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Professional mountain biker Caleb Leis demonstrates his skills at the first River Valley Bike Fest, held in October 2021 in Russellville.

Following the trail of outdoor recreation

Your community's natural assets can translate to big economic impact.

By Dylan Edgell

Outdoor recreation is becoming a big business in Arkansas. According to a report from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), the outdoor recreation market accounted for \$374.3 billion of the U.S. GDP in 2020. In Arkansas, the outdoor recreation industry was responsible for \$2.9 billion of the state's GDP, accounted for nearly 3 percent of all jobs in Arkansas, and supplied \$1.5 billion in annual compensation to outdoor recreation employees. With growing interest in outdoor recreation in the country, Arkansas is primed to reap the financial benefits through increased tourism and business opportunities in The Natural State.

In November of 2021, Katherine Andrews was named the first director of the state's new Office of Outdoor Recreation, and she has already seen promising trends in the tourism industry coming out of the pandemic. According to the most recent *Talk Business & Politics* Arkansas Tourism Ticker report, Arkansas saw a 30.1 percent increase in hospitality tax revenue, a 50 percent increase in statewide tourism tax collections, and a 7.6 percent increase in the monthly average of Arkansas' tourism industry employment. Andrews thinks that this data is a promising sign for the future of outdoor recreation in Arkansas.

"We seem to have recaptured the momentum we were experiencing at the dawn of 2020," she said, "and

we expect that momentum to continue growing along the same trajectory for the foreseeable future."

As outdoor recreation activity grows around the state, it's imperative that local leaders strategize on capturing this energy and maximizing economic opportunity at the community level. To learn more about how to take advantage of new opportunities surrounding outdoor recreation, we talked to Daniele Housenick, director of Main Street Russellville, and Christie Graham, director of the Russellville Visitors Bureau, who shared their insights about the River Valley Bike Fest and the impact of new mountain biking trails at nearby Mount Nebo State Park. The Monument Trails are a collection of world class mountain biking trails that were created through a partnership between the Arkansas State Parks and the Arkansas Parks and Recreation Foundation. Monument Trails wind through four Arkansas State Parks, including Hobbs State Park-Conservation Area, Pinnacle Mountain, Mount Nebo and Devil's Den State Park. The Monument Trails at Mount Nebo opened to the public in the summer of 2020 and were recently named the No. 1 mountain biking trail system in the state by recreation site Arkansas Outside (www.arkansasoutside.com).

To capitalize on this new asset in the Arkansas River Valley region, local leaders collaborated on what became the first River Valley Bike Fest, held in October

2021 in Russellville. The three-day event was designed to highlight the best of the Russellville area while showcasing the new trails on Mount Nebo. The first day focused on highlighting the attractions and amenities of downtown Russellville and included food, live music and a demonstration by a professional mountain biker. The next two days focused on Mount Nebo's Monument Trails and included races for all skill levels. Structuring the festival this way allowed for everyone to be involved in the festivities and showed folks from outside of the community all that Russellville and Mount Nebo have to offer, Housenick said.

Events and amenities like these positively impact tourism and local businesses in cities and towns across the state. In Russellville, new local businesses like Jackalope Cycling have opened to cater to the adventure-seeking tourists. Additionally, the A&P tax revenue in Russellville had its best year to date in 2021 and was 12.4 percent above their previous best year in 2018.

Tourism has a broader impact locally than many people may realize, Graham said. "People that are coming through are not just utilizing a hotel and a gas station. It's full service. So, I think that across the board a lot of businesses are impacted in our city. Yes, they're coming into the restaurants and the downtown, but they're really impacting the whole community."

Russellville Mayor Richard Harris was an integral part of the River Valley Bike Fest effort and is excited about the continued focus on outdoor recreation. "We already know that there are people from across the country taking advantage of the bike trails we have up on Mount Nebo, and so why not accentuate that and try to get those people in our community so they could see what we are as a community," he said. "Hopefully they'll like what they see and come back again and again."

Communities across the state can take advantage of the growing interest in outdoor recreation by capitalizing on their existing natural assets, creating programming to highlight their community and being intentional about involving everyone to create an experience that all can enjoy.

To learn more about the Monument Trails and outdoor recreation opportunities near you, visit www.arkansasstateparks.com. 📍



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