



THE HEALTHY GOOSE

Each year the outdoor recreation industry produces “golden eggs” worth more than \$7 billion to Montana’s economy.

Are we reinvesting enough into natural resources, infrastructure, and conflict resolution to sustain that economic bounty?

BY TOM DICKSON



OUTDOOR RECREATION IN MONTANA CONTRIBUTES **\$7.1 BILLION** IN CONSUMER SPENDING ANNUALLY
Includes spending on gear, lodging, food, and travel

Source: Outdoor Industry Association

REINVESTMENT OPPORTUNITY:
Clean public recreation lands trashed by increased public use and growing vandalism.

In 2018, crews at the Helena–Lewis and Clark National Forest reported removing more than 3,200 pounds of abandoned furniture, campers, tires, roofing material, and even a freezer full of rotting meat. Cleanups and vandalism repair in national forests and state parks use up money needed to repair trails, improve parking, and otherwise enhance visitor experiences.



MAIN PHOTO: BEN PIERCE; INSET PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

I never considered that clean, functional toilets at state parks had much, if anything, to do with Montana's economy.

I learned otherwise earlier this fall while touring Lewis & Clark Caverns State Park with park manager Rhea Armstrong and maintenance supervisor Bill Foreman.

Sitting at 5,000 feet amid rolling hills of sage and mountain mahogany, Montana's first state park overlooks the Jefferson River valley about 20 miles southeast of Interstate 90 between Bozeman and Butte. In addition to some of the largest and most beautiful limestone caves in the Northern Rockies, the park features a spacious, tree-shaded campground, 10 miles of hiking trails, and a collection of structures that together make up a National Historic District.

Known as "the caverns," the park is a local economic engine, attracting 800 visitors a day in peak season to an area otherwise visited only by mule deer and turkey vultures. Tourists driving to and from the nationally designated park stop to eat, buy gas, or spend the night at nearby Three Forks, Cardwell, and other small towns. "It's definitely a big draw for the entire area,"



CLOGGED Lewis & Clark Caverns maintenance supervisor Bill Foreman shows a restroom septic pipe filled with mineral scale.

says Whitehall mayor Mary Hensleigh, who worked as a caverns guide during summers in the early 1970s.

Armstrong tells me that park attendance has climbed every year since she was hired as assistant manager in 2005 (she became manager in 2016). That has strained "beyond capacity" the park's infrastructure,

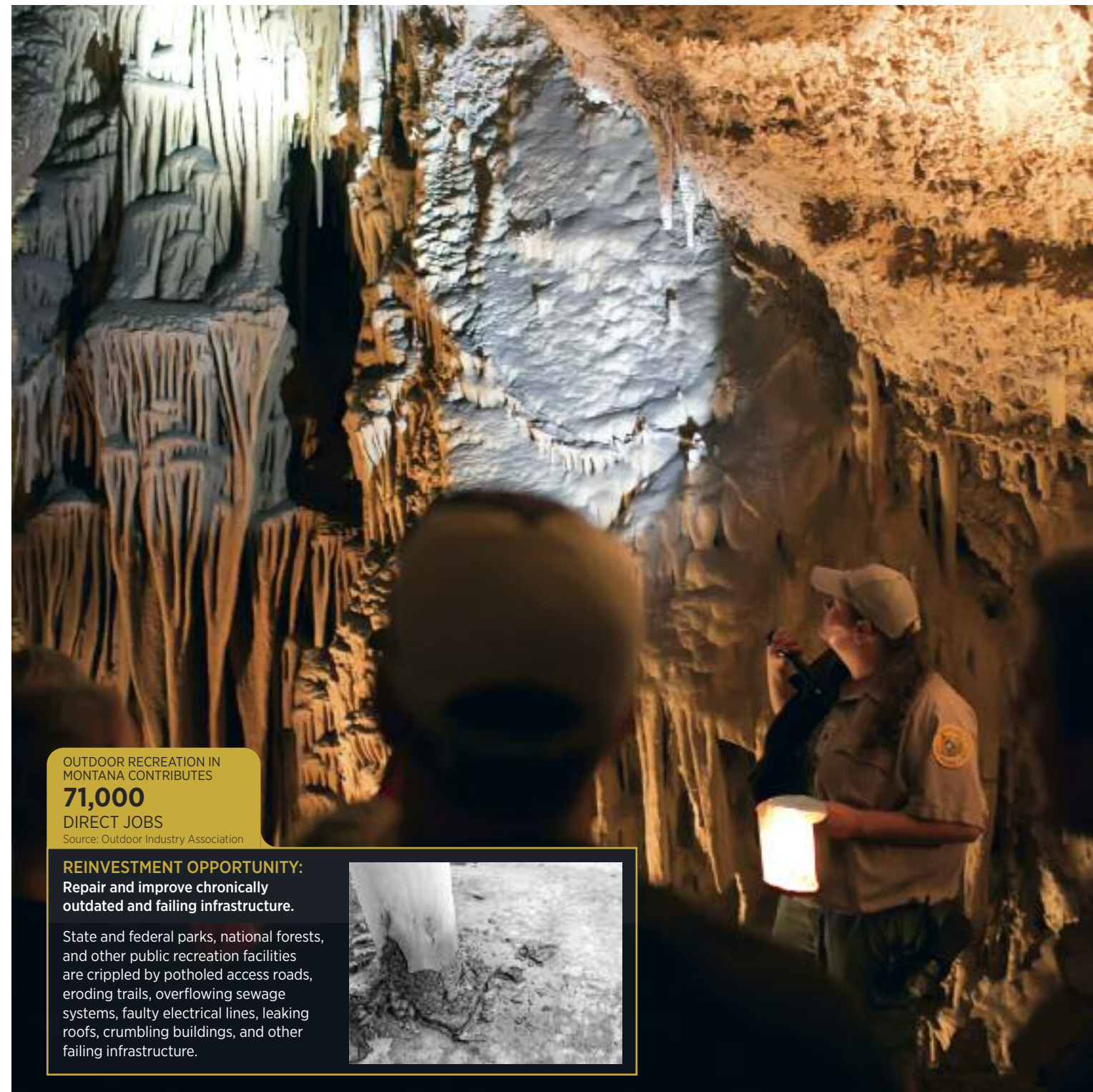
particularly the restrooms, known as comfort stations. Foreman shows me a 50-year-old piece of sewage pipe so filled with mineral scale he can hardly fit a pencil through the tiny opening.

It doesn't take much imagination to envision what that means when campers need to use the facilities.

Three miles up a winding road at the cave entrance, portions of another comfort station are regularly closed. Installed a half-century ago, the septic system strains to handle the growing crowds. "One of these days it's going to go," Armstrong says. The cost to replace the ailing system: \$1 million. "The longer you wait to deal with infrastructure problems, the more expensive it gets," she says.

The good news is that parks visitation, hunting, downhill skiing, hiking, snowmobiling, boating, and other outdoor recreation generate \$7.1 billion per year in consumer spending in Montana, according to a 2017 Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) report. That makes outdoor recreation second only to health care as an economic driver in the state. But much of the infrastructure that supports all this outdoor activity—septic and electrical systems, roads, trails, campgrounds, fencing, and signage—is failing. It, along with the fish and wildlife habitats that also help fuel Montana's lucrative outdoor recreation industry, need greater reinvestment, say outdoor recreation experts. "We have outdoor amenities here that other states can only dream about," says Rachel Vandervoort, director of Montana's new Governor's Office of Outdoor Recreation. "But we definitely need to ramp up the stewardship of the resources and infrastructure that support all those amenities."

If Montana's outdoor economy is a goose



OUTDOOR RECREATION IN MONTANA CONTRIBUTES
71,000
DIRECT JOBS
Source: Outdoor Industry Association

REINVESTMENT OPPORTUNITY:
Repair and improve chronically outdated and failing infrastructure.

State and federal parks, national forests, and other public recreation facilities are crippled by potholed access roads, eroding trails, overflowing sewage systems, faulty electrical lines, leaking roofs, crumbling buildings, and other failing infrastructure.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: TOM DICKSON; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; SHUTTERSTOCK



Montana's outdoor recreation economy

Activities that contribute to the \$7.1 billion in annual spending across the Treasure State each year:



CAMPING
RV campsite
Tent campsite
Rustic lodge



FISHING
Stream
River
Pond
Lake/Reservoir



MOTORCYCLING
On-road
Off-road



SNOW SPORTS
Cross-country skiing
Downhill skiing
Snowboarding
Snowmobiling
Snowshoeing



OFF-ROADING
ATV
ROV
4x4



TRAIL SPORTS
Day hiking
Backpacking
Rock/Ice climbing
Horseback riding
Trail running



HUNTING
Rifle
Shotgun
Bow



WATER SPORTS
Kayaking
Rafting
Canoeing
Boating
Paddleboarding



WHEEL SPORTS
Cycling
Mountain biking
Skateboarding



WILDLIFE VIEWING
Birding
Big game
Photography



OUTDOOR RECREATION IN MONTANA CONTRIBUTES **\$2.1 billion** IN WAGES

Source: Outdoor Industry Association

REINVESTMENT OPPORTUNITY: Make up staff shortages and manage growing recreation and wildlife conflicts.

The BLM, USFS, and National Park Service have seen staff cuts of 10 to 39 percent over the past two decades even as public use has soared. That growing use also leads to river crowding, grizzly conflicts, and other problems that agencies must manage.



“We grow by attracting and retaining a world-class workforce of cool, smart, talented people, and we find that those people are attracted to the great access to outdoor recreation that we have in Montana.”

every weekend they can hike, hunt, fish, and ride their ATVs,” says Lance Trebesch, president of TicketPrinting.com, an online event-ticket printing company that employs 28 people in Harlowton.

A 2017 University of Montana Bureau of Business and Economic Research report found that companies use Montana’s vast outdoor recreation opportunities to lure valuable employees. “We grow by attracting and retaining a world-class workforce of cool, smart, talented people, and we find that those people are attracted to the great access to outdoor recreation that we have here in Montana,” says Michael Sanderson, president and CEO of Sanderson Stewart, a civil engineering firm with offices in Billings and Bozeman.

Manufacturing jobs also benefit from the outdoor recreation boom. Bozeman-based Simms Fishing Products produces fishing waders in a 60,000-square-foot facility and employs 180 workers. Missoula-based Chilton Skis builds high-end backcountry skis sold worldwide.

While growth in some traditional outdoor activities such as fishing and hunting has stabilized, those activities still contribute greatly to the overall outdoor recreation economy. Studies by FWP and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service show that elk, deer, and antelope hunters alone spend \$324 million in Montana each year, an economic influx that supports 3,300 jobs. In 2017, anglers spent \$919 million in Montana on gear, food, lodging, and travel.

Thank Montana’s snowcapped mountains, wildlife-rich prairies, and fish-filled waters for much of that economic input. But VandeVoort notes that credit also goes to res-

idents who’ve worked to sustain the state’s outdoor-based lifestyle. “We have the best stream access law in the nation, we allow recreation on state lands, and we build and sustain private-public partnerships like Block Management and conservation easements,” she says. “Fisheries, wildlife, trails, parks, access to forests and wilderness, our open space—all that comes from people working with each other to make Montana so livable and attractive to tourists.”

STRAINING THE SYSTEMS
It also comes from dutiful management. And it costs money. For public agencies charged with providing outdoor recreation amenities, increased participation and use is taxing infrastructure, staffing, and budgets.

Straining under soaring wildfire-fighting costs across the West, the U.S. Forest Service lacks sufficient funds and staff to clean campsites, clear trails, remove garbage, and service outhouses, including on the eight national forests in Montana (which provide 18,000 miles of trails and 238 campgrounds). According to a 2017 U.S. Department of Agriculture report, the country’s national forest road maintenance backlog alone is \$3.2 billion—not surprising to anyone who has driven the teeth-chattering routes to some trailheads.

Glacier National Park reports that toilets at Logan Pass now need to be pumped four times per day, compared to just twice a few years ago. Traffic on Going-to-the-Sun Road sometimes backs up for miles while crews repair its historic stone bridges. Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks report a combined maintenance backlog totaling nearly \$700 million, and Montana’s 55 state parks face \$22 million in deferred maintenance. The state parks’ backlog includes a decrepit boat dock at Flathead Lake’s Big Arm State Park, inadequate water systems at Lone Pine in Kalispell, and crumbling roofs and window sills on historic buildings at Bannack.

On top of that are increased garbage cleanup and vandalism repair costs. The

laying \$7 billion worth of golden eggs each year, common sense suggests keeping that goose healthy.

THEY PAY TO PLAY

Driven by a growing population, more retiring yet active baby boomers, and lower gas prices, outdoor recreation is increasing across Montana at a record pace. Some 4.1 million people visited Yellowstone National Park in 2017, the second highest number

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ever. In Glacier National Park, a record-breaking 3.3 million visitors last year marked an increase of 50 percent from a decade earlier. Montana’s state parks visitation has grown by 40 percent over the past 10 years.

City parks are being used more, too, by tourists and especially residents. Amy Teegarden, city of Helena Parks and Recreation director and a past chair of the Montana Trails, Recreation and Parks Association, says public demand for trails and other outdoor recreation amenities is growing in communities across the state.

“Here in Helena, 80 percent of the trail use is local, which tells me we have a very active local community,” she says.

All that outdoor activity is good news across the board. According to the Colorado-based OIA, the more than \$7 billion that Montana tourists and residents spend to hike, hunt, ski, snowmobile, horseback ride, fish, boat, and more supports 71,000 jobs that pay more than \$2.1 billion in wages and contribute \$286 million in state and local tax revenue. What’s more, “outdoor recreation is economic diversification,” says VandeVoort.

MAIN PHOTO: JESS MCGLOTHLIN; INSET PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

“It’s not replacing anything or pushing any other industry out. Traditional timber, ag, and coal towns can still be who they are, plus have all that added economic benefit.”

LURING THE TALENT

At a time when many Americans are cut off from the natural world, access to Montana’s great outdoors is a huge incentive for workers. That’s especially true for tech companies, which pay twice the median wage. “Our team loves it here, surrounded by the Little Belts, Snowies, and Crazies, where



We have outdoor amenities here that other states can only dream about. But we need to ramp up the stewardship of the resources that produce those amenities.”

Helena–Lewis and Clark National Forest reports having to pay more than \$25,000 each year just to pick up and dispose of abandoned furniture, campers, tractor tires, roofing materials, and TVs.

Once used almost exclusively by hunters, state wildlife management areas are now also visited by mountain bikers, hikers, and campers. The increased use contributes to problems with human waste, unauthorized roads and trails, and wildfires. At Montana state parks, vandals have burned latrines, torn up sprinkler systems, and ripped down signs. “The cost to clean that up is money we can’t spend to maintain trails, mow lawns, and otherwise improve the visitor experience,” says Beth Shumate, head of the FWP State Parks Division.

Chronic staffing shortages add to agencies’ woes. From 2010 to 2015, congressional funding cuts forced the Bureau of Land Management, which administers 8 million acres in Montana alone, to reduce staff by more than 20 percent nationwide. The U.S. Forest Service saw its overall staff decline by 39 percent from 1998 to 2015. Over the past seven years, national parks have had to cut staff by 11 percent despite a 19 percent increase in visitation.

“In many places we’re basically running on volunteers,” says Shumate about Montana’s state parks. Only eight employees manage the five parks on Flathead Lake, which attract tens of thousands of visitors each year; the workload requires an additional 20 volunteers. Travelers’ Rest State Park relies on a dozen volunteers to help its one employee manage the flocks of Lewis and Clark fans that visit the site.

Then there’s the growing number of conflicts among the crush of visitors—like the fistfights reported last summer at Glacier National Park’s popular Logan Pass parking lot, which fills each morning by 8:30 a.m. Cross-country skiers, snowshoers, hikers, and snowmobilers jostle one another for limited trails in winter, while hikers, moun-

tain bikers, and horseback riders do the same once the snow melts. Hunters and private property owners litigate over blocked access to public lands. On rivers at Montana’s fishing access sites, tempers flare over boat ramp crowding, while wade anglers, drift boaters, and a growing number of kayakers and inner-tubers compete for limited space between banks. “Managing and regulating the avalanche of increased recreation that’s here now and coming down the pike takes money and staff we simply haven’t needed before,” says Paul Sihler, FWP chief of staff.

REINVEST IN MONTANA

How can Montana maintain the integrity of the outdoor experience so valuable to residents, visitors, and the state’s economy? VandeVoort says Montanans need to continue supporting traditional methods of funding public lands, waters, infrastructure, and access while finding new ways to reinvest in those resources. Amy Roberts, OIA executive director, calls on lawmakers to adequately fund federal, state, and local parks, campgrounds, and trails management and maintenance. “The agencies we rely on to maintain this infrastructure are all facing a budget crisis,” she says. Teegarden, Helena’s parks chief, says Montana might want to consider a statewide recreation tax to generate funds to help local and state agencies provide and maintain outdoor recreation. For instance, a surcharge of just 1 percent of the \$7.1 billion in spending would generate \$71 million each year.

Conservation groups like the Montana Wildlife Federation are calling for full funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

OUTDOOR RECREATION IN MONTANA CONTRIBUTES
\$286 million

IN STATE AND LOCAL TAX REVENUE

Source: Outdoor Industry Association

REINVESTMENT OPPORTUNITY:
Support state and federal programs that protect and improve habitat and provide access.

Fish and wildlife habitat is threatened by invasive plants and animals such as spotted knapweed and foreign mussels. It’s being fragmented from increased housing and other development and is being altered by climate change. Lack of public access to public land continues to be a major concern of hunters, hikers, and others.



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Though it can’t be used for maintenance, the popular federal program creates and protects outdoor amenities and natural resources across Montana, ranging from recreation areas in Miles City to elk habitat in the Helena–Lewis and Clark National Forest. Unless recreation is re-prioritized to a higher level, state and federal agencies could be forced to limit access to recreation sites or even shutter them altogether, according to Montana’s 2014–2018 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan. Budget and staffing woes could even lead to

public land transfers or privatization. The Utah-based American Lands Council has cited strains on national parks and forests in its call for transferring federal lands to state ownership. Bozeman-based Property and Environmental Research Center has suggested allowing private companies to manage Yellowstone, Glacier, and other national parks as franchises under strict park brand guidelines, the same way chain restaurants and hotels are managed.

Back at Lewis & Clark Caverns, I stop at the campground comfort station on my way

out of the park. Everything is working fine. But I recall how, just an hour earlier, maintenance supervisor Bill Foreman showed me where, lacking funds to replace a failing urinal, he’d wedged a two-by-four between two pipes to stop a leak. “I’m a MacGyver type,” he’d said. “I can repair just about anything that breaks down. But at some point, it just makes sense to stop doing patch-up jobs and invest in things that are no longer working.”

Foreman’s words apply not just to infrastructure but also to the natural systems that sustain Montana’s healthy recreation econ-

omy. As VandeVoort says, “Public wildlife, parks, and land management agencies provide the stewardship that keeps the wheels on this economic bus and sustains our way of life,” she says. “In the outdoor recreation industry, conservation and sound economics go hand in hand.”

Considering all we have inherited from previous generations of forward-thinking Montanans, and how valuable those resources are to our culture, lifestyle, and economy, maintaining that long conservation tradition seems like a wise and worthy investment. 🐾