**Showcasing the DNR: Cultivating growth in Michigan’s outdoor recreation business – the Michigan Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry**

With its wealth of water, public land, trails and opportunities for outdoor recreation, Michigan is among the top states in the nation in terms of how much outdoor activities contribute to the economy – including ranking No. 5 for economic impact of boating, No. 6 for recreational vehicle use and No. 8 for hunting/shooting/trapping.

These figures are according to 2020 data from the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Unprecedented numbers of people have been out enjoying Michigan’s natural resources since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, with outdoor recreation participation seeing significant increases.

Annual Michigan state park visits swelled from 28 million to 35 million after the pandemic started, and visitation went up another 25 to 30% during the 2021 summer season. The number of people buying fishing and hunting licenses increased by about 10 and 5%, respectively, from license year 2019 to 2020. Off-road vehicle trail use jumped 20% from 2019 to 2020 and has grown another 13% in 2021.

The pandemic led many to discover the physical and mental health benefits of getting outdoors, and communities across the state have long recognized that in addition to supporting healthier lifestyles, outdoor recreation contributes to a high quality of life and attracts and sustains employers and families.

Outdoor recreation also is a vital part of Michigan’s economy – annually generating $9.5 billion in economic impact, 108,673 jobs and $4.6 billion in wages and salaries (2020 BEA data).

And according to Tino Breithaupt, senior strategic advisor – corporate relations at the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, the manufacturing segment of Michigan’s outdoor recreation industry is growing even through the pandemic, with seven major expansion/attraction projects in the state between Oct. 1, 2020, and Sept. 30, 2021, creating 1,134 new jobs and resulting in $64.75 million in total capital investment.

These projects include the [expansion of pontoon boat manufacturer Crest Marine](https://www.michigan.gov/whitmer/0,9309,7-387-90499-572832--,00.html) in Owosso Charter Township, which will make it the largest employer in Shiawassee County, and [RV components manufacturer EQ United establishing new operations](https://www.michigan.gov/whitmer/0,9309,7-387-90499_90640-573517--,00.html) in Cassopolis.

Outdoor recreation-focused companies and jobs represent an important and slightly different way to understand and leverage Michigan’s incredible outdoor recreation assets, with a focus on not just the sale and enjoyment of recreational gear and vehicles, but also on jobs and companies that design and manufacture the gear itself. Based on MEDC data, these types of outdoor gear production jobs proved to be more resilient than the harder-hit service and hospitality sectors of the outdoor recreation economy, with jobs in outdoor manufacturing growing 5.5% in Michigan from 2017-2021.

**Office created**

Because of the important and growing role outdoor recreation – and the industry built around it – play in Michigan, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer created the Michigan Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry in 2019 to expand the outdoor recreation economy in the state by supporting and growing existing outdoor businesses and attracting new outdoor recreation businesses.

Part of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the office also operates in a unique interagency collaboration with the MEDC, drawing on the corporation’s strategies and staff assistance to leverage resources to support and grow the outdoor recreation lifestyle economy.

Brad Garmon was appointed director of the Michigan Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry in September 2019.

“Outdoor recreation is really booming right now, but when you approach outdoor recreation as an identifiable industry, like we do the auto industry or the oil and gas industry, it’s very apparent that outdoor recreation is huge and also really complicated,” Garmon said. “I need to be able to help the local gear shop trying to operate a downtown retail business during a pandemic, but also help a huge boat manufacturer address their supply chain needs, and a non-profit nature center or a ski hill deal with their staffing issues.

“The industry is made of amazing people and businesses and leveraging that kind of support helps them and also creates lasting positive impact on the people and places of the state.”

With the creation of the office, Michigan joined a growing movement of states, currently numbering 13 but growing fast, focused on new collaborations with and for the private-sector outdoor recreation industry.

**First and only**

Michigan was the first, and so far only, Great Lakes state to join this “Confluence of States” pact, which recognizes the outdoor industry as “a powerhouse of meaningful job creation, and a driving force of our nation's economy” and that it is “an economic multiplier, creating a unique quality of life in rural and urban areas, attracting new businesses and professional talent to our communities.”

Garmon explained that Michigan’s role in the national outdoor recreation economy is unique.

“Michigan is a state that makes things, and our manufacturing businesses and workers are recognized globally for engineering, design, advanced materials and high-tech production,” he said. “Diversifying even a small part of our Michigan production capability by getting suppliers and designers and entrepreneurs focused on this fast-growing and innovation-driven world of outdoor recreation gear would open huge opportunities for more high-wage, skilled jobs across the state.”

Based on MEDC research, the more than 5,000 jobs in manufacturing outdoor gear and equipment in Michigan paid an average of $66,624 per job in 2021, compared to an average salary of $26,626 per job in outdoor recreation services.

With more commercial and industrial designers than any other state, Michigan offers plenty of opportunity for these types of outdoor industry jobs and businesses to thrive.

The Michigan Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry works to help Michigan entrepreneurs and manufacturers succeed and become a more integral part of the outdoor recreation community in the state.

**Wider focus**

Garmon has been “tremendously supportive in the development” of a startup company called Lilypad Labs – which has developed a prototype of a solar-powered small boat, rentable and drivable with Bluetooth technology from cell phones – according to Lilypad Labs CEO Dana Lowell.

“Outdoor recreation is a primary differentiator for Michigan. Michigan has access to over 20% of the world’s fresh water. This is an enormous opportunity and responsibility,” Lowell said. “Michigan has more freshwater coastline than any other state. These are assets that give us a commanding presence in outdoor water recreation.

“We have four seasons and available plentiful green space. We have world-class parks ranging from the beaches of Holland State Park to remote Isle Royale. We should have a statewide priority of focusing on outdoor recreation and related industry participants.”

Garmon’s office builds on ideas from the Blue Ribbon Panel on Parks and Outdoor Recreation, convened nearly a decade ago, which encouraged the state to embrace that “parks and outdoor recreation encompass more than simply preserving places to recreate. They are places that help create vibrant communities, attract visitors and talent, encourage people to gather and connect with one another, [and] offer opportunities for people to improve their health and well-being.”

Garrett Dempsey of the Detroit Outdoors Coalition explained how the office helped connect his organization with the National Park Service on a partnership that gave Detroit youth outdoor experiences in the Upper Peninsula.

Garmon shared his time and relationships to connect the coalition with NPS staff around Lake Superior.

“The 200-plus Detroiters experiencing the wonders of national park, national forest and state recreation land through the resulting partnership is an inspiring example of the value OORI brings to this work in Michigan and the entire Great Lakes region,” Dempsey said. “The world of outdoor recreation is incredibly diverse. The common thread running through all of it is creating meaningful experiences and relationships between people and the natural world.”

**Busy director**

Garmon has focused on building a unique program of economic development designed for and with the outdoor recreation industry itself, meeting with hundreds of outdoor recreation businesses over the first two years.

He also held weekly meetings with core members of the economic development team at MEDC and facilitated work between DNR and MEDC staff to better understand and focus his office’s role relative to existing programs. With this group, the office is working every day to add new resources and tools that:

* Identify trends and remove barriers to outdoor businesses success in the state.
* Build an outdoor entrepreneur pipeline to support startups and small, innovative companies and products.
* Recruit and train diverse talent into Michigan’s outdoor industry by supporting workforce investment.
* Engage more diverse leaders and innovators from underrepresented communities.
* Support, grow and leverage Michigan’s outdoor brands and elevate Michigan as an outdoor lifestyle state.

Examples of the work that stems from this unique approach and partnership in the last 20 months includes hosting virtual conversations with minority outdoor leaders; hosting outdoor business showcases to highlight small startup outdoor companies; hosting a national buyer-supplier summit to showcase the production capabilities of our supply base to a national audience of boat, recreation vehicle and all-terrain vehicle makers; and piloting an innovation outdoor “pitch” contest to help find and target support to new outdoor businesses and entrepreneurs. The [2022 Northern Michigan Outdoor Recreation Pitch Competition](https://pmbc.connect.space/northern-michigan-outdoor-recreation-pitch-competition/details) application period is now open, with the pitch event set for Feb. 14.

**A testimonial**

Karen Strough, partner/owner of northern Michigan-based Donnelly-Strough Co. sales agency, has been in the business of outdoor recreation as a manufacturer’s representative selling outdoor footwear, technical outdoor apparel, snow sports and outdoor performance gear for three decades.

As part of her association with Garmon and the Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry, Stroud said she’s met staff from other Michigan-based offices that have a big influence on bringing new businesses to Michigan, such as the Michigan Economic Development Corp. and Pure Michigan Business Connect.

“As a rep, I did not know of their existence and now, through the efforts of (the) OORI, I understand how much we can all achieve together with the different connections we can bring to the table,” Strough said. “I believe that by continuing to strive to collaborate on topics of mutual interest, such as encouraging new businesses focusing on outdoor recreation to locate in Michigan; to recognize how much business our retailers generate in Michigan, and through our efforts, get more people outside in Michigan, we can all be more successful with what we do. And this will generate more dollars in Michigan.”

**Partnership sustainability**

The MEDC/DNR partnership sustained by the Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry Office provides valuable opportunities to grow the state’s outdoor recreation manufacturing and retail and destination businesses, while fostering the growth of the recreation economy and vibrant communities across the state.

“Michigan’s Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry is a major proponent of the continued success of the state’s outdoor recreation economy,” said Jill Sims, the National Marine Manufacturers Association policy engagement manager, Great Lakes region. “The office’s role in ensuring the outdoor recreation industry, driven by Michigan’s $1 billion recreational boating and fishing industry, has a seat at the table alongside state policymakers, private entities and businesses as they look to develop, promote and enhance the state’s outdoor recreation economy.”

**Pandemic effects**

The office was launched just prior to the pandemic, and the 20 months following created unprecedented opportunities and challenges. Throughout this time, however, the outdoors remained a steadfast and increasingly critical outlet and source of physical, emotional and economic health for many, including a marked and measurable cadre of new users discovering or rediscovering outdoor recreation.

The Michigan Snowsports Industries Association worked with Garmon and the Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry on plans to safely open ski areas during the pandemic.

“This wasn’t an easy task. But, with Brad’s assistance and the willingness of all Michigan ski areas to comply, we were allowed to open, and we successfully and safely navigated through the winter season,” said Michigan Snowsports Industries Association President/Executive Director Mickey MacWilliams.

“Each year we average between 2 and 2.4 million skier visits to our slopes and Michigan is tied with New York for the most ski areas per state. If we weren’t allowed to open last winter, the economic impact to our industry, and our state would have been devastating. I speak for the entire Michigan ski industry when I say that we are extremely grateful for Brad Garmon and the OORI and look forward to working closely in the future.”

**Future considerations**

Looking ahead, the Michigan Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry will continue to make connections and help the outdoor industry navigate changes.

“The outdoor industry overall has strong stewardship ethic, and wants to protect and support more people accessing our lands and waters. It is becoming more socially responsible and trying to improve in both diversity and environmental impact,” Garmon said.

“Michigan has the resources and tools to help them do that, and my job is to get to know our outdoor businesses and help open doors for them, so they can access the resources, tools and expertise to grow and be successful.”

Learn more about the Michigan Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry at [Michigan.gov/MI-OutdoorRec](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79137_87865---,00.html).

Check out previous Showcasing the DNR stories in our archive at [Michigan.gov/DNRStories](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79137_79770_79873_80003---,00.html). To subscribe to upcoming Showcasing articles, sign up for free email delivery at [Michigan.gov/DNR](http://www.Michigan.gov/DNR).

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