

**Sustainable Tourism for a Thriving Economy**  
**U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation's**  
**Subcommittee on Tourism, Trade, and Export Promotion**

**Amy Allison**  
**Director, Made By Mountains Partnership**

The Made By Mountains Partnership is a grant funded organization based in Western North Carolina, supporting 25 counties and the Qualla Boundary. The Partnership works to expand the outdoor industry and greater outdoor economy across Western North Carolina's Appalachian region and to catalyze rural economic development.

One of our main areas of focus is activating equitable outdoor driven economic and community growth. We work alongside community leaders, economic developers, tourism agencies, business owners and land managers as they make strategic plans that support their community's economic vitality by leveraging the region's abundant outdoor recreation assets for sustainable growth. Our work places us in communities across the region, from Asheville and Boone, to name some larger, more recognizable cities, and into smaller communities like Robbinsville, North Carolina, with 533 total residents (2021 census) and Brevard, North Carolina, with fewer than 8,000 residents (2021 census).

Western North Carolina communities like these are the gateways to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, with nearly 13 million visitors in 2022, making it the most visited National Park in the nation, and the Blue Ridge Parkway, the most visited National Park Unit in the nation with over 15 million visitors in 2022. We are home to Pisgah and Nantahala National Forests, two of the most popular National Forests in the country, as well as wildly popular state forests, state parks, state trails and a plethora of community land trusts. Our region's proximity and short driving distance from  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the nation's population makes us a premier domestic destination for travelers and adventure seekers alike.

The travel and tourism sector has witnessed exponential growth over the years, becoming a driving force of global and local economic development. Yet, this industry's rapid expansion has, at times, come at a significant cost to our environment, cultures, and local communities. Over tourism, environmental degradation, cultural erosion, and economic imbalances are glaring challenges that we must confront. In the face of these challenges, sustainable tourism is not a choice; it is an imperative.

In 2022, North Carolina hosted approximately 43 million visitors, making it the 6th most visited state in the nation. That same year, statewide tourism generated \$33.3 billion, which marked a 15.2% increase over the previous year.

Clearly, tourism is an integral part of our state's DNA, but we must be persistent in the pursuit of sustainable travel and tourism practices that seamlessly integrate the protection of natural resources, support our tourism economy, and ensure sound development goals. We know that many of our communities rely heavily on the harmonious balance that takes into account the needs of businesses, visitors, and especially, local communities as these numbers continue to grow.

So, the question that we ask often in our community meetings is "How can we build a sustainable travel and tourism sector that embraces these principles and fosters balance?"

One resource that we can steer our communities toward is our state's sustainable destination tourism program, Outdoor NC. This program has been led by Visit NC, North Carolina's state tourism agencies. Working with key stakeholders, community leaders, policy makers and businesses across the state, they are creating messaging that reminds visitors and residents alike how to appreciate our natural spaces and wild landscapes, while also protecting them for generations to come. Shaped with Leave No Trace principles as a foundation, Outdoor NC encourages outdoor recreation, while also educating travelers on best practices. The beauty of a statewide Sustainable Tourism program is that visitors will see the same messaging reinforced from the mountains to the coast.

Building a sustainable travel and tourism program requires a holistic approach that considers the needs of all stakeholders - businesses, visitors, and local communities. Educating tourists about responsible travel is pivotal. By promoting responsible behaviors and ethical choices, we can empower travelers to become allies in this sustainability journey.

Sustainable tourism is a lifeline for many communities, particularly in remote or economically disadvantaged areas. The income generated from responsible travel can be a significant driver of economic vitality. It creates job opportunities, supports local businesses, and provides a stable source of income for communities, helping them thrive. Money spent by tourists often circulates directly within the community, benefiting businesses, families, and individuals. Building a sustainable tourism sector doesn't mean stifling economic growth but rather channeling it in ways that benefit all stakeholders.

In many of our communities, tourism has turned into the red carpet for economic development, paving the way for growth and prosperity. We have watched boarded up towns transformed by enhancing and expanding outdoor recreation opportunities and celebrating the local culture, nurturing an environment that fosters entrepreneurship, especially in the outdoor manufacturing sector. These dynamic factors create economically diverse outdoor communities where the beauty of nature and the richness of culture inspire innovation and opportunity. As visitors are drawn to explore the natural wonders and cultural heritage of these regions, they not only fuel the local economy but also stimulate the growth of outdoor businesses and the production of goods designed for outdoor enthusiasts. This relationship can transform once-sleepy towns into thriving hubs of outdoor commerce, ensuring sustainable economic development and a unique sense of place that sets these communities apart.

Strategically linking our trails to our main streets fosters a symbiotic relationship between outdoor recreational areas and the surrounding communities. By providing easy access and well-marked paths, greenways and trails from these natural and recreational spaces to main streets, we can encourage visitors to explore local businesses, shops, and eateries. This not only boosts the local economy but also enhances the overall visitor experience, allowing travelers to immerse themselves in the culture and unique offerings of the community. By connecting these assets, we create a cycle where tourism dollars directly contribute to the vitality of the town or city, promoting sustainable economic growth and a stronger sense of community for all.

Tourism diversifies a community's sources of income, reducing its reliance on single industries or activities. This diversification makes the community more resilient to economic downturns, as it isn't solely dependent on one sector. By encouraging sustainable tourism, we can help these communities build a more stable and diverse economic base. Sustainable tourism can serve as a catalyst for diversification, helping communities develop other industries alongside tourism.

Building a sustainable travel and tourism sector that balances the protection of natural resources, supports the tourism economy, and ensures reasonable development is a complex but essential endeavor. It requires a collective commitment from governments, businesses, travelers, and local communities.

By supporting sustainable tourism, we not only protect our wild places and community outdoor gathering spaces, but also contribute to the economic growth and prosperity of the communities we visit. These communities rely on the income generated from tourism to fund local services, infrastructure, and education, ultimately improving the quality of life for their residents.

We must recognize that this is a journey, and every step we take toward responsible travel is a step in the right direction. By protecting the environment, supporting the local economy, and embracing strategic economic development, we can create a brighter and more sustainable future for the travel and tourism sector.

My hope is that we can all become champions of sustainability in our respective roles - travelers, business owners, policymakers, community leaders, and community members. Together, we can make a difference, ensuring that the beauty of our planet, the richness of our cultures, and the prosperity of our communities endure for generations to come.