



Natural State Initiative Recommendations



Since its inception in March, marked by the centennial of Arkansas State Parks, the Natural State Initiative has developed key areas of focus, serving as a framework for its continued work. The outlined Natural State Initiative report highlights the work ahead while acknowledging work that is well underway. The report has been a collaborative effort with agencies, stakeholders and advisory council members that supports both the outdoor economy and outdoor experiences that enhance our state's quality of life. Each geographic region of Arkansas offers limitless adventures that differentiate The Natural State as a premier outdoor destination. The work of the Advisory Council is to advance how the state's resources grow both the outdoor economy and outdoor recreation.



WORK OF THE NATURAL STATE INITIATIVE

- Created by executive order on January 24, 2023
- Established to provide guidance to the governor regarding outdoor recreation and outdoor economy
- Multi-agency initiative
- Regular meetings since January
- Members must have an interest in outdoor recreation in Arkansas

Current Strategies and Initiatives Underway





ARKANSAS STATE PARKS

- Defining the essential experience at each Arkansas State Park
- Prioritizing existing campground and cabin overnight experiences
- Focusing on infrastructure, existing facilities and high-level maintenance
- Investing in furniture, fixtures and equipment
- Evaluating opportunities for efficiencies within state park operations
- Leveraging the investment of capital in Arkansas State Parks
- Building new trails and funding trail maintenance, including the hiring of a dedicated trail manager at each Monument Trails system





ARKANSAS TOURISM

- Highlighting Arkansas' premier outdoor recreation products through a targeted and expanded media presence
- Leveraging partnerships to expand reach and elevate Arkansas' image
- Continuing brand development to establish Arkansas as a premier destination for rock-climbing and trails for cycling, mountain biking and shared use
- Implementing a refreshed brand across all content and platforms
- Enhancing the user experience on Arkansas.com
- Testing expansion markets and identifying opportunities for increased national awareness
- Emphasizing Quality of Life as a determining factor for those seeking to relocate, whether their plans are based on retirement or for professional reasons



ARKANSAS OFFICE OF OUTDOOR RECREATION

- Leveraging the state's natural assets to grow the outdoor economy
- Creating partnerships at a state level and serving as the state's point of contact for the outdoor economy
- Reducing barriers to growth for outdoor recreation companies
- Educating partners about the importance of outdoor recreation access and the benefit and impact to a local economy
- Bridging the gap between conservation-based agencies and economic-focused agencies
- Developing a statewide outdoor economic impact study to measure economic growth and leverage the impact of investment
- Hosting annual Arkansas Outdoor Economic Summit
- Creating and implementing NSI Opportunity Zones to draw investment and tourism to Arkansas State Parks
- Investing in outdoor recreation infrastructure through the Outdoor Recreation Grants Program




ARKANSAS GAME AND FISH COMMISSION

- Evaluating feasibility of bike-packing, hut-to-hut trails in AGFC Wildlife Management Areas
- Developing an outdoor-recreation focused methodology to measure year-to-year growth in Arkansas' outdoor economy
- Creating the Conservation Incentive Program to encourage conservation on private lands and to empower private landowners to create habitat and unforgettable experiences
- Water trail creation projects at War Eagle Creek, Kings River, Illinois River and Three Forks area of White and Saline rivers
- Partnership with the University of Arkansas' Greenhouse Outdoor Recreation Program to recruit entrepreneurs to develop solutions to conservation, hunting and fishing challenges



UA'S GREENHOUSE OUTDOOR RECREATION PROGRAM

- GORP is an early-stage incubator focused on the development of developing entrepreneurs who are creating innovative products and services within the outdoor recreation industry
- Originally launched in 2021 by the Office of Entrepreneurship & Innovation at the University of Arkansas and funded by the Walton Family Charitable Support Foundation
- The proposed expansion of GORP support for outdoor recreation founders is two-fold:
 - Expand GORP Incubation programming to support founders in other regions of the state
 - Provide a new GORP Accelerator program to work with scalable, investment-ready growth companies in outdoor recreation industry
- In November 2023, the U.S. Economic Development Administration awarded a \$1.2M grant to be combined with an additional \$1M investment from the state to support expansion of GORP to four NSI Opportunity Zones

A photograph of two hikers from behind, standing on a rocky riverbank. The hiker on the left is wearing a green backpack and a dark jacket. The hiker on the right is wearing a dark backpack with a red rope and a water bottle attached, and a plaid shirt. They are looking towards a river with large rocks and a forested hillside in the background. The text "Natural State Initiative Recommendations" is overlaid in white on the left side of the image.

Natural State Initiative Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION #1:
Invest in enhancing the
Arkansas State Parks
experience





RECOMMENDATION #1:

- Develop the Arkansas State Parks “Next Centennial” campaign – charting the next 100 years that focuses on master planning, maintenance and operation of Arkansas State Parks
- Partner with local businesses to offer quality food and beverage, including alcohol sales, at higher-visitation state parks
- Grow the Monument Trails system, including the development of a world-class downhill mountain bike park
- Expand rock climbing in Arkansas State Parks, including traditional and sport routes and via ferrata to provide access for all skill levels
- Expand and improve campgrounds in Arkansas State Parks with an emphasis on restrooms and camper cabins
- Continue to build out broadband connectivity within Arkansas State Parks



RECOMMENDATION #2:

Establish Arkansas as a year-round tourism destination





RECOMMENDATION #2:

- Establish Arkansas Tourism office as a national leader in tourism
- Identify and utilize brand partners that reflect Arkansas' culture and can further advance the vision of Arkansas Tourism
- Empower regional tourism associations to develop and market their tourism products that feature unique cultural and recreational experiences
- Develop and promote major events, like the 2024 Arkansas Graveler, to showcase Arkansas as a leading destination for outdoor recreation
- Maximize the impact of the Great American Eclipse in April 2024 — convert one-time visitors into repeat visitors

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Further enhance Arkansas' outdoor economy





RECOMMENDATION #3:

- Codify the Office of Outdoor Recreation into state law in order to create greater opportunities for access to state revenue and federal grants
- Explore natural areas to support conservation
- Partner in a more intentional manner with NGOs, such as The Nature Conservancy
- Consider long term funding for Outdoor Grants and provide greater flexibility to grant awards that provide statewide impact
 - Utilize dollars from the tobacco settlement to provide outdoor recreational grants
- Create the Outdoor Business Alliance to act as a statewide trade organization to promote and advocate for a growing and impactful outdoor industry

RECOMMENDATION 4:

**Educate Arkansans to
the personal and economic
benefits of a thriving
outdoor economy**



RECOMMENDATION #4:

- Educate Arkansans to the health benefits of outdoor recreation
- Promote opportunities within Arkansas State Parks for establishing a healthy lifestyle
 - e.g., First Day Hikes
- Expand outdoor recreation programs in schools to introduce more kids to the outdoors and improve health

RECOMMENDATION 5:

**Promote careers in
outdoor recreation,
tourism and hospitality**





RECOMMENDATION #5:

- Increase and emphasize career options in outdoor recreation, tourism and hospitality at the high school and community college levels
- Emphasize and strengthen CTE programs
- Develop a statewide strategy for recruiting talented workers to the state



RECOMMENDATION 6:

**Provide greater investment
in and support to those
engaged in Arkansas'
outdoor economy**



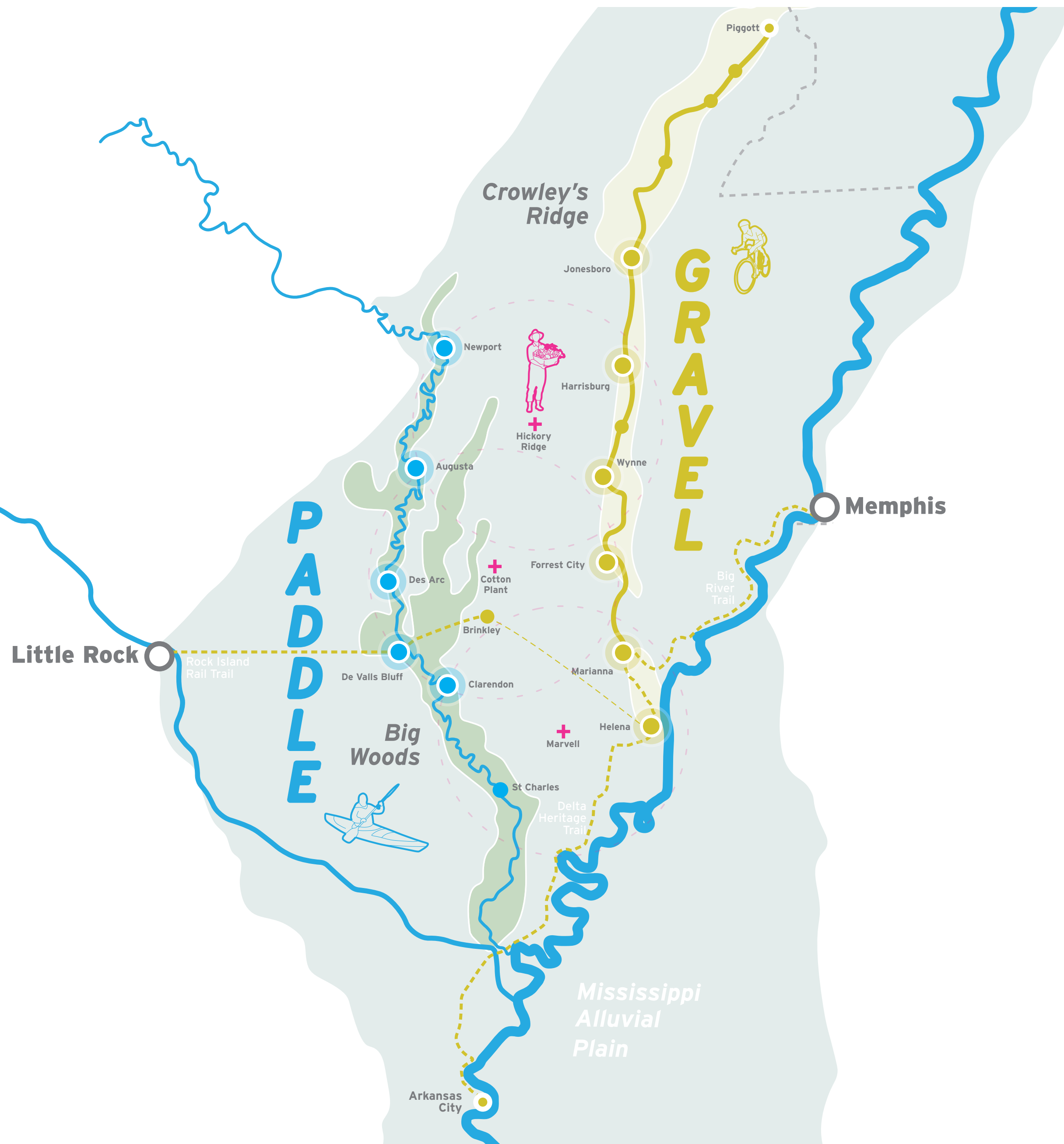
RECOMMENDATION #6:

- Compete with other states by exploring the idea of creating a venture fund specific to outdoor recreation
- Create an outdoor accelerator program to fill a gap in the pipeline of resources available to the industry
- Explore the availability of incentives and other tax credits to include outdoor recreation companies
- Align businesses with in-state investor networks to provide greater access to investment capital
- Extend mentoring and business consulting resources to middle stage and mature outdoor recreation businesses
- Develop a guidebook for identifying resources
- Host an Arkansas-specific trade show with an emphasis on smaller brands and direct-to-consumer companies

RECOMMENDATION 7:

Grow the Arkansas Delta Recreation Economy





RECOMMENDATION #7:

- Expand access to recreation and cultural assets to improve Arkansans' health and well-being
- Establish a series of gravel bicycle routes and water trails that connect rural communities and cultural assets with nearby state parks, public lands and other high-quality destinations
- Establish vibrant and historic Main Streets with connected natural amenities that draw more visitors to the community
- Cultivate local food economies throughout the focus area
- Target the specific markets of Little Rock; Conway; Pine Bluff; Jonesboro; Memphis; Jackson, Tenn.; and Cape Girardeu, Mo.
- Develop the Big Woods hardwood bottomland forest in Arkansas (27 counties) into a destination for tourists to participate in biking, hiking, trail running, bird watching and water trailing
- Establish Crowley's Ridge as THE destination for gravel biking in Eastern Arkansas — the fastest growing sector of the bicycle industry

RECOMMENDATION 8:

**Use mobile technology
as a driver to fuel
outdoor economy**





RECOMMENDATION #8:

- Develop a digital platform featuring verified trails and outdoor adventure data curated by experts, accessible for free via a mobile app
- Digitally curate trails and expeditions tailored to visitors' interests and experience within the app
- Enable visitors to navigate trails with turn-by-turn directions using GPS navigation
- Showcase trending/popular outdoor attractions within the app
- Offer offline maps, virtual tours and 3D views of trails on the mobile app platform
- Provide attraction information such as distance, elevation, trail grade and real-time weather information - water levels, trail conditions, etc.
- Customize dining and accommodation hubs strategically located near attractions, elevating the overall visitor experience
- Develop a platform within a mobile app to connect the outdoors with hospitality allowing visitors to book lodging and reserve dining experiences
- Establish an engaging digital community focused on promoting outdoor tourism in Arkansas

Arkansas is The Natural State. Our mission at the Natural State Initiative is to establish Arkansas as a leading destination for year-round outdoor adventure.

In Arkansas, the outdoor economy grew by almost 23% in the last year; Arkansas must seize this momentum and further establish The Natural State as a leader in the outdoor economy and a destination for outdoor enthusiasts from around the world; with a goal to elevate the best outdoor experiences in Arkansas that we have a right to win; get more kids off screens and outdoors to improve health and quality of life; and double the number of entrepreneurs, workers, and the overall size of the outdoor economy and revenue from the 2% tourism tax in the next decade.

We welcome all Arkansans' input, feedback and recommendations. If you have ideas you'd like to share with members of the Natural State Initiative advisory council or its chairman, Bryan Sanders, please email Teddy.Stewart@governor.arkansas.gov.