

Federal Job Cuts and the New Landscape of Outdoor Recreation Management

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Imagine arriving at your favorite national park and finding visitor centers shuttered, trails unmaintained, and the absence of knowledgeable staff to guide your experience. While this may sound extreme, current developments within the U.S. Department of the Interior have made this scenario increasingly plausible. Sweeping federal job cuts threaten not only the preservation of America's treasured public lands but also the future of outdoor recreation and tourism—industries essential to both local economies and national heritage.

Defining the Impact

The Interior Department is initiating a significant reduction-in-force impacting thousands of positions, including an anticipated 1,500 layoffs within the National Park Service. Critically, these cuts are disproportionately affecting experts in ecology, archaeology, geology, and recreation planning—roles fundamental to protecting and interpreting our natural and cultural resources. With a concurrent hiring freeze and a proposed 30% budget cut to the Interior Department, morale is at a historic low, further impairing the agency's ability to fulfill its stewardship responsibilities. The National Parks Conservation Association and other organizations warn these actions could severely compromise statutory obligations and degrade visitor experiences for millions.

Embracing Collaboration

Despite these challenges, there is a viable, albeit long and winding, path forward: increased reliance on partnerships and collaboration. History shows us that strategic alliances can effectively mitigate the consequences of federal downsizing. State agencies, local governments,

universities, and nonprofit organizations have already demonstrated the powerful outcomes achievable through collaboration—particularly when federal capacity is limited.

Building Resilient Partnerships

Research and practice underscore that collaboration is crucial in navigating these turbulent times. State offices or divisions of outdoor recreation provide successful models of cross-sector partnerships. Many of these offices support billion-dollar industries with minimal staffing by cultivating a network of local, state, federal, and non-governmental collaborators¹. University programs like those supported through the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism, further exemplify this model through the [GNAR Academy](#) (which provides leadership and topic-specific training for land management agencies and gateway community leaders) and [Dark Sky Cooperatives](#) (which facilitates monthly debriefs and <https://extension.usu.edu/iort/cp-darkskies/quarterly-connections> focused on dark sky conservation and astrotourism promotion). These initiatives deliver valuable training and build community capacity through peer learning and resource sharing, helping to sustain high-quality recreation experiences despite limited federal resources.

However, building resilient partnerships demands overcoming institutional and attitudinal barriers, such as rigid bureaucratic procedures, overlapping jurisdictions, and limited incentives for collaborative engagement¹. Addressing these challenges requires intentional investment in relationship-building, training in stakeholder engagement and conflict resolution, and fostering a culture of shared leadership and mutual trust.

Inspiring Action

Now more than ever, the future of outdoor recreation relies on collaboration among many groups and individuals. Just as people lean on friends during challenging times, organizations navigating difficult periods also depend on partnerships and shared support. With reduced federal resources, state and local agencies, universities, nonprofits, and community leaders have an essential role to play in maintaining the quality of outdoor experiences.

At the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism, we've seen firsthand how effective and meaningful partnerships can help communities overcome challenges. We encourage you—community members, local leaders, and advocates—to connect with each other, share your strengths, and support collective efforts. Working together, we can protect the places that matter to us and ensure they remain special for future generations.

Further Reading

Alms, N., & Katz, E. (2025, May 7). [Thousands of layoffs to hit Interior, National Parks imminently](#). Government Executive.

Sausser, B., Monz, C., Dorsch, T., & Smith, J. W. (2019). [The formation of state offices of outdoor recreation and an analysis of their ability to partner with federal land management agencies](#). *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism*, 27, 100232.