

# The Unsung Hero of Outdoor Recreation

by Ron Hamlin

On August 4, 2020, the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) was signed into law, six years ago this month. It requires that Congress fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) at the long-authorized but seldom-reached level of \$900 million each year. Before its passage, there was no guarantee of appropriation, and only twice in over fifty years had Congress fully allocated the funding.

Interestingly, the Land and Water Conservation Act, which set up the fund, was signed into law on the same day as the Wilderness Act, September 3, 1964. This relatively unknown fund has played a significant role in the recreational resources and conservation projects that we enjoy today, including the Appalachian Trail. The LWCF has an interesting history.

Following World War II, as the boomer generation was emerging, open land was being consumed by housing, industrial, and commercial expansion as cities grew and suburbs were developed to meet the needs of growing families. Recreational activities of all sorts experienced exponential growth as Americans enjoyed easier, faster access through improved roads and more powerful cars. They were also releasing nearly two decades of restrained physical energy following the Great Depression and World War II.

In response to overwhelming consumption and to better understand how Americans enjoyed outdoor recreation, Congress created the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission (ORRRC) in 1958. The ORRRC published its findings in 1962, describing the many ways Americans recreate and forecasting additional needs 20 and 50 years out. It was a comprehensive study that broke down outdoor recreational activities in many ways, described the relative participation rate of each activity, and projected their future growth.

The importance and impact of many activities were evaluated, including winter and water sports, camping, hiking, and other forms of backcountry recreation, as well as less physically demanding activities such as picnicking, walking, and attending outdoor sporting events. The study provided a wealth of information that ultimately led to the

passage of numerous acts throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s aimed at addressing environmental and recreational concerns, including the Wilderness and National Trails System Acts. It was to this committee that author, university instructor, and outdoor enthusiast Wallace Stegner wrote his influential, so-called “Wilderness Letter,” in support of preserving wilderness as a recreational resource.

In their conclusion, one of the committee’s recommendations was that state and federal governments should work to preserve and develop recreational resources. As a result of that recommendation, Congress began to develop a mechanism to fund recreation facilities and preserve conservation tracts while preserving the funds necessary for all the other important functions of government. The solution was the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which authorized up to \$900 million each year from funds generated by national park entry fees, the sale of surplus government property, and motorboat fuel tax revenue. Money generated from offshore energy leases was added in 1968 and has become the primary source of funding for the LWCF.

In addition to funding federal efforts to buy land for recreational and conservation purposes, the LWCF provides matching grants to states for appropriate state and local projects. Since 1965, the first year the LWCF was funded, the Wilderness Society reports that over 42,000 state and local projects have been funded, with projects in every county in the nation.

The act that created the LWCF required reauthorization every 25 years. In 2015, after 50 years of quietly funding many successful conservation and recreation efforts, authorization lapsed for a few months before it was renewed following considerable effort to restore it. The fund received permanent authorization in 2019, and the Great American Outdoors Act became law the following year, ensuring full funding for recreation and conservation projects.

The LWCF has provided critical funding to protect the Appalachian Trail corridor. Following the passage of the National Trails System Act in 1968, over \$250 million has been distributed to purchase tracts and rights-of-way important to the integrity of the A.T. When the National Trails System Act was passed, nearly half of the A.T. crossed

private or otherwise unprotected land. Today, we can enjoy the entire A.T. without any possibility of coming upon a “No Trespassing” sign, thanks in large part to LWCF funds.

Georgia has received \$312 million since 1965 for state and community projects. The fund has also been instrumental in preserving many of the areas we enjoy or that provide sanctuary for wildlife today, such as the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area, Chattooga Wild and Scenic River, Cumberland Island National Seashore, Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge near Macon, and Sansavilla Wildlife Management Area along the Altamaha River in south Georgia. As of 2022, the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest has received over \$16.5 million in LWCF funding for appropriate purposes.

These efforts were funded not by our tax dollars but largely by federal revenue, derived from offshore leases of petroleum reserves. As our nation and the world tackle the effects of climate change and our reliance on petroleum-based energy systems shift, if the recreational resources we enjoy today are to remain available and improved for future generations, we will need to be very creative and forward-thinking to identify a revenue source that would equal the impact that the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and assured by the Great American Outdoor Act, has had.