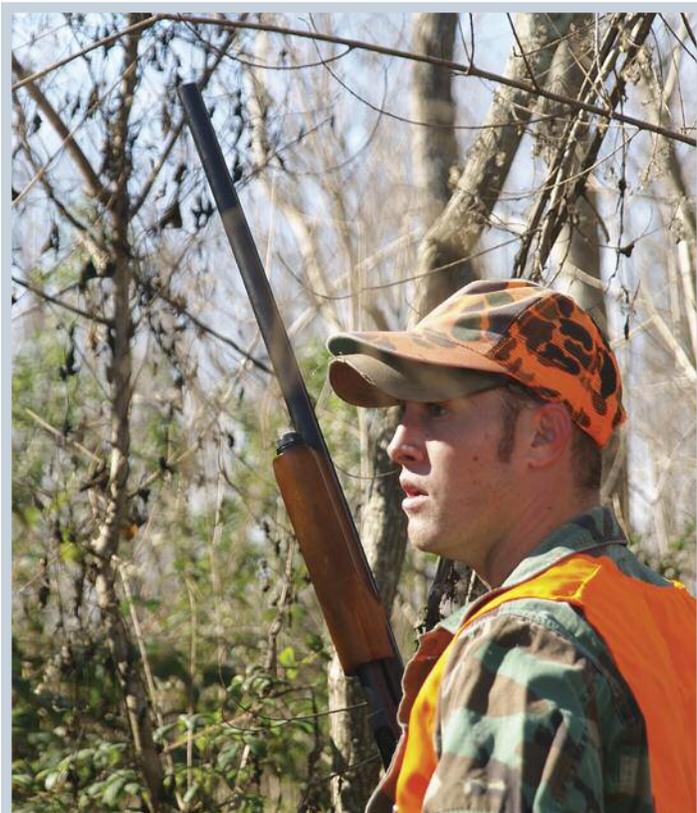
Other ideas that needed large, coordinated efforts but did not have widespread support within the focus groups included the following:

- Privatize recreation activities on public land.
- Develop a growth management board.

Finally, research was suggested as a tool to help both educational and funding efforts. These research activities included the following:

- Quantify economic benefit of green space.
- Conduct a statewide study on potential land for hunting and fishing, and develop these lands as a focus of land trusts.
- Identify and rectify park deserts.

This section provided ideas from the focus groups that did not fit neatly into the collaboration, grants and funding, and education categories. Besides current laws (e.g., comprehensive planning), past programs (e.g., Ultimate Land Use Tour), and current and past UW-Extension programming, it is worth noting that green infrastructure and identified research play important roles in open space conservation that provides opportunities for outdoor recreation across Wisconsin.



Research was suggested to identify potential land for hunting and fishing, and develop these lands as a focus of land trusts.

## Summary, Conclusions, and Policy Recommendations

At the beginning of the chapter, the following question was asked: How should Wisconsin connect urban and rural populations to the outdoors over the next five years and beyond? Results from focus groups suggest that there are many successes and challenges in open space recreation. Strategies and big ideas developed in these discussions will help move the conversation about open space forward in a meaningful way. Ideas generated will help Wisconsin plan for future outdoor recreation while ensuring open space conservation.

Although the focus groups consisted of stakeholders from a variety of interests and backgrounds, the themes that emerged within each of the groups were fairly consistent. Participants identified collaboration among private land-owners, non-profit groups, agricultural and industrial interests, and federal, state, and local agencies as a critical component of past successes and a necessary part of future open space planning.

In addition, focus group participants highlighted the importance of coordinated funding and grant opportunities for outdoor recreation. They did, however, indicate that the process of obtaining grants and funding presented many challenges.

Finally, groups identified the need for education in aid of outdoor recreation provision and management. Participants indicated that educational efforts should focus on a variety of stakeholders (e.g., managers, visitors, the public, and elected officials) and should be concentrated on themes such as the importance of open space; the missions and goals of multiple stakeholders (to aid in collaboration); ecological services; and the economic as well as non-economic benefits of open space protection.

### Policy Recommendations

As participants discussed the successes and challenges of protecting and managing open space for recreation, they also made multiple policy recommendations. These are outlined below under their appropriate category:

#### ■ Collaborations and Partnerships

- Address communication issues and challenges identified by the focus groups to improve present and future collaborative efforts.

#### ■ Grants and Funding

- Review and, if necessary, address the administrative challenges to grant opportunities.

# 5

## Chapter 5: Open Space Conservation – Connecting People to Outdoor Recreation Opportunities

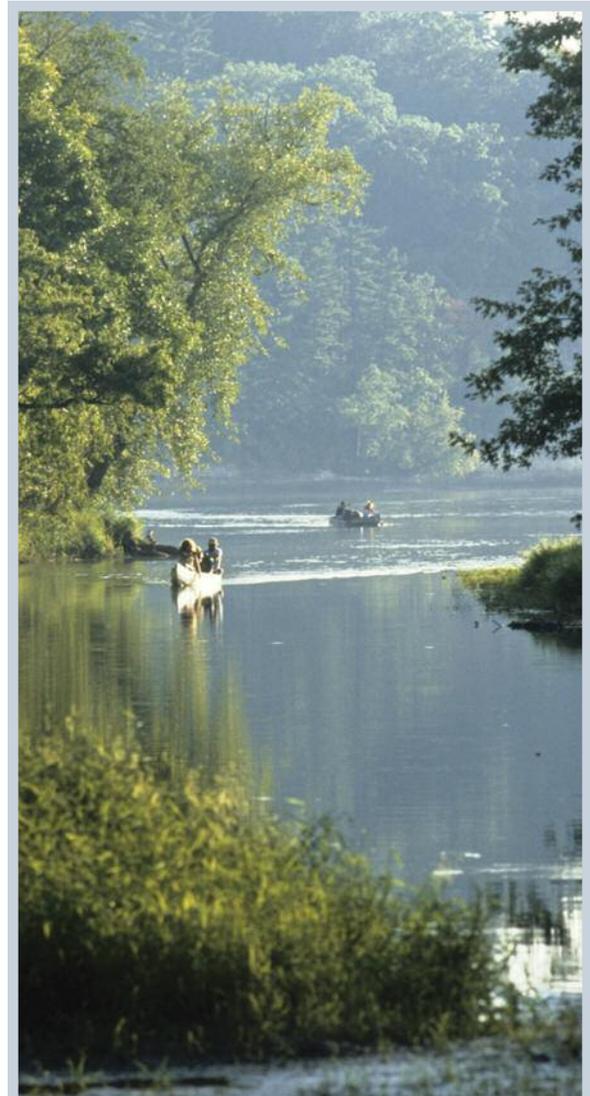
- Explore additional avenues for increasing funding opportunities through a variety of mechanisms (some of which have been identified previously).

### ■ Education

- Work with partners to address how to educate a variety of audiences about open space conservation topics using a variety of methods, especially experiential learning.
- Initiate a dialogue with partners on which ideas are possible and appropriate out of the big ideas identified. Possibilities include creating a land use and open space institute, organizing an annual wood or open space event akin to farm technology days, and establishing a confederation/conference of recreation areas' friends groups.

### ■ Other

- Explore new and existing opportunities for many types of green infrastructure with a particular focus on trails and other engineering standards.
- Work on conducting relevant research identified in this process.



**As participants discussed the successes and challenges of protecting and managing open space for recreation, they also made multiple policy recommendations.**