NATURE ILLINOIS
Summer 2026 • nature.org/illinois

Enjoying nature © Jennifer Emerling

Nature nurtures Midwest economies

Many major industries throughout the Midwest are rooted in nature

Perhaps money *does* grow on trees. Midwest industries, like agriculture, fisheries and outdoor recreation, depend on our region's bountiful lands and waters to contribute billions to the economy every year. The work of caring for Midwest forests supports hundreds of thousands of jobs and supplies vital timber products for our homes and communities. A haven of freshwater, major Midwest waterways have been used to transport essential goods and products for centuries.

The Nature Conservancy is improving the sustainability and strength of these vital economies through collaborations with industry partners and our habitat protection work. For example, we are working with our partners in Michigan and Wisconsin on spawning reef restoration in the Great Lakes to help rebuild populations of cisco and whitefish, which are essential native species and significant both culturally and commercially. Learn more about this work at **nature.org/greatlakes**.

Cost avoidance benefits

Caring for nature drives prosperity in other ways as well. By implementing nature-based solutions, such as green infrastructure in cities and wetland restoration projects, TNC helps protect our communities from storm and flood damage, avoiding or reducing the cost of repair and rebuilding efforts. We help communities incorporate nature into their neighborhoods for cleaner air and water, benefiting the health of residents and reducing the need for expensive health care treatments. Recently, in the Marshall Square neighborhood in Chicago, TNC collaborated with partners to help plant 120 trees, with 100 more coming over the next two years. Learn more at **nature.org/marshallsquare**.

Heron Pond at Cache River Wetlands
© Ralph Earlandson

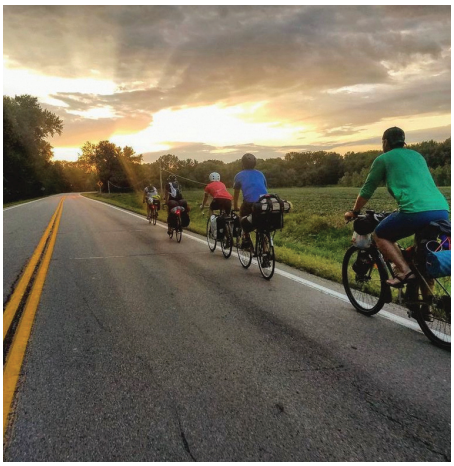
Cache cow

Home to thousand-year-old cypress trees, the Cache River wetlands in southern Illinois are a popular outdoor recreation destination, attracting approximately 1 million people every year. Overall, outdoor recreation generates roughly $24 billion for the state annually.

Visit us here!

Because of their rich biological variety, the habitats of the Cache River are designated "Wetlands of International Importance," like the Florida Everglades.

Learn more at
nature.org/CacheRiver



Glenn Schneider; Bikepacking trip © Out Our Front Door

The economic ripples of local adventures

Q&A with Glenn Schneider Jr., Out Our Front Door co-founder

Bikepacking gear can be simple—your old bike with some camping basics in a milk crate and away you go—or you can go deluxe with panniers and a $5,000 bike. Outdoor recreation is an important economic engine. There's the cost of gear, for starters, then the money people spend on reservations, food, and travel to their destination. Out Our Front Door, a Chicago-based outdoor recreation nonprofit, creates economic impact with programs like group overnight bikepacking trips or adventures that allow children with disabilities to bike with their families. The Nature Conservancy has supported this organization, and other local groups connecting people to nature, through small grants.

You spend thousands booking camp sites. What are some other economic impacts of your organization? On our overnight trips, which I think we'll have 25 this year, most of them are one-nighters. We don't provide lunch, so we eat lunch out. We bring anything from 20 to 100 riders and descend on a town. We all buy lunch, and sometimes beers, and sometimes we go to the store and stock up on snacks and stuff. There's all sorts of money being spent on those breaks.

When you think of the larger economic impact of your organization, what comes to mind? We spend $200,000 a year, and a huge chunk of that goes straight into the economy. We really try to be intentional on how and where we spend that. The local bike shops come to mind. There's a number of shops in town that focus on bike camping. They send a lot of people our way, we send a lot of people their way. It doesn't get much more local than your local bike shop, and so we're so proud to support them and get their support.

As we've grown, we've gotten $70,000 in grants to buy super custom adaptive bikes. We worked it out with one of our local bike shops to buy the bikes through them. That way, a bunch of that grant money went through them. This bike shop was able to take some of that money and become a dealer for adaptive bikes.

That sounds amazing! It really is. Last year we had 150 mostly kids that we engaged with our adaptive bikes, and a lot of them are riding a bike for the first time. And if you get to be around a kid riding a bike for the first time...There's not much more glee in this world than that.

NATURE
ILLINOIS

85%

Percent of Illinoisans surveyed by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources who believe outdoor recreation areas and facilities are important to quality of life and the economic development of their community.

Illinois Department of Natural Resources, *Illinois Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan 2021–2025*

A big economic impact

Hikers © Fauna Creative

According to the most recent data, in 2023 outdoor recreation created value-added impact of over $24 billion in Illinois, accounting for 2.2% of the state's gross domestic product and creating nearly 173,000 jobs. Some of the most significant outdoor recreation sectors driving this impact were conventional outdoor recreation activities such as camping, hiking and hunting, as well as boating and fishing.

U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2023*

The Nature Conservancy

The Nature Conservancy
400 N. Michigan Avenue, Suite 1100
Chicago, IL 60611

Illinois
illinois@tnc.org
nature.org/illinois

TikTok @nature_midwest
Facebook @TheNatureConservancyIllinois
Instagram @nature_illinois
LinkedIn @the-nature-conservancy-illinois