

If you are in Snowshoe, WV at the World Cup, take a look around. West Virginia's natural beauty and mountains inspire us and draw us closer to what makes this state "Almost Heaven." There is no doubt that the outdoor recreation opportunities here are valuable, rare, and hard to imitate. The Mountain State boasts:

- over 2,000 miles (over 3,200 km) of the highest density of white water in the country;
- some of the best climbing in the east, including the only summit east of Wyoming; and
- over 4,000 roped climbs and bouldering routes combined in the New River Gorge area, which also was designated as America's newest National Park in 2020.

You can see that West Virginia is Almost Heaven for outdoor enthusiasts, and outdoor recreation is an economic sector that continues to gain traction in the U.S. In 2019, the outdoor economy accounted for \$459.8 billion of the nation's gross domestic product ([U.S. Bureau of Economics, 2019](#)). Between 2012 and 2017, the nationwide average GDP in outdoor recreation grew by 16.6%—outdoor meccas like Colorado and Utah grew statewide by nearly 30% ([Headwater Economics, 2019](#)). There are pockets of West Virginia that are examples of the success that an outdoor recreation economy can bring to an area, but as a state we grew at 1% during the same time period. However, there is opportunity for the whole state to benefit from this type of development, and many organizations are working toward this goal from dedicated non-profit organizations to those who coordinate fun professionally like Snowshoe Mountain.

The Brad and Alys Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative has taken note of the successes from states like Colorado and Utah, and strives to leverage West Virginia's outdoor recreation opportunities for community and social prosperity. The collaborative supports four areas of impact which include sustainable economic development, opportunities to enhance public health and wellness, education and workforce training, and conservation and stewardship efforts. Some of this work includes [Ascend WV](#), a talent attraction and retention program with benefits for remote workers, and [Science Adventure School](#), a one-of-a-kind learning experience that combines adventure, STEM education, and experiential education. As a result of these strategies, the Smith OEDC's goal is to retain West Virginia's best and brightest in the state, and attract new residents and businesses through the outdoor driven lifestyle you can lead in West Virginia.

West Virginia is an iconic destination to more experienced outdoor enthusiasts; namely, all of you reading this right here at the World Cup! The Appalachian Mountains' rugged terrain offers natural trails that are long and challenging. Currently, there is a need to design trail systems with a better on-ramp to learn and progression in skill level in order to create the expert mountain bikers that love the Mountain State's backcountry trails. Combining that with better signage for easy wayfinding, access to better parking, and easily searchable online information allows for an expansion of outdoor sports and an open door for diversity in users.

To take advantage of mother nature's topography and create a pathway for on-trail learning, Richard Edwards joined the Smith OEDC as the team's recreation infrastructure development coordinator. Edwards has spent most of his career with the International Mountain Bicycling Association, where he helped found IMBA Trail Solutions and most recently served as director of community engagement and education. Over twenty years, Edwards gained quite the reputation in the trail building community and is known for the care and effort he places into design, with special attention to sustainability and working with the topography of the land.

"I want to continue to help make West Virginia's communities a more desirable place to live, work and play through outdoor recreation," Edwards says, "We can have world class trails here, and West Virginia is within a day's drive from half of the U.S. population."

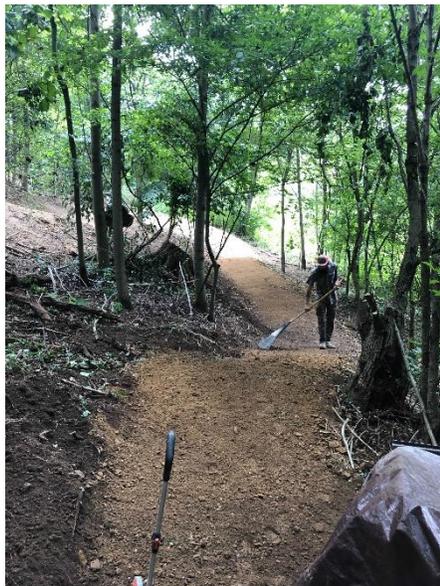
Over the last year, members of the Smith OEDC team have been involved in trail master plans in Cacapon State Park, Morgantown, Marlinton, and Fayetteville, WV, with dirt actively being moved right now, in a few of

those locations. By building high quality trails and other recreation infrastructure that is accessible for all skill levels and connected to our communities, this work can improve health and improve property for both communities and residents by enhancing the quality of life you can have by living in the state.

In addition to creating access through infrastructure, the Smith OEDC further expands opportunities for cycling by supporting the groundbreaking [Youth Cycling Coalition](#), with Morgantown, WV chosen as the location for this pilot program. Ten national, youth-focused bicycling organizations have partnered to integrate programs to provide positive cycling experiences to youth across the nation. The pilot draws on each organization's expertise, which includes road cycling, BMX, mountain biking, infrastructure, advocacy, education, and positive youth development, to implement a range of programming for kids ages 6 through 18. Together, the coalition works to get more children on bikes and can provide a complete pathway with intersections and alternatives to keep them engaged and to foster a passion for biking as they grow into young adults.

Though we are not at the beginning of this journey, this type of economic development opportunity is not completed overnight. Collaborative efforts of the Smith OEDC along with a myriad of partners throughout the state stand to enhance outdoor recreation and create access to the great outdoors, ignite the economy in West Virginia's towns and consequently the Mountain State as a whole. Through collaboration between West Virginia University, the state, the communities within, outdoor organizations and many others, these forces can come together to leverage West Virginia's natural assets and build an outdoor recreation economy that benefits all.

Are you interested in learning more? Visit the Brad and Alys Smith Outdoor Economic Development website at oedc.wvu.edu.



*Pictures courtesy of IMBA Trail Solutions