

Roadmap for Colorado's Outdoor Access Ecosystem

Research Findings and Recommendations

Rising Routes Alliance | July 2025



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Dear Fellow Coloradans,

I'm excited to share the inaugural *Roadmap for Colorado's Outdoor Access Ecosystem* report - an effort to understand the systemic barriers facing Colorado's outdoor providers and identify practical solutions. This research is rooted in a simple but powerful belief that everyone deserves a chance to discover their purpose, power, and place through nature. It also recognizes that every outdoor organization, whether emerging or well-established, has a vital role in advancing a more equitable and just Colorado.

This report is more than a collection of data. It's a reflection of the grit, dedication, and brilliance of more than 80 Colorado-based organizations. These organizations, often operating with limited resources and staff, show up day after day to create outdoor opportunities for communities that have long been, and continue to be, historically excluded. What the findings uncovered are clear: our state's outdoor ecosystem is full of heart, but it's fragmented. Organizations are siloed, resources are imbalanced, and many providers, especially in rural and under-resourced regions, are just trying to stay afloat. That has to change.

This report paints a fuller picture of the realities on the ground - from unstable funding and high staff turnover to transportation barriers and gear access inequities, a spectrum of issues determine who can participate in outdoor programs. It demonstrates how smaller organizations, with the greatest need for resource-sharing, often have the least capacity to build partnerships, and reveals how collaboration, while valued across sectors, often remains informal and unsustainable without dedicated infrastructure to support it. It also outlines what's possible: building financial sustainability beyond the grant cycle, investing in people through cross-sector training initiatives, removing participation barriers through transportation and gear solutions, creating collaborative systems for collective impact, and establishing a centralized hub to coordinate these efforts statewide. The solutions are out there - we need to connect the dots and build the infrastructure to support them.

We're deeply grateful to the partners and collaborators who shaped this report with us. Your insight, honesty, and trust made this work possible. And this is just the beginning. We're already working with organizations across Colorado to bring this vision to life through pilot programs, partnerships, and shared investment. My hope is that this report pushes us all to think differently, act boldly, and find new ways to support one another as we build something better together. Because when the outdoors truly belongs to everyone, all of Colorado grows stronger.

With appreciation and resolve,



Jason Swann
Founder & Executive Director, Rising Routes Alliance



Who we are

Across Colorado, outdoor organizations are creating life-changing experiences using the outdoors as a medium for connection, healing, and opportunity for all people. But too often, they are doing so within fragmented, under-resourced systems. Rising Routes exists to fill those gaps - not by duplicating what's already working on the ground, but by strengthening it. "We serve Colorado outdoor organizations and their leaders. We act as a backbone: supporting infrastructure, fostering cross-sector collaboration, and helping providers navigate the invisible systems that shape access, equity, and sustainability. With deep expertise in research, policy, and data analysis, we help guide strategic decisions that shape the evolution of Colorado's outdoor systems, so that belonging, access, opportunity, and innovation are not afterthoughts, but foundational principles. Our role is to connect existing efforts, reduce duplication, and make the work lighter for those already carrying so much. This research reflects our commitment to listening deeply to community-based providers and collaborating with cross-sector outdoor leaders across the state. It's a vital step toward building the systems and structures needed to create a more inclusive and resilient future in the outdoors.

Our Vision

A connected web of people and organizations working in harmony so that every person can discover their purpose, power, and place through nature.

Our Mission

Rising Routes strengthens the outdoor access ecosystem by supporting the people and organizations driving it forward. We develop research-informed social systems that foster formal collaboration and support providers in shaping a future where belonging is woven into every trail, summit, and shoreline.

Rising Routes Internal Contributors



Jason Swann

Jason Swann established Rising Routes in 2017 to bridge divides through the nexus of mental wellness, social justice, and environmental stewardship. A former financial professional, Jason now serves as the Intermountain West Conservation Finance Director for the Trust for Public Land and supports a wide variety of outdoor equity initiatives across Colorado.



Mary McKean

Mary McKean joined Rising Routes in 2020, bringing a broad range of field experience as an outdoor educator and program coordinator. She now serves as a Planning Specialist with the National Park Service, working to address a wide scope of interdisciplinary planning needs at diverse national park units across the U.S.



Guy Trombley

Guy Trombley brings over 25 years of experience leading research, design, and organizational transformation across sectors. At Rising Routes, Guy blends his expertise in user experience, systems thinking, and equity-driven leadership to shape innovative, people-centered solutions for the outdoors and beyond.

Rising Routes Board of Directors

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 - Chair of Board Engagement Committee
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- > **Heather Disney Dugan** - Deputy Director, Colorado Parks and Wildlife
- > **Phil Henderson** - Founder and Expedition Leader, Full Circle Expeditions
- > **Jeremy Vesbach** - Western Lands Director, Wester, Resource Advocates

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This report is the result of many conversations, shared ideas, thoughtful edits, and generous partnerships. It wouldn't exist without the people and organizations who showed up with their time, their knowledge, and their belief in what's possible. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of our collaborators at The Wilderness Society (TWS), REI Cooperative Action Fund, University of Colorado Boulder, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), the Donnell-Kay Foundation (DKF), Colorado Alliance for Environmental Education (CAEE), Keystone Policy Center, and the Colorado Next 100 Coalition. Your insights and support helped shape this work in meaningful ways.

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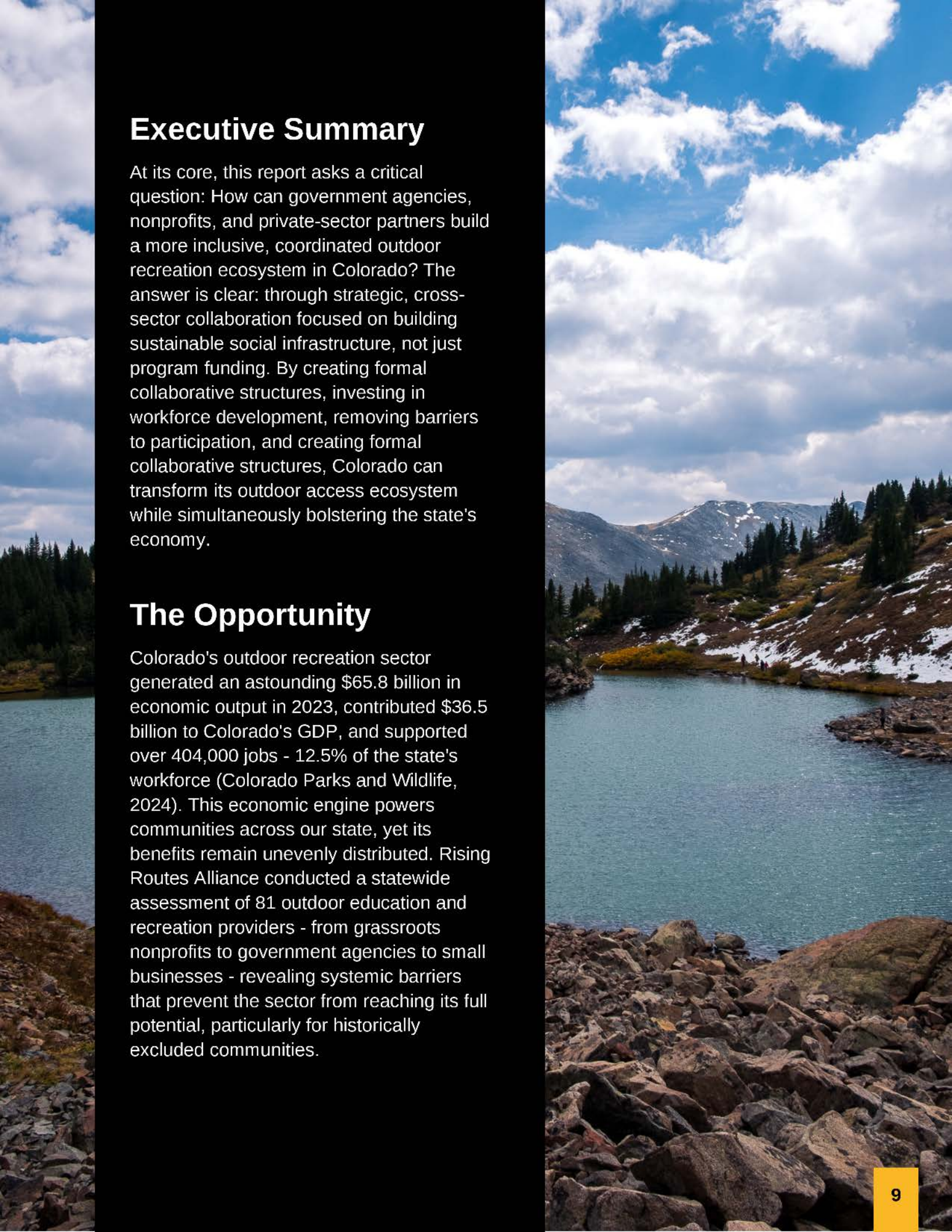
The Wilderness Society

- Gabriel Otero - Director for Equitable Funding Policy
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“

To everyone who contributed along the way - whether reviewing drafts, offering encouragement, or sharing stories from the field - thank you. This is what collective work looks like.





Executive Summary

At its core, this report asks a critical question: How can government agencies, nonprofits, and private-sector partners build a more inclusive, coordinated outdoor recreation ecosystem in Colorado? The answer is clear: through strategic, cross-sector collaboration focused on building sustainable social infrastructure, not just program funding. By creating formal collaborative structures, investing in workforce development, removing barriers to participation, and creating formal collaborative structures, Colorado can transform its outdoor access ecosystem while simultaneously bolstering the state's economy.

The Opportunity

Colorado's outdoor recreation sector generated an astounding \$65.8 billion in economic output in 2023, contributed \$36.5 billion to Colorado's GDP, and supported over 404,000 jobs - 12.5% of the state's workforce (Colorado Parks and Wildlife, 2024). This economic engine powers communities across our state, yet its benefits remain unevenly distributed. Rising Routes Alliance conducted a statewide assessment of 81 outdoor education and recreation providers - from grassroots nonprofits to government agencies to small businesses - revealing systemic barriers that prevent the sector from reaching its full potential, particularly for historically excluded communities.

Key Findings: Four Systemic Barriers

Our research found four interconnected barriers that disproportionately impact organizations serving historically excluded communities:

1

Financial Instability: Funding remains the most persistent challenge, with geographic disparities showing Front Range organizations maintaining more balanced revenue portfolios while Western Slope and Eastern Plains providers depend heavily on unpredictable grants. This instability directly impacts program quality and community reach.

2

Workforce Development: Leadership training emerges as the highest priority across all regions, yet nonprofits serving diverse populations face the greatest barriers to accessing professional development due to unstable funding and high staff turnover.

3

Physical Access Barriers: Transportation challenges disproportionately affect rural and low-income populations, while 30% of providers rely on unpredictable gear donations instead of sustainable systems. These barriers systematically exclude participants based on resource access rather than interest.

4

Fragmented Collaboration: Despite examples of partnership, Colorado lacks the connective infrastructure needed to formalize, sustain, and scale coordination statewide. Most collaborations remain informal and proximity-based - leading to not just challenges but missed opportunities. Colorado's outdoor organizations demonstrate remarkable resilience and innovation even as they navigate systems that weren't designed to support them - especially those serving rural, low-income, and BIPOC communities.

Strategic Recommendations: From Fragmentation to Coordination

Based on our data analysis and cross-sector input, we propose four transformative strategies:

1

Build financial sustainability beyond the grant cycle. Implement revenue diversification initiatives tailored to organizational type and region; redesign grant making to prioritize multi-year, flexible funding with simplified applications; and establish regional financial training hubs that build long-term resilience over short-term survival.

2

Invest in people as essential infrastructure. Create a coordinated professional development system with cross-sector training exchanges; develop seasonal to permanent employment pathways to reduce the annual turnover rate; One of the biggest barriers is to serve underrepresented kids and families to provide transportation and establish leadership incubators specifically designed for BIPOC, rural, and emerging leaders to ensure the sector reflects the communities it serves.

3

Eliminate participation barriers through systems change. Launch regional transportation cooperatives connecting communities to outdoor spaces; establish a statewide network of gear libraries with shared acquisition, maintenance, and distribution systems; and implement community-centered outreach strategies that reflect local cultural contexts and build authentic trust.

4

Create collaborative infrastructures for collective impact. Streamline administrative requirements across funding sources; establishing the regional coordination networks aligned with state priorities; and invest in shared physical resources (vehicles, equipment, facilities) to maximize efficiency and resource utilization.

*To integrate these strategies, we propose establishing a **Centralized Collaboration Hub for Outdoor Education and Recreation** - a backbone organization providing coherence to Colorado's fragmented outdoor access ecosystem through regional networks, shared resources, and coordinated advocacy.*

Immediate Action Steps

Rising Routes has already initiated three foundational projects:

1

An **Interactive Web Map** launching in Fall 2025 that will connect communities to opportunities, reveal service gaps, and facilitate resource-sharing across Colorado.

2

The **Colorado PEAK Accelerator**, co-founded by Rising Routes, AYA Foundation, and Full Circle Expeditions, is a 12-month entrepreneurship program that will provide outdoor businesses and nonprofits with industry-specific training, expansion capital, and connections to outdoor industry partners, aiming to build a more diverse and resilient outdoor economy.

3

A formal **Statewide Advocacy Coalition** representing diverse regions, sectors, and communities is in development, to ensure that the priorities of outdoor recreation and education providers are reflected in policy and funding decisions.

This is not just an equity issue, it's an economic imperative. With 88% of Colorado's projected population growth concentrated along the Front Range by 2050 (Colorado State Demography Office, 2023), demand for equitable outdoor access will only intensify.

By implementing these recommendations through coordinated, strategic action, Colorado can transform its outdoor access ecosystem from a collection of under-resourced programs to a coherent, sustainable system. A collaborative approach can serve all residents and ensure that the economic, health, and social benefits of the outdoors are available to every Coloradan, not just those with resources and privilege.

How You Can Help

If you're a funder, policymaker, agency partner, or community leader - this work needs you.

- Invest in social infrastructure, not just programs
- Support rural and small organizations with flexible funding
- Empower collaboration by funding the systems that make it possible
- Partner with Rising Routes to strengthen the ecosystem



***The outdoors belong to everyone.
Together, we can make that promise real.***



Introduction

The Future of Colorado's Outdoors: Economy, Equity, and Opportunity

Colorado's magnificent landscapes are not just the backdrop to our state identity, but the engine of our economic future. The outdoor recreation industry generated a staggering \$65.8 billion in economic output in 2023, contributing \$36.5 billion to Colorado's GDP and supporting more than 404,000 jobs that represent 12.5% of our workforce (Colorado Parks and Wildlife, 2024). This economic powerhouse drives prosperity across our state, with Coloradans and visitors spending an unprecedented \$52.1 billion on outdoor recreation in a single year (Colorado Parks and Wildlife, 2024).

Yet a critical gap exists between this thriving economic sector and the support systems needed to sustain it. Our statewide assessment of 81 outdoor education and recreation providers reveals an industry at a crossroads: rich with purpose and innovation, but hampered by fragmented systems that limit potential, particularly for those serving historically excluded communities.

Colorado's Outdoor Economy at a Glance

Colorado's outdoors aren't just a way of life - they're a major economic engine.

- \$65.8 billion in economic output
- \$36.5 billion in Gross Domestic Product (8.5% of the state's total GDP)
- \$11.2 billion in tax revenue (local, state, and federal)
- 404,000 jobs statewide, making up 12.5% of the workforce
- \$52.1 billion in consumer spending on outdoor recreation
- \$29.6 billion of that spending came from the Front Range alone

Source: 2025–2029 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)

As Colorado faces transformative demographic shifts - with the Front Range projected to absorb 88% of the state's population growth by 2050 - the demand for equitable, sustainable outdoor access will only intensify (Colorado Parks and Wildlife, 2024). This isn't merely about maintaining economic growth; it's about ensuring that the benefits of this prosperity reach every corner of our state and every Colorado resident, regardless of geography, income, or background.

The nonprofits, government agencies, and small businesses at the frontlines of outdoor access are being asked to do more with less. In rural communities, these challenges are magnified by inadequate transportation, outdated equipment, and inconsistent funding streams. Without immediate, coordinated action to strengthen the infrastructure supporting these providers, Colorado risks a widening gap between those who can access the outdoors and those who cannot.

By aligning with priorities in the 2025-2029 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, our recommendations provide a blueprint for investment to transform Colorado's outdoor recreation ecosystem from a collection of under-resourced programs to a coordinated, sustainable system that truly serves all Coloradans.

The question before us is clear: How can government agencies, nonprofits, and private - sector partners work together to build a more inclusive, coordinated, and resilient outdoor recreation ecosystem in Colorado?

Approach & Methodology

Our research followed an inductive, iterative, and inclusive process centered on the experiences of outdoor recreation and education providers across Colorado. We sought to gather quantitative and qualitative data from organizations serving historically underrepresented communities - defined as groups underrepresented regarding race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical ability, income level, or rural location.

Mixed-Methods Survey Development, Distribution, & Analysis

We employed a mixed-methods organizational assessment survey as our primary data collection tool, combining quantitative metrics with qualitative insights to develop a nuanced understanding of the industry's challenges and opportunities. The data collection, analysis, and initial reporting were led by a team of graduate student consultants and faculty from the University of Colorado Boulder's Masters of the Environment program.



Research Process

- **Survey Development** - We created a tailored survey instrument, which was benchmarked against broader multi-state outdoor recreation and education surveys to ensure alignment with national trends while addressing Colorado's unique landscape (The State of A Landscape Analysis of Programs and Providers, Colorado Alliance for Environmental Education, www.caee.org)
- **Partner Engagement** - The survey was refined through partner engagement with key stakeholders including Colorado Parks and Wildlife, the Outdoor Equity Grant Program, Great Outdoors Colorado, the Colorado Association for Environmental Education, and The Wilderness Society. Their input ensured the tool was inclusive and reflected field realities and priorities.
- **Sample Selection** - We built a comprehensive database combining provider lists from multiple networks to ensure representation across organization size, type, and geographic location throughout Colorado.
- **Pilot Testing** - Select partner organizations participated in a test phase to evaluate the survey's effectiveness and refine its language, content, and delivery for maximum clarity and accessibility.
- **Data Collection** - The finalized survey was distributed to over 400 director-level leaders statewide. After rigorous validation, 81 complete and verified responses were analyzed, representing a diverse cross-section of nonprofit, government, and for-profit organizations.
- **Analysis Approach** - We used complementary analytical tools: Qualtrics for quantitative data analysis and Dedoose for qualitative coding and thematic analysis.

This collaborative, cross-sector research process not only generated valuable data, but also strengthened relationships and fostered shared understanding across Colorado's outdoor recreation and education landscape.



Demographics of Respondent Organizations -

This section analyzes the characteristics of the 81 executive-level responses to our survey, providing insight into Colorado's outdoor recreation and education organizations.

Geographic and Sector Distribution

Respondent organizations were classified using CPW's three statistical categories: government, for-profit, and nonprofit. Responses were fairly evenly distributed across these sectors, with government agencies slightly more represented.

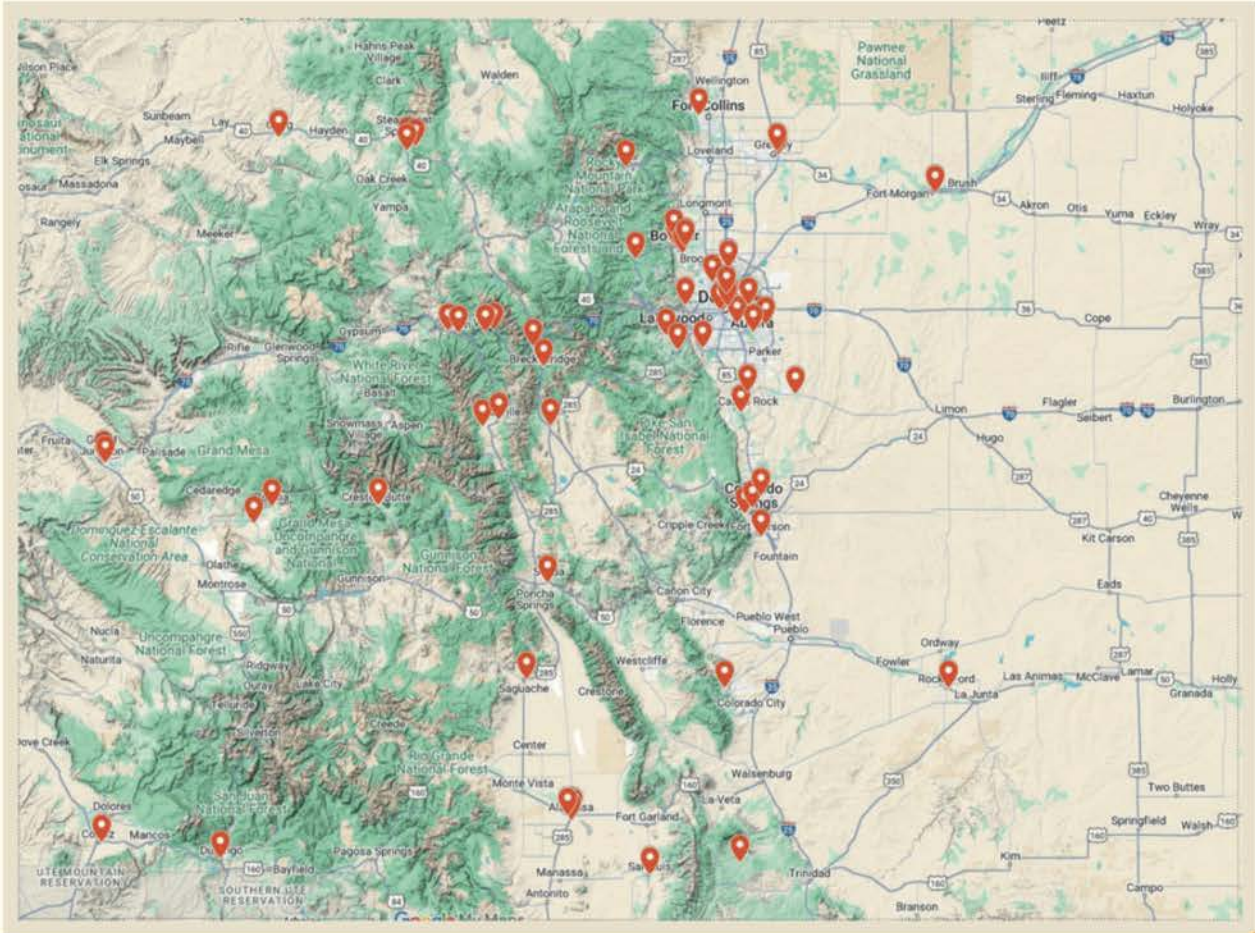


Figure 1.1 While respondents' physical locations spanned the state, the distribution reflected Colorado's population centers: Front Range (62%), Western Slope (24%), and Eastern Plains (14%). Notably, 25 providers reported serving multiple regions, indicating broader statewide reach beyond their physical locations.

Demographics and Identity

Colorado's outdoor recreation and education providers are successfully reaching a wide range of historically marginalized groups, including racially and ethnically diverse communities, LGBTQIA2S+ individuals, low-income populations, immigrants, and people with disabilities. This represents significant progress toward inclusion, especially considering that the 2024 Outdoor Participation Trends Report indicates the national outdoor participant base remains predominantly White (69.7%), with Hispanic and Black Americans underrepresented (Outdoor Industry Association, 2024).

Colorado providers show particular strength in reaching unhoused individuals, immigrant communities, and rural populations - demonstrating a commitment to addressing systemic barriers and ensuring all communities can access the health, educational, and social benefits of outdoor experiences.

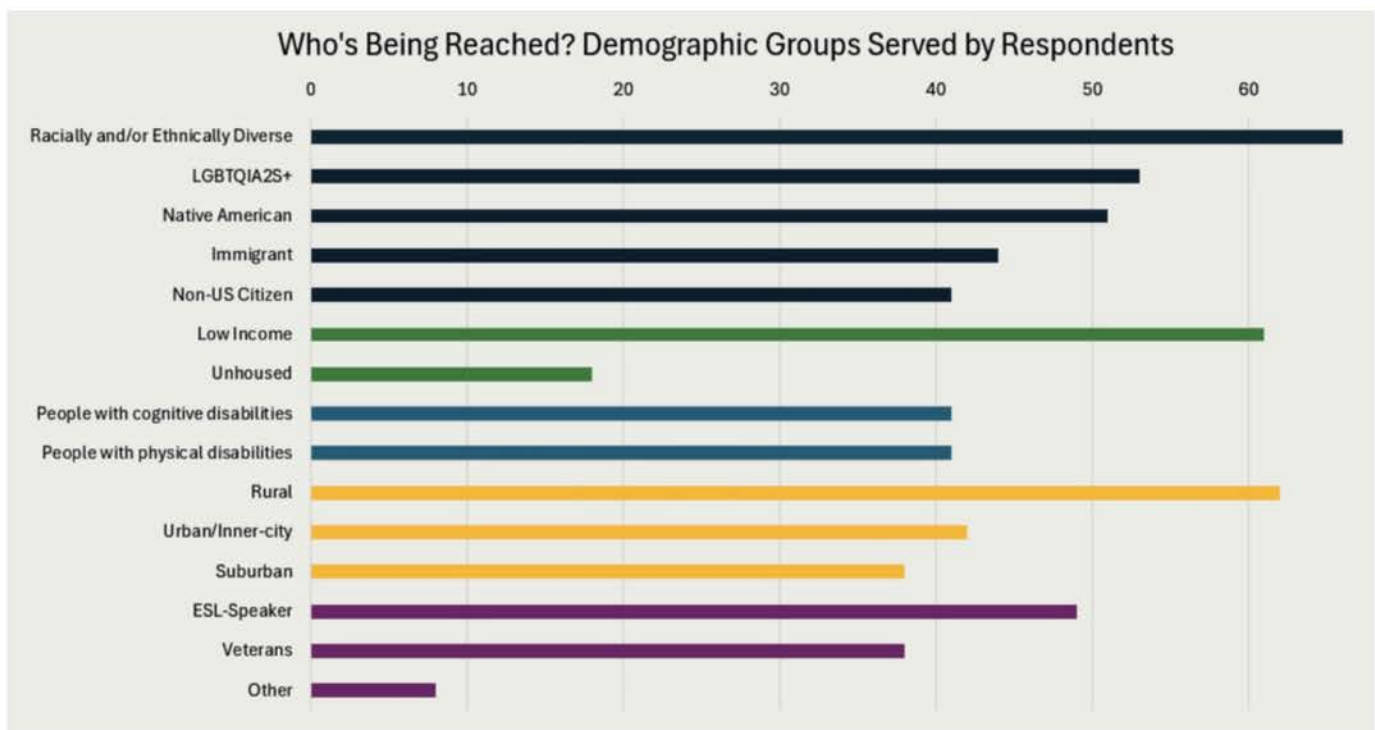


Figure 1.2 Demographic Groups Served by Respondents

Age Range Diversity

With the state facing a significant aging shift while needing to cultivate environmental stewardship values in younger generations, outdoor programs serving all age ranges provide essential infrastructure for public health and economic resilience. As population growth increasingly concentrates in the Front Range (projected to account for 88% of state growth through 2050), maintaining equitable outdoor access across both urban and rural areas will be critical for balanced recreation opportunities in a changing Colorado (Colorado State Demography Office, 2023).

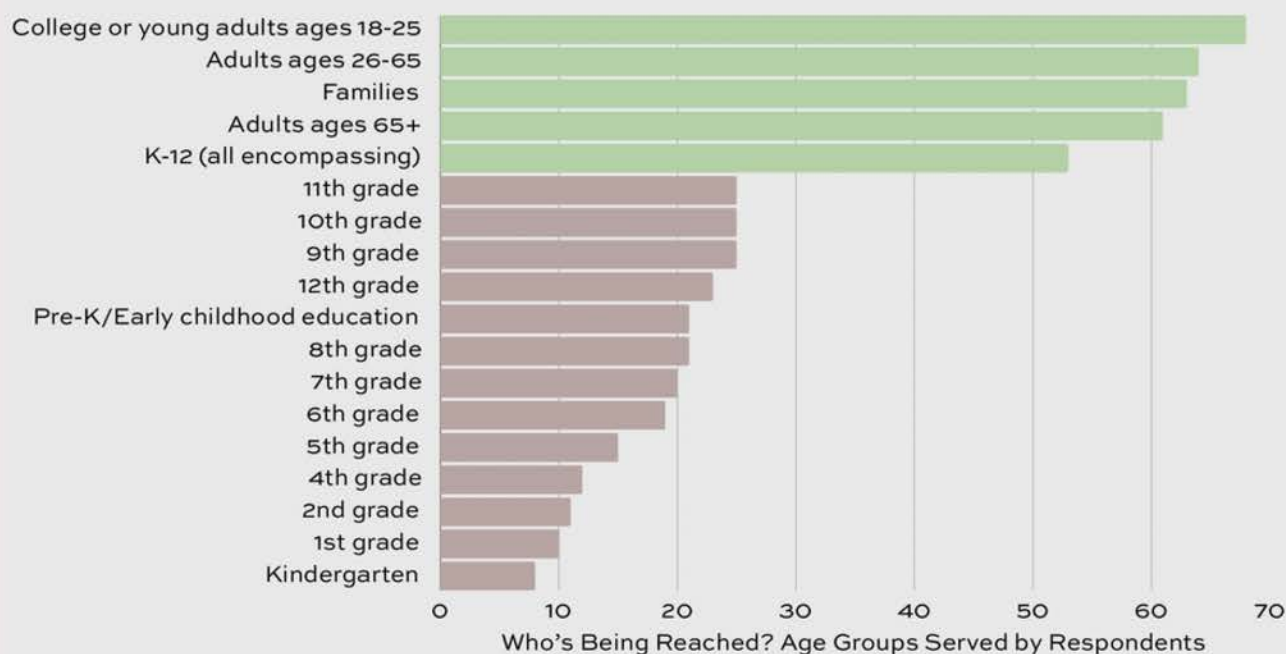


Figure 1.3 Providers reported serving the full spectrum of age groups, from young children through seniors. This comprehensive age engagement is strategically important given Colorado's demographic trajectory: In 2022-2023, the state experienced its slowest population growth since the late 1980s and is currently undergoing a significant aging shift, with 37 of 64 counties now experiencing natural population decrease (Colorado Parks and Wildlife, 2024).

Outdoor Activities

Rank	Activity	% of Respondents
1	Hiking or Walking	70%
2	Camping	67%
3	Wildlife Viewing	65%
4	Fishing or Boating	61%
5	Outdoor Sports	59%
6	Indoor Activities	52%
7	Environmental Education	52%
8	Adventure Sports	44%
9	Agriculture-Based Activities	32%
10	Local Attractions (e.g. ice skating rink)	31%
11	Schoolyard-based Activities	30%
12	Winter Sports	29%
13	Gardening / Horticulture	26%

Figure 1.4 The activities most frequently offered by Colorado outdoor providers were hiking/walking (70%), camping (67%), and wildlife viewing (65%). These responses align directly with public preferences identified in the Colorado SCORP 2024 Outdoor Recreation Survey, which found walking (84%), hiking (61%), wildlife viewing (38%), and tent camping (28%) among Coloradans' top 10 recreational activities (Colorado Parks and Wildlife, 2024).

This alignment between provider offerings and public preferences means outdoor organizations are effectively meeting Coloradans' needs through accessible, nature-based experiences. By emphasizing lower-cost activities like hiking and wildlife viewing, providers help overcome common barriers while supporting inclusion goals.

This approach aligns with public priorities for investment in the operation and maintenance of existing areas (60%) and enhanced wildlife viewing opportunities (42%), positioning outdoor programs to continue supporting public health, environmental stewardship, and community wellbeing across diverse populations (Colorado Parks and Wildlife, 2024).





Key Findings

Our research reveals that Colorado's outdoor access ecosystem operates with abundant purpose but constrained capacity.

Providers consistently achieve remarkable community impact despite working with limited resources, rising service demands, and fragmented systems that often impede rather than enable collaboration. From small rural nonprofits to government agencies and for-profit entities, organizations face shared structural barriers that limit their ability to deliver consistent, high-quality programming, especially to historically underrepresented communities.

The survey of 81 organizations reveals different primary challenges depending on organizational type:

Organizational Type	Primary Challenge
Small Nonprofits	Funding constraints limiting program growth and accelerating high staff turnover
Mid-Sized Nonprofits	Regulatory or legal barriers restricting expansion
Government Entities	Bureaucratic hurdles delaying project execution
For-Profits	Outreach difficulties engaging underrepresented communities
Large-Budget Organizations	Sustainability concerns related to long-term grant access



This section examines four interconnected challenge areas that shape Colorado's outdoor access landscape:

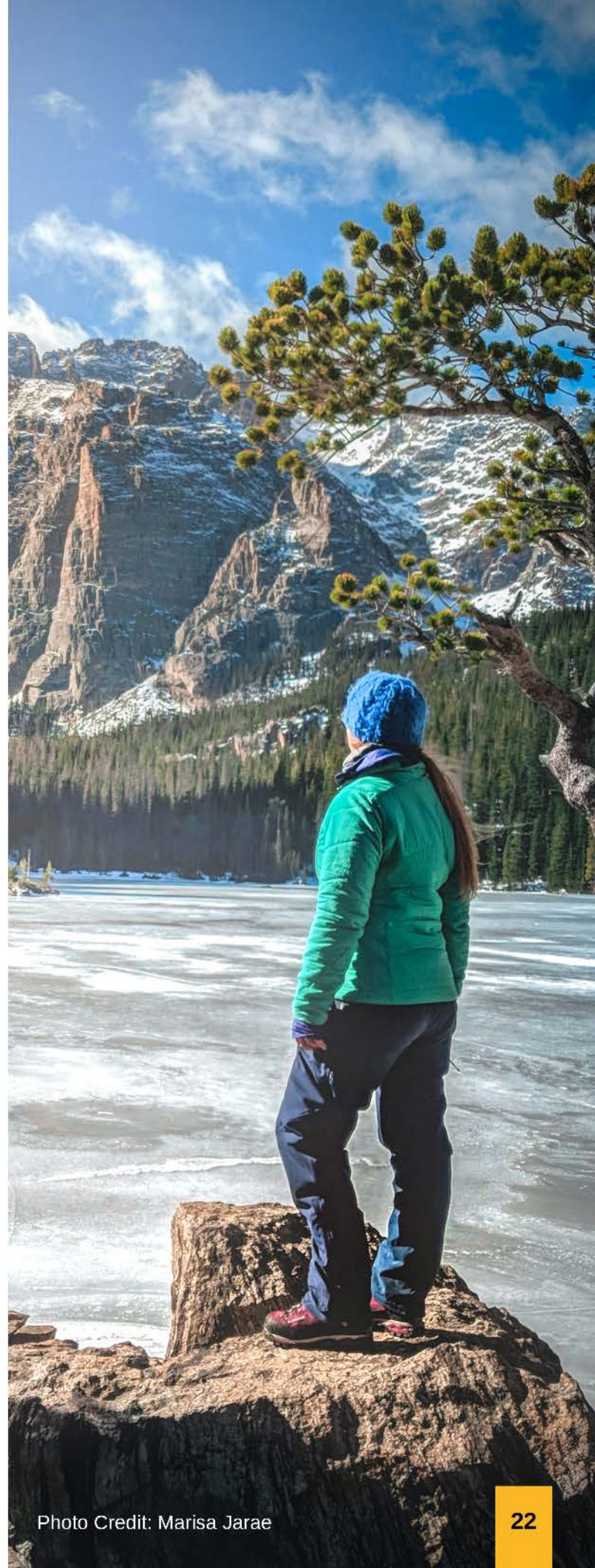
Funding Instability and Structural Inequities - How financial constraints create cascading effects on program delivery, staffing, and sustainability

Workforce Development and Training Limitations - Where capacity gaps exist in leadership, technical skills, and equity-centered practices

Physical Access Barriers - How transportation, gear, and infrastructure disparities determine who can participate and where

Collaboration Infrastructure - Why partnerships remain informal and fragmented despite strong interest in working together

By understanding these barriers not as isolated organizational challenges but as symptoms of deeper systemic issues, we can identify strategic opportunities for investment and coordination that would strengthen the entire outdoor access ecosystem.

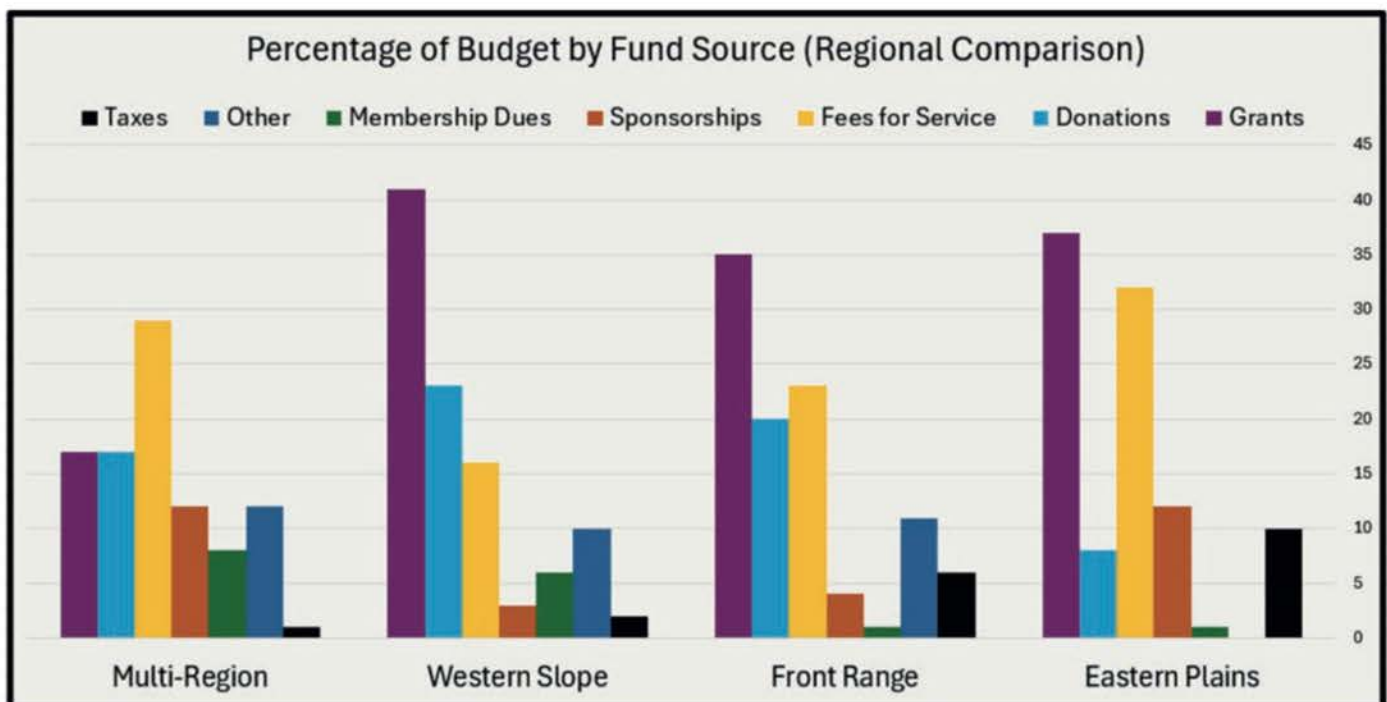


Funding Instability & Structural Inequities

Across Colorado's outdoor recreation and education sector, funding remains a persistent challenge that transcends organization size, region, and mission. Financial instability, driven by inconsistent grant cycles and limited access to flexible revenue streams, creates structural inequities that ripple through the entire ecosystem of outdoor access. The financial landscape for outdoor providers shows pronounced disparities that affect service delivery and long-term viability.

Geographic disparities are substantial

Organizations serving multiple regions maintain more balanced revenue streams (with higher percentages from fees for service), while regionally focused organizations - especially on the Western Slope and Eastern Plains - rely more heavily on grants, donations and fees to sustain operations. While Front Range organizations generally report more diversified funding, rural providers often face limited access to flexible or multi-year funding sources.



Funding diversification builds resilience

Organizations with varied funding streams - including fees for service, donations, and public support - report greater financial stability and operational flexibility, enabling more consistent service delivery and innovation.

Grant dependent organizations face compounded challenges

Nonprofits relying primarily on project-based grants experience higher financial constraints, greater administrative burden, and significant difficulty maintaining consistent staffing, gear availability, and program quality.

Funding Gap Analysis by Sector

- Nonprofits: More financial constraints and staffing shortages.
- For-profits: Fewer financial issues, but greater infrastructure barriers (access to equipment, permitting, transportation).
- Schools and donation-dependent organizations: More challenges with accessibility, inclusion, and outdoor gear access.

Funding instability doesn't just affect program delivery - it undermines the entire ecosystem of outdoor access by limiting who can participate, what experiences are offered, and which communities are served.

Workforce Development and Training Limitations

Survey results reveal that while training needs vary by region and organizational type, there are consistent themes across the field - particularly around technical certifications and training in leadership, safety, and equity. These findings offer an opportunity to tailor regional and sector-specific capacity-building efforts.

Organizations often serve multiple regions. Among the 81 respondents in the study, 45 providers serve the Front Range, 47 providers serve the Western Slope, and 15 providers serve the Eastern Plains. For this analysis, providers serving multiple regions were counted once in each region they serve, allowing for a more complete understanding of regional training needs.

Regional training disparities are pronounced

Front Range organizations report the highest need for Leadership & Management training (95%), while the Eastern Plains show an 80% response rate and the Westerns Slope comes in at 66%.

Training Area Front	Range	Western Slope	Eastern Plains
Leadership & Management	96% (43 of 45)	96% (43 of 45)	96% (43 of 45)
Outdoor Education & Safety	60% (27 of 45)	60% (27 of 45)	60% (27 of 45)
Technical Skills & Certification	60% (27 of 45)	60% (27 of 45)	60% (27 of 45)
Environmental Education	27% (12 of 45)	27% (12 of 45)	27% (12 of 45)
Community Engagement	20% (9 of 45)	20% (9 of 45)	20% (9 of 45)

Sector-specific training priorities differ substantially:

Government Agencies

- **Top Priorities: Leadership development, outdoor safety, policy compliance, and risk management training.**
- Increasingly interested in systemic DEI work, particularly embedding equity into policies - though often approached from structural rather than relational perspectives
- With potential shifts in federal grant requirements under the new administration, agencies may soon face challenges navigating changing compliance frameworks

For-Profit Organizations

- **Top Priorities: Leadership development, professional certifications, and technical expertise.**
- Training reflects customer service and quality assurance - building professionalism and operational excellence
- Rarely pursue DEI or community engagement training, as their revenue model relies primarily on earned income rather than community partnership

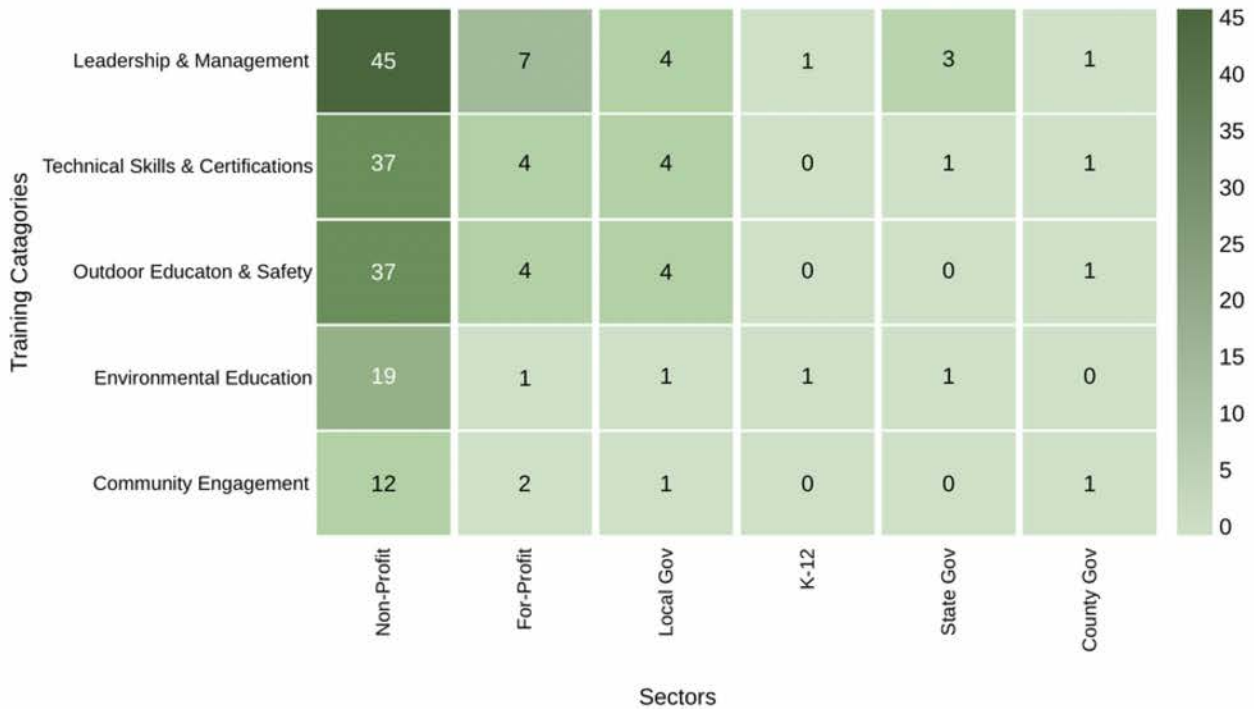
Nonprofit Organizations

- **Top Priorities: Leadership development, technical assistance (administrative skills, budgeting and accounting, grant writing), and compliance.**
- Nonprofits often serve on the front lines of access and inclusion, requiring a wider range of training, not just to run programs, but to build trust, sustain funding and navigate regulatory systems.
- Fund development training, especially grant writing and donor cultivation, is critical. These skills help organizations secure the resources they need to operate consistently, especially when base funding is unstable or tied to short-term cycles.
- Despite the high demand, training access remains limited by unstable funding, high staff turnover, and administrative capacity that is stretched too thin for professional development.





Training Needs by Sector



Consistent funding sources to keep staff. [It's] hard to find people of color who are certified in wildlife, first aid, and water sports to be adventure guides. [We] need funding to pay for training and need funding to keep them hired long term."

- Nonprofit Provider with a very small budget from Suburb of Denver



Nonprofits serve on the front lines of outdoor access and inclusion, requiring training to build trust, secure funding, and navigate regulatory systems - yet professional development remains a luxury they simply can't afford amid high turnover and relentless short-term funding cycles."

- Jason Swann, Executive Director, Rising Routes Alliance



Physical Access Barriers

Transportation, Gear, and Infrastructure

Colorado's outdoor education and recreation providers operate in a wide range of settings - from neighborhood parks and public lands to ski resorts and private retreat centers. However, the ability to access high-quality environments, reliable transportation, and appropriate gear varies dramatically across organizations.

Location Access Disparities

Our analysis reveals that physical program locations follow distinct patterns by sector and resources:

- Nonprofits most commonly operate in local parks, public lands, and publicly accessible green spaces - typically the most accessible and affordable options.
- Government agencies primarily utilize public and state-managed lands and conservation areas.
- For-profits report higher usage of privately-owned land, specialized facilities like adventure parks, and premium environments such as ski resorts.

These sector-based patterns mirror broader resource inequities, where program quality and environmental diversity often correlate with an organization's funding structure. This creates a tiered system of outdoor access that reflects each organization's financial capacity and mission priorities.

Importantly, these provider patterns align closely with public recreation habits. According to the Colorado SCORP 2024 Outdoor Recreation Survey, 64% of Coloradans recreate in neighborhood parks, trails, and open spaces, and 48% use local parks and recreation areas (Colorado Parks and Wildlife, 2024). This mirrors our findings that providers most frequently operate in local parks (70%), public lands (67%), and state parks (65%). This alignment suggests that outdoor programs are successfully meeting Coloradans where they already recreate - in accessible, close-to-home spaces that serve the broadest population.



Most Frequently Used Program Locations by Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Education Providers

Rank Location Type	% of Respondents
Local parks, playgrounds, trails, paths, neighborhoods	70%
Public Land (NPS, USFS, BLM)	67%
State land (State parks, recreation areas, and wildlife areas)	65%
Lakes, reservoirs, rivers, streams	61%
County open space	59%
Indoor facilities (e.g. community center or museum)	52%
Privately owned land	44%
Farm or ranch	32%
Local attractions (e.g. ice skating rink, tennis court, etc.)	31%
Community schoolyards	30%
Ski Resort	29%
Garden or greenhouse	26%
In-Office	18%

Budget-Based Differences in Location Use

Access to outdoor settings varies significantly based on an organization's financial resources. These differences shape both the types of environments available for programming and the experiences they can offer participants.

Smaller-budget organizations primarily operate in more accessible and affordable locations:

- Community-based settings like public parks and playgrounds
- Local schoolyards
- Indoor community facilities
- Public lands that are free or low-cost to access

Larger-budget organizations show greater capacity to utilize resource-intensive environments:

- Ski resorts
- Privately owned land
- Nature-based retreat centers
- Locations that may require special permits or fees

This disparity raises important questions about infrastructure equity and access, as the locations available to an organization can significantly impact the quality and variety of outdoor experiences they can offer to participants.

Given that a majority of Colorado residents (60%) prioritize the maintenance of existing outdoor areas (Colorado Parks and Wildlife, 2024), the heavy use of neighborhood-based and public lands facilities by outdoor recreation and education providers not only reflects demand but also reinforces the need for equitable investment in these critical community spaces.



Administrative Barriers to Land Access

- Mid-sized nonprofits and government agencies are disproportionately affected
- Land-use restrictions create particular barriers on the Western Slope
- Bureaucratic processes delay program implementation, especially for smaller organizations serving under-resourced communities

These administrative barriers not only restrict program options but also drain limited staff time and resources.

Transportation Limitations

Reliable transportation remains one of the most persistent barriers to outdoor access:

- Low-income and remote populations are especially affected, with transportation challenges particularly acute in rural regions
- Small organizations frequently lack vehicles with trailers to transport both gear and participants to recreation sites
- Low-income participants often lack personal vehicle access or cannot afford transportation costs

This fundamental access issue prevents participation regardless of interest level or program quality. For many providers, transportation constraints directly determine who can participate and what experiences they can offer, creating significant equity gaps in outdoor access.

Gear Access Inequities

Equipment access follows similar resource patterns:

- 30% of providers rely primarily on donations for gear and equipment, creating a dependency on inconsistent sources that arrive in varying conditions - from new to used and repaired
- Small organizations often lack storage facilities, maintenance capacity, and replacement budgets
- Rural providers report outdated or insufficient gear, limiting program quality and safety

These physical barriers compound one another, creating a system where access to outdoor experiences remains predictably uneven - reinforcing rather than reducing existing inequities across Colorado's communities.

Community outreach challenges compound physical barriers, with for-profits and rural organizations particularly struggling to connect with underrepresented populations due to limited staff capacity, language barriers, and lack of representation in leadership.

These barriers systematically exclude individuals from outdoor experiences based on resource access rather than interest, creating a participation gap that reinforces existing social and economic inequities.

Collaboration Infrastructure and Systems Gaps

Colorado's outdoor sector values collaboration, yet current partnerships operate primarily as informal, localized connections rather than through strategic, formal systems. This fragmentation creates significant barriers to scaling impact and sharing resources effectively across the state.

Most Partnerships Are Local

Collaboration in Colorado's outdoor sector typically forms through geographic proximity or established relationships rather than coordinated networks. This locality-driven approach results in:

- Limited interregional coordination
- Restricted knowledge sharing opportunities
- Underdeveloped nonprofit-to-nonprofit collaboration despite aligned missions

Sector-Specific Collaboration Patterns

Each sector demonstrates distinct partnership behaviors:

- Nonprofits lead in co-hosted events, shared programs, and joint grant applications.
- For-profits tend to collaborate through resource-sharing (e.g., gear or space), but rarely around program design or funding.
- State and local governments partner most often around public programming, permitting, and co-hosted public events.
- K-12 schools participate sporadically, often in one-off events or short-term programs.

Budget Constraints Limit Capacity

Financial limitations significantly impact collaboration potential, especially for smaller organizations:

- While smaller organizations have the greatest need for shared infrastructure and partnerships, they possess the least capacity to initiate, coordinate, or sustain collaborative relationships
- Limited staffing and funding create barriers to meaningful engagement
- For resource-constrained organizations, collaboration represents a survival necessity rather than a strategic choice

“Because of budget cuts, we are under-resourced in key areas like having the ability to foster community and local partnerships that help create access for underrepresented populations. [We lack the] ability to scale and fund on an ongoing basis our [leadership development] pathway to employment. We need to help carry the burden of cost of our programs [to] help more youth have access to our programs. While we are working to continue to put the resources we do have into fostering relationships and building programs that reach our underrepresented populations, we continue to come upon barriers in our structures.”

- Western Slope large non-profit in a small town

Informal Networks, Fragmented Approaches

The outdoor industry across Colorado operates through loosely connected informal social systems without structured coordination:

- Organizations lack access to shared communication tools
- No central coordination platforms exist
- Limited infrastructure for professional learning exchange
- Few mechanisms for systematic resource-sharing
- Minimal support for joint strategic planning

These gaps result in inconsistent, difficult-to-scale collaboration efforts statewide.

Who Are Providers Collaborating With?

Our analysis reveals specific partnership patterns:

29% of reported collaborations involved state or federal government agencies

- These partnerships show significant reliance on public-sector anchors
- However, they are concentrated among a small number of agencies
- This reveals opportunities to expand engagement across a broader range of institutions

18% of collaborations involved local governments

- Nearly half of these partnerships occurred in rural communities
- This highlights both the essential role of local governments in outdoor access
- And demonstrates rural areas' capacity for creative, adaptive collaboration
- Rural organizations frequently share gear, space, and knowledge to overcome resource limitations

34% of collaborations were with nonprofits

- 24% with regionally focused organizations
- 10% with statewide-serving organizations
- Nearly half of regional nonprofit partnerships explicitly involved rural-serving organizations
- This reinforces the importance of supporting locally embedded groups in areas with limited infrastructure

For smaller and under-resourced organizations, collaboration represents not just a strategic advantage but an operational necessity; enabling the sharing of staff, equipment, program models, and knowledge. However, without dedicated infrastructure to support these connections, collaboration remains inconsistent, temporary, and inefficient.

Investing in regional hubs, shared digital tools, and coordination infrastructure would transform Colorado's outdoor sector by connecting isolated efforts, reducing program duplication, expanding equitable access, and building a resilient network capable of achieving statewide impact. This infrastructure investment must include direct support for smaller organizations' staffing, time, and coordination capacity to ensure truly inclusive collaboration.





Recommendations

Colorado's outdoor recreation and education sector stands at a critical intersection of purpose and potential. Our research reveals an ecosystem rich with dedicated providers creating meaningful outdoor experiences, but constrained by fragmented systems that limit their reach and sustainability. Across 81 organizations spanning the state, from rural nonprofits to government agencies to small businesses, we found consistent patterns of structural barriers that disproportionately affect those serving historically excluded communities.

The following recommendations directly address the four systemic challenges identified in our study: funding instability, workforce development gaps, physical access barriers, and fragmented collaboration. Each strategy is designed to strengthen the foundations upon which outdoor access depends - not just addressing symptoms, but improving the underlying systems that determine who can participate and how programs can thrive.

These recommendations align with priorities in Colorado's 2025-2029 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) while offering practical pathways toward a more equitable, resilient outdoor ecosystem. By investing strategically in these areas, Colorado can ensure that its \$65.8 billion outdoor economy truly benefits all residents, creating a future where access to nature's benefits is determined by interest rather than privilege.

Strengthen Funding Systems and Financial Resilience

Across Colorado, outdoor recreation and education providers are navigating financial systems that don't match the scale or significance of their work. Our research reveals that funding instability undermines every aspect of program delivery - from staff retention to program quality to equitable access.

“We are in a chicken or the egg situation with administrative staff; we need more staff to raise more money, we need more money to hire more staff. Financial sustainability isn't just about keeping the lights on. It's about retaining staff, adapting to community needs, and being able to show up consistently year after year.

- **Provider Serving Front Range and Eastern Plains with a budget of 1 to 2 million.**

“This recommendation directly aligns with SCORP's "Financial Sustainability" priority and addresses the geographic disparities our research identified, where Front Range organizations maintain more balanced revenue portfolios while Western Slope and Eastern Plains providers depend heavily on unpredictable grants.”

– **Mary McKean, Rising Routes.**

Challenge: *Many organizations rely heavily on a single income stream - often grants, fees, or donations. This increases financial risk, limits flexibility, and makes long-term planning difficult.*

Solutions:

- Develop strategic public-private partnerships where private conservation funds work in tandem with state programs like the Outdoor Equity Grant Program (OEGP), directing resources specifically to capacity-building work, addressing the critical gap where current funding primarily supports program delivery rather than the systems and structures needed for sustainability
- Support grant-dependent organizations in developing service-based revenue models (e.g., consulting, gear rentals, workshops)
- Encourage fee-based providers to explore mission-aligned grant opportunities
- Build capacity for smaller organizations to cultivate donor relationships and private sponsorships
- Expand capacity-building funding to support diversification efforts, especially for rural regions and underfunded providers
- Incentivize cross sector partnerships (e.g., nonprofit + for-profit + government agency) through collaborative funding mechanisms
- Offer technical assistance and training in budgeting, forecasting, and pricing models for nonprofits exploring earned revenue strategies

Innovative Funding Model:

A targeted public-private partnership approach could direct private foundation investments into capacity-building support that complements OEGP's programmatic focus - creating a more holistic funding ecosystem that builds organizational capacity while expanding direct services.



Grant Accessibility Reform

Challenge: *Smaller organizations, rural providers, and those serving underrepresented communities often face the greatest barriers in accessing public and private grants. Application processes are time-consuming, relationship-driven, and often favor well-established entities.*

Solutions:

- Provide grant readiness support through simplified processes, application review and funder introductions
- Expand access to state, federal, foundation, and corporate grant programs, with clearer pathways for small and first-time applicants
- Establish statewide mentor relationships between experienced grant recipients and newer organizations
- Increase the availability of multi-year funding that reduces administrative burden and supports long-term planning
- Target new and flexible funding toward regions and organizations historically underrepresented in competitive grant making

Financial Training Infrastructure

Challenge: *Even when funding opportunities exist, many organizations lack the staff time or expertise to manage them. Limited access to financial training can leave organizations vulnerable to compliance issues and underinvestment in strategic planning.*

Solutions:

- Create regional workshops on grant writing, budgeting, and financial compliance
- Establish peer learning cohorts focused on financial strategy development
- Integrate financial training into equity-centered capacity building initiatives - not just as a technical skill, but as a critical tool for sustainability
- Provide transportation subsidies or virtual options to ensure rural participation across regions
- Offer place-based funding to help cover costs of participation in training (e.g., transportation, childcare, staff time)

By addressing both immediate funding gaps and long-term financial sustainability, these strategies will help ensure that the economic benefits of outdoor recreation are more equitably distributed across communities and regions.

Invest in Workforce Development and Leadership

Behind every outdoor experience is a person making it possible - a program coordinator, an environmental educator, a land steward, a guide. Yet our research reveals significant gaps in training access, professional development, and leadership pipelines, particularly for smaller organizations, rural providers, and those serving diverse communities.



Our most valuable and often under-funded resource is our staff. We are a small organization with many staff working across multiple programs and in cross functional teams. Program specific grants make it difficult to fully fund critical salaries, and limit how quickly we can grow our team to meet the needs of our communities."

- Front Range nonprofit

These challenges aren't just staffing issues - they're structural problems that disproportionately impact rural providers, small nonprofits, and organizations serving underrepresented communities.

This recommendation directly addresses our findings on workforce development limitations and supports SCORP's priorities for Sustainable Access and Opportunity by investing in the people behind outdoor recreation and education.

Staff Training and Cross-Sector Initiatives

Challenge: Our research identified distinct training needs by sector, with 96% of Front Range providers, 66% of Western Slope providers, and 80% of Eastern Plains providers identifying leadership and management training as their top need. Yet access to quality, affordable, and culturally relevant professional development remains a shared barrier across the state.

Solutions:

- Create cross-sector professional development systems where:
 - Government partners offer compliance and safety training
 - Nonprofits provide community engagement and DEI expertise
 - For-profit entities share business strategy and earned income models
- Expand access to regional and virtual training opportunities that are place-based and tailored to organizational size
- Promote shared training calendars, reduced-cost registrations, and pooled resources across sectors and regions
- Elevate peer-led training models that build trust, cultural relevance, and community-rooted expertise



Workforce Pathways and Retention

Challenge: *Many organizations report not just a shortage of staff, but a lack of capacity to support professional growth - particularly in regions where talent pipelines are thin or short-term contracts are the norm.*

Solutions:

- Develop comprehensive, regionally adapted workforce programs tailored to the outdoor sector's unique needs that align with local community priorities and existing networks
- Establish seasonal-to-permanent employment pathways to reduce turnover and build institutional knowledge
- Fund inclusive hiring initiatives that diversify staff and leadership
- Provide leadership development training specifically designed for BIPOC, rural, and emerging leaders
- Create mentorship programs that connect experienced professionals with new entrants to the field
- Implement regular DEI, cultural competency, and trauma-informed care trainings - not as a one-time checkbox, but as part of a supportive workculture



"We need funding to pay for training and to keep them hired long term."

-Non-profit Leader

By investing systematically in the people who deliver outdoor experiences, Colorado can address critical capacity challenges while building a workforce that better reflects the full diversity of the state's population.



Remove Barriers to Participation through Infrastructure and Outreach

Our research identified three interconnected physical and social barriers that systematically limit who can access outdoor experiences in Colorado: transportation limitations, gear access inequities, and community outreach challenges. These aren't individual program deficiencies, but system-level issues that disproportionately affect rural, low-income, and historically excluded communities.

This recommendation supports SCORP's priorities around Sustainable Access and Opportunity and Stewardship, ensuring that all Coloradans - not just the most resourced - can build meaningful connections to nature.

Transportation Solutions

Challenge: Transportation remains one of the most persistent barriers to outdoor access, particularly affecting low-income and rural populations without transit infrastructure.

Solutions:

- Provide transportation subsidies, vouchers, or direct funding for travel to and from outdoor programs
- Build partnerships with local transit providers, schools, and municipalities to reduce transportation barriers

Gear and Equipment Access

Challenge: Our findings show 30% of providers rely primarily on donations for gear, creating dependency on inconsistent resources while small organizations often lack storage facilities and maintenance capacity.

Solutions:

- Establish mobile gear libraries, especially in regions without outdoor retailers
- Create low-cost rental programs that ensure quality and safety
- Partner with outdoor brands and foundations to secure bulk gear donations and long-term supply support

Community-Centered Outreach

Challenge: Many providers struggle to connect with diverse populations, especially in rural or rapidly changing communities. Survey respondents report outreach is frequently limited by staff capacity, language barriers, and lack of representation in leadership.

Solutions:

- Launch multilingual, culturally relevant marketing and communication strategies with support from community-based messengers
- Develop hyper-local engagement strategies based on community priorities and existing relationships
- Support leadership development programs that build a pipeline for diverse representation across staff, boards, and volunteers
- Expand and tailor DEI training to reflect rural, urban, and community-specific realities - not just national frameworks

By addressing these fundamental access barriers through systemic solutions rather than individual program fixes, Colorado can ensure that outdoor opportunities reflect the state's changing demographics and reach communities that have historically been excluded.

Build Collaborative Infrastructure for Collective Impact

Colorado's outdoor recreation sector is rich in creativity and community commitment, yet constrained by fragmented partnerships, outdated systems, and inequitable access to essential infrastructure.

For smaller and rural organizations especially, collaboration isn't optional - it's a lifeline. These providers depend on shared gear, space, staff, and knowledge to survive. But without intentional infrastructure to support these connections, collaborative efforts remain reactive, inconsistent, and difficult to sustain over time.

Policy shapes access at every level - not just through legislation, but through grant requirements, permitting processes, and land use regulations that determine who can access what outdoor spaces, and when. Infrastructure matters too - not just roads and vehicles, but shared resources, storage, and the physical spaces where learning takes place.

This recommendation supports SCORP's goals for Sustainable Access, Land and Water Conservation, and Financial Sustainability by advocating for systems-level changes that strengthen the outdoor recreation and education sector from the inside out.

Administrative Streamlining

Challenge: Cumbersome grant applications, complex permitting, and unclear land-use policies delay programs, discourage smaller organizations, and drain staff time especially in rural and under-resourced areas. Mid-sized nonprofits and government agencies are disproportionately affected by these administrative barriers.

Solutions:

- Simplify state and local grant application processes, particularly for small and first-time applicants
- Reduce bureaucratic barriers by advocating for clearer, more equitable permitting policies
- Partner with agencies and land managers to develop equity-focused land use guidance for outdoor education and recreation providers
- Develop collaborative efforts to create shared templates, tools, and standardized onboarding processes across agencies



Regional Networks and Collaboration Hubs

Challenge: *Despite widespread interest in collaboration, many providers operate in silos - without shared infrastructure or systems that make working together sustainable. Most collaboration happens within geographic proximity with interregional partnerships remaining rare and informal.*

Solutions:

- Create a centralized capacity-building hub with regional outreach, training, and support
- Encourage public-private partnerships to expand access to facilities, land, and logistical resources
- Fund region-specific collaboration networks that align local goals with statewide priorities
- Facilitate cross-sector learning, including peer education, resource libraries, and cross-training

Infrastructure and Resource Sharing

Challenge: *Many organizations lack access to the physical infrastructure needed for consistent, high-quality programs. This includes vehicles, gear storage, indoor facilities, and accessible outdoor sites.*

Solutions:

- Invest in vehicles, trailers, and storage to support community-based programming
- Create systems that allow nonprofits and schools to access public and private land affordably and consistently
- Develop regional capacity and resource-sharing models for equipment, facilities, and transportation
- Include organizational infrastructure needs in funding strategies, not just programmatic support

By building these collaborative systems, Colorado can reduce fragmentation, increase efficiency, and create a more coordinated approach to outdoor access statewide.



Establish a Centralized Collaboration Hub for Outdoor Recreation and Education

Colorado's outdoor access ecosystem is rich in talent, purpose, and grassroots leadership - but too often, it's held together by informal networks, time-strapped staff, and one-off partnerships. There's no single place where providers can go to find support, share resources, or work across regions and sectors with consistency.

Our research consistently revealed that while organizations value collaboration, they lack the infrastructure to sustain it. This fragmentation creates inefficiencies, duplication of efforts, and missed opportunities for collective impact.

To address this fundamental gap and accelerate our previous four core recommendations, we propose establishing a Centralized Collaboration Hub for Outdoor Education and Recreation in Colorado - a lasting, cross-sector infrastructure designed to connect service providers, funders, and agencies through shared tools, strategic guidance, and place-based support.

This Collaboration Hub would build on SCORP's vision for "Financial Sustainability" and "Sustainable Access and Opportunity," providing a structural solution to many of the sector's most persistent barriers: duplication, fragmentation, funding inequities, and capacity gaps.

Key Functions of the Collaboration Hub

1

Infrastructure and Resource Sharing

The hub should include a centralized training and technical assistance center, offering:

- Operational and programmatic support (e.g., grant writing, budgeting, evaluation)
- Administrative infrastructure assistance (e.g., fiscal sponsorship, HR, compliance)
- Mobile gear libraries to increase access for rural or underserved communities
- Peer learning networks and regional capacity-building cohorts
- Cross-sector training exchanges where for-profits, nonprofits, and government entities contribute their unique expertise

2

Regional Cross-Sector Collaboration Networks

To truly scale equity and access, the hub must anchor a statewide framework that supports regional partnerships.

- Regional networks would bring together for-profit, nonprofit, and government stakeholders
- Each network would align local and regional goals with statewide priorities
- Modeled in part after Regional Partnership Initiatives (RPIs), but specifically designed for outdoor recreation and education
- Would serve as pilots for cross-sector grant proposals, shared infrastructure investments, and joint community outreach efforts

3

Statewide Advisory Council

To ensure the hub is responsive, equitable, and community-driven, a formalized Statewide Advisory Council should guide its strategic direction.

- Composed of regional representatives from diverse sectors and geographies - including tribal, rural, and urban partners
- Ensures that policy, funding, and infrastructure decisions reflect regional realities and community priorities
- Serves as a bridge between local action and statewide vision
- Provides accountability and oversight for equitable resource distribution

Implementation Strategy

Creating effective statewide infrastructure requires thoughtful, inclusive design and gradual scaling. Our early approach recommends the following:

- **Pilot Partnerships:** Partner with 1-3 RPIs or regional entities to co-design and test the hub model before statewide implementation
- **Grant Reforms:** Re-assess existing grantmaking structures to better support collaborative and capacity-building work
- **Research and Evaluation:** Embed continuous learning into the hub model - tracking what works, where gaps remain, and how impact evolves
- **Phased Development:** Begin with core functions and expand services based on provider needs and resource availability
- **Sustainable Funding:** Develop a diversified funding model that combines public, private, and earned revenue streams

By creating this central infrastructure, Colorado can transform disconnected outdoor programs into a coordinated ecosystem that maximizes resource efficiency, reduces duplication, and ensures that all communities - regardless of geography, wealth, or demographics - can access high-quality outdoor experiences.

Foundation for Change

These recommendations provide a practical and interconnected framework for strengthening outdoor recreation, education, and access in Colorado. They focus on stabilizing funding, supporting people, removing barriers to participation, and building the infrastructure needed to sustain collaborative, equity-centered growth.

With strategic investment in the social systems that support outdoor access, we can ensure those benefits extend to all communities creating a more inclusive, resilient outdoor future for every Coloradan.







Collaborative Solutions Underway

While our comprehensive recommendation for a centralized Collaboration Hub represents a long-term solution, Rising Routes is already taking concrete steps to address these immediate needs. We're actively developing three initiatives that directly respond to the gaps identified in this research: a statewide interactive web map, a formal advocacy coalition, and the Colorado PEAK Accelerator for outdoor recreation and education providers.

These projects aren't theoretical - they're practical tools designed to strengthen connections between organizations, increase visibility of opportunities, and enable more strategic resource-sharing across Colorado's outdoor ecosystem. They represent the transition from aspiration to implementation, demonstrating what becomes possible when collaboration infrastructure receives tangible support and investment.

Interactive Web Map of Outdoor Education and Recreation Providers

Led by Rising Routes in partnership with Green Goat Maps

Our research findings revealed a critical gap in Colorado's outdoor sector: despite widespread interest in collaboration, organizations lack the tools to find and connect with each other effectively. The data showed that most partnerships form through geographic proximity or existing relationships rather than strategic alignment, with interregional connections particularly rare. This fragmentation disproportionately affects smaller and rural organizations, which our survey identified as having the greatest need for resource-sharing but the least capacity to initiate partnerships.

To address this specific challenge identified in our research, Rising Routes is developing a statewide interactive web map in partnership with Green Goat Maps. This tool is designed to bring the entire outdoor access ecosystem into view - so nonprofits, government agencies, funders, and communities can collaborate more intentionally, and more equitably.

Why a Map Matters

Seeing is connecting. When we map the ecosystem, we unlock collaboration.

What the Web Map Will Do

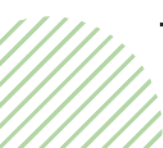
This public-facing tool will allow users to:

- Search by ZIP code, town, or region to find nearby providers
- Filter by program type, affinity group, or audience served
- View detailed organizational profiles with mission, services, contact info, and web links
- Use interactive overlays - public lands, transportation corridors, city and county boundaries - to plan programs or travel
- Explore a responsive, mobile-friendly experience built for real-world use

Who It Will Serve

This platform is designed to meet the needs of multiple stakeholders:

- Families and individuals - especially in underserved communities - can easily find trusted, relevant opportunities nearby
- Nonprofit and community-based organizations gain visibility, discover new partners, and connect across regions
- Funders and advocates can use spatial insights to target investments and understand coverage gaps
- Policy and planning leaders gain the tools to make more informed, data-driven decisions about land use, program funding, and equity strategy



This map is not a directory. It's collaborative infrastructure.



Why It Matters for Equity

It's not about interest - it's about access. This map helps remove barriers to belonging in the outdoors.

Rising Routes' Role

Rising Routes is leading the project's development - designing the platform, curating equity-driven search filters, coordinating statewide outreach, and embedding the map into a broader effort to strengthen collaborative infrastructure across Colorado.

This work is part of Rising Routes' commitment to systems change - not just filling gaps, but creating new pathways for people and organizations to work together.

“We're not just mapping organizations - we're mapping connection. When we can see the full landscape, we can collaborate more intentionally - and more equitably.”

- Jason Swann, Founder, Rising Routes



Colorado PEAK Accelerator

A strategic partnership between Rising Routes and AYA Foundation

Our research consistently highlighted financial sustainability as the most persistent challenge for outdoor organizations, particularly for small businesses and nonprofits serving historically excluded communities. The data also revealed that 79% of organizations across sectors report needing leadership and management training to operate effectively. The Colorado PEAK Accelerator directly addresses these challenges by creating a cross-sector, cross-regional network where outdoor businesses and nonprofits can build essential leadership skills, access industry mentors, and secure investment capital. By fostering collaboration across sectors, this program will develop a sustainable pipeline of organizations ready to strengthen both local economies and Colorado's position as a leader in the outdoor industry.

Developed as a partnership between Rising Routes and AYA Foundation—a Colorado-based nonprofit dedicated to economic empowerment through entrepreneurship—this initiative responds to the critical gaps our data revealed to create financially viable outdoor ventures. The 12-month entrepreneurship program combines Rising Routes' expertise in outdoor systems with the AYA Foundation's proven track record in entrepreneurship support and business mentorship for underrepresented communities.

The program's approach recognizes the complementary roles of nonprofits and small businesses in the outdoor economy: nonprofits drive participation by bringing more people into outdoor spaces, while small businesses develop the gear, services, and experiences that sustain that growth. Both can leverage their deep local connections to become key partners and suppliers for larger outdoor corporations.

Why an Accelerator Matters

Building the partnerships, connections, and financial capacity is essential for small organizations to thrive in Colorado's outdoor economy.

What the Accelerator Will Do

This intensive cohort-based program will provide:

- Monthly in-person meetings rotating across Colorado's regions to build statewide connections
- Comprehensive curriculum on industry entry, strategic partnerships, capital acquisition, and marketing strategies
- Two annual statewide networking events connecting participants with industry leaders and funders
- Membership in the Association of Colorado Outdoor Businesses
- \$20,000 expansion capital awards for participating organizations

The accelerator is all about strengthening the outdoor recreation ecosystem by ensuring that community-based, equity-focused organizations can develop sustainable business models alongside established industry leaders.

Who This Serves

The PEAK Accelerator is designed to support:

- Small businesses and nonprofits seeking to enter or expand in the outdoor sector
- BIPOC-led and rural entrepreneurs facing structural barriers to capital and industry connections
- Organizations with innovative models for expanding outdoor access and equity
- Established outdoor businesses looking to deepen community impact and broaden their customer base

Building Colorado's Outdoor Future

By fostering collaboration across sectors, the PEAK Accelerator program will develop a sustainable pipeline of diverse organizations ready to strengthen both local economies and Colorado's position as a leader in the outdoor industry.

Partnership Roles

This initiative exemplifies the power of strategic collaboration, with each organization contributing complementary expertise:

AYA Foundation serves as programmatic lead — delivering business fundamentals, organizing industry networking events, and connecting participants with funding opportunities. Through personalized coaching, financial training, and credit repair services, AYA ensures participants are prepared to secure investment and expand their market presence.

Rising Routes serves as fiscal and research lead — developing industry-specific curriculum, conducting market research, providing strategic insights, building digital tools, and evaluating program impact. The Web Map tool developed by Rising Routes will enhance industry connectivity, supporting the Accelerator's goal of building stronger regional networks.



“The outdoors industry has tremendous economic power. This accelerator will help ensure that power isn't concentrated in just a few hands, but is accessible to the niche entrepreneurs and community leaders who are reimagining what the outdoor economy can be.”

- Jason Swann, Founder, Rising Routes

Statewide Advocacy Coalition for Outdoor Education and Recreation

Conceived and convened by Rising Routes Across Colorado, outdoor recreation and education providers are doing powerful work - but they're often doing it in isolation. Smaller nonprofits and BIPOC- led organizations rarely have the time, connections, or political capital to engage in policy conversations. Public agencies and funders don't always hear from the people closest to the work. And collaboration across regions or sectors is often informal at best.

To change that, Rising Routes is convening a formal statewide advocacy group a structured, inclusive coalition that will serve as the collective voice for Colorado's outdoor recreation and education field.

Why it Matters

No single organization can shift the system alone. This coalition will give the field a united voice and a seat at the table.

What the Coalition Will Do

Unlike passive advisory committees, this coalition is action-oriented. Through regular convenings, strategic coordination, and regionally representative leadership, the group will:

- Advocate for increased public funding, land access, outdoor equity, and infrastructure support
- Share tools, data, and best practices across diverse organizational types
- Align policy and messaging efforts to elevate outdoor recreation and education as essential statewide infrastructures
- Identify local and regional needs, then elevate them into state-level priorities
- Bridge the gap between on-the-ground implementation and statewide decision-making

What it Offers

A shared policy platform

Peer collaboration and resource exchange

Representation across regions, sizes, and sectors

Collective power to shape Colorado's outdoor future

Who This Serves

The coalition is structured to elevate the entire field - particularly those voices traditionally excluded from policy conversations, such as:

- Grassroots and rural providers with limited access to policy spaces
- Organizations serving historically excluded communities
- Cross-sector collaborations between nonprofit, government, and for-profit entities
- Funders and legislators seeking authentic community insight
- The next generation of leaders, building a pipeline for more inclusive, community-centered leadership across Colorado



Approach & Methodology

When we center the people closest to the work, we build better policy and deeper trust. This coalition will help ensure that outdoor recreation and education thrives for everyone, in every part of the state.

Rising Routes' Role

Rising Routes is designing and convening the group with a clear focus on regional balance, sector inclusion, and shared leadership. This initiative mirrors the governance structure envisioned in the Collaboration Hub, giving providers not just a voice, but shared direction.

"We can't transform the system unless the folks closest to it are helping lead it. This group isn't symbolic - it's strategic."

-Jason Swann, Founder Rising Routes





Conclusion - Where The Work Begins

This report answers a critical question: How can government agencies, nonprofits, and private-sector partners build a more inclusive, coordinated outdoor recreation ecosystem in Colorado?

Our research reveals both challenges and promising paths forward. We found that while many providers - particularly nonprofits and government agencies - are committed to inclusive outdoor access, they often lack the infrastructure, stable funding, and coordination systems needed to realize this vision effectively.

Our survey identified four interconnected systemic barriers that disproportionately affect providers:

1. **Financial instability** that creates cascading effects on program delivery, with pronounced disparities between Front Range organizations and those serving rural regions
2. **Workforce development** gaps in essential leadership, technical skills, and equity-centered practices, with smaller organizations facing the greatest barriers to accessing training
3. **Physical access limitations in transportation, gear, and infrastructure** that systematically exclude participants based on resource access rather than interest
4. **Fragmented collaboration systems** where partnerships remain informal, proximity-based, and difficult to sustain despite strong interest in working together

Despite these constraints, the momentum is strong. Providers are showing up. They're innovating. And they're ready to collaborate in deeper and more intentional ways. What they need now is coordinated support-systems that match the scale of the work and the communities it's meant to serve.

Our five recommendations offer a comprehensive roadmap for strengthening the entire outdoor access ecosystem:

1. Build financial sustainability beyond the grant cycle through diversified revenue models, reformed grant making, and regional financial training hubs
2. Invest in people as essential infrastructure through cross-sector training initiatives, workforce pathways, and leadership development for underrepresented communities
3. Remove barriers to participation through coordinated transportation solutions, sustainable gear systems, and community-centered outreach strategies
4. Create collaborative infrastructures that streamline administration, establish regional networks, and support shared physical resources
5. Establish a Centralized Collaboration Hub that integrates these efforts through a statewide advisory council, training center, and regional implementation networks

Rising Routes is already taking concrete steps toward this vision through three foundational initiatives: a statewide interactive web map, a formal advocacy coalition, and the Colorado PEAK Accelerator. These projects demonstrate what becomes possible when collaboration isn't just encouraged but supported with tangible tools and infrastructure.

The outdoors belong to everyone. Through strategic, cross-sector collaboration, we can create what Rising Routes envisions: a connected web of people and organizations working in harmony - so that every person can discover their purpose, power, and place through nature.

Appendix A. References

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Appendix B. Survey Engagement and Data Integrity

A central goal of this project was to capture diverse perspectives from leaders across Colorado's outdoor recreation and education sector. To do this, we invited over 400 director-level leaders statewide to participate in a mixed - methods survey. As described above, this database of providers drew from Rising Routes Alliance's network, along with provider lists shared by the Colorado Association for Environmental Education (CAEE) and the Outdoor Equity Grant Program (OEGP). The survey initially received more than 280 responses, reflecting a high level of engagement and interest from the sector. However, during final validation, the research team identified a significant number of anomalous entries, including incorrectly named organizations or inconsistent data. A forensic review confirmed that the survey had been targeted by automated bot activity, likely in response to the mention of consulting service value as a participation incentive - an incentive mistakenly interpreted as a monetary reward.

To ensure data integrity, the dataset underwent rigorous vetting. After removing invalid entries, 81 legitimate, complete, and reliable responses remained. These responses reflect a diverse cross-section of executive leaders from nonprofit, government, and for-profit organizations across Colorado

This unexpected challenge underscores the importance of data integrity protocols in digital research environments. While it temporarily complicated the analysis phase, it ultimately reinforced the credibility of the final data set. The experience highlighted the need for careful oversight and validation of digital research tools, even in human-centered fields like outdoor recreation and education. Ultimately, the findings presented in this report are grounded in authentic, human-driven insights, reflecting the true state of the field.

Appendix C. Questions for Further Research

Further research should investigate the following key questions by category. The nature of these higher-level questions that have emerged from the analysis and synthesis of the survey data point toward long format interview questions and or use in regional focused cross-sector focus groups to better determine how to best optimize the recommendations for action put forth in this report.

1. What are the specific challenges preventing organizations from accessing grants and sponsorships?
2. How do organizations with highly diversified funding structures achieve financial sustainability?
3. What role do partnerships play in increasing access to funding opportunities?
4. Are there types of policy barriers limiting access to government funding for outdoor education programs?
5. How do different funding strategies impact program accessibility and affordability for underrepresented populations?
6. What innovative funding models could be introduced to strengthen financial stability in this sector?
7. How do differences in overhead funding policies impact nonprofit and government sector sustainability?
8. What is the long-term effect of over-reliance on grant funding for smaller organizations?
9. How can cross-sector partnerships help mitigate funding volatility in under-resourced regions?
10. What role can private philanthropy play in bridging equity gaps in outdoor access?
11. How does funding structure correlate with long-term participation and retention among underrepresented youth?

Training and Professional Development

1. What are the barriers preventing organizations from accessing training opportunities?
2. How effective are current training programs in meeting workforce development goals?
3. What long-term impact does training investment have on organizational success?
4. How can cross-sector collaborations improve training accessibility and cost-effectiveness?

Transportation

1. Explain the types of transportation needs your organizations have as well as the barriers to meeting those needs.
2. What would a common transportation solution look like for your organization and how is that similar or different from other provider organizations?

Equipment and Gear

1. Describe how an effective Equipment and gear program operates that best serve under resourced organizations providing outdoor recreation opportunities for underserved populations.
2. List the type of gear that would be needed for outdoor recreational opportunities to be more equitable in extent and quality of experience.
3. Brainstorm on ways to reduce the cost of these gear resources by organizing regional sharing libraries.

Collaboration and Partnership

1. Describe what characteristics would enhance the quality of collaboration and effectiveness of partnerships between outdoor recreation providers across sectors and between regions of the state.

Policy and Administrative Processes

1. Describe the fundamental Policy Issues providers are experiencing as barriers?
2. What role does communication play concerning the “bureaucratic issues” providers commonly face?

Appendix D. Learning Experiences and Activities Provided

When people engage with outdoor recreation and education programs, their learning experiences generally fall into three categories:

Formal learning takes place within schools or other official institutions. It is delivered by trained educators, follows a structured curriculum, and often leads to certification or recognized qualifications.

Non-formal learning happens outside of traditional school systems but is still structured and intentional. Examples include after-school programs, summer camps, vocational training, and community-based learning. While these activities don't typically lead to formal credentials, they are designed with clear goals and learning outcomes.

Informal learning occurs through everyday life - interactions with family and peers, time in nature, or exposure to media. It is unstructured, spontaneous, and driven by curiosity rather than a planned curriculum or formal instruction.

Each type of learning plays an important role in shaping how people experience the outdoors. However, this research focuses specifically on formal and non-formal learning experiences.

These are the types most commonly employed by outdoor recreation and education providers, and they are structured enough to be captured through survey methods. Informal learning, by contrast, is more difficult to measure in this context. Because it relies on observation and varies widely by individual, it requires qualitative research approaches beyond the scope of this study.

