

Access Fund TN Vision Plan

This was the first draft to the Access Fund's climbing SCORP for Tennessee. I researched and wrote the piece based on their request to include historical, economical, health, and recreational facts and statistics.

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Welcome to Tennessee

In 1867, John Muir visited Tennessee for the first time as he traveled from Kentucky to Florida. During his journey, he hiked through endless green woods as he followed the steep contours of stony escarpments.

He discovered mossy boulders the size of small houses and huge rock dwellings and cliff bands the size of amphitheaters. Lush flora covered the towering cliffs from top to bottom. The occasional waterfall spilled over the edges where gnarled centenarian cedars clung to the craggy soils below.

From atop of these proud bluffs, Muir gazed out at a sea of sloping hills covering Tennessee for miles. As he trekked through this untamed terrain, the Cumberland Plateau's clandestine caves, rocks, wildlife, and waterways slowly revealed themselves beneath the vast canopy of deciduous forests. With each step, Muir grew fonder and fonder of this enchanting wilderness.

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Stretching 440 miles across from Memphis to Johnson County, the Volunteer State bestows an array of scenery, culture, and outdoor recreation. From music lovers to entrepreneurs, residents thrive in Tennessee where low cost of living, economic opportunity, and vibrant urban and rural scenes are favored features for work and play. Between bustling bike paths near the Capitol to refreshing blue holes in the Smokies, Tennessee's collection of recreational areas received a gold medal award in 2007 for the best park system in America.

Just outside the major cities of Knoxville, Nashville, and Chattanooga, lies a climate-resilient ecosystem with more wildlife diversity than any other inland state.^[1] With so much biodiversity and myriad of landscapes, more outdoor enthusiasts are visiting the state's parks and public lands than ever before. Paddlers, mountain bikers, hikers, hang gliders, and rock climbers all seek solace and adventure among the Cumberland Plateau and Appalachians. In fact, climbers alone contribute millions of dollars annually to counties located near outdoor climbing, and there are over a dozen climbing gyms in the state.

While Tennessee is host to a thriving climbing community across the state, the bulk of the state's outdoor climbing areas are located in eastern Tennessee. A general overview of East

Tennessee's environment, history, economy, park network, and conservation efforts provides a foundation to why climbers recreate in the Cumberland Plateau. This rich narrative explains how a long term vision for climbing area planning and investment will benefit the state's land and people for years to come.

-- A Varied Landscape --

Tennessee's topography can be divided into three major segments: the Gulf Coastal Plain in the west, the Central Basin and foothills in the middle, and the Cumberland Plateau, Unaka, and Smoky Mountains in the east. The mountainous and craggy terrain of East Tennessee includes the state's highest concentration of climbing areas, tourist destinations, and endangered ecosystems.

Stretching from Kentucky to the Scenic City of Chattanooga is a network of mesas made of striking sandstone cliffs dating back to 500 million years. Together, this system of ridges, rocks, rivers, valleys, caves, rural towns, and farms is called the Cumberland Plateau – the world's longest hardwood forest tableland.^[2]

Underneath a medley of shortleaf pines, oaks, hickories, maples, and hemlocks is an environment teeming with an assortment of wildlife, including rare amphibians, small mammals, and migratory songbirds.

Further east, the Smoky Mountains boast a lush temperate rainforest with old growth forests containing ancient spruce-fir, hemlock, pine, and oak trees. Even though the Smokies make up only a small part of the Appalachian Mountains, the region encompasses some of the tallest peaks in the range and the highest concentration of black bears in the Eastern United States.^[3]

For many centuries, the rugged landscape of East Tennessee was only used by communities of Cherokee and Creek who inhabited the region for 1,000 years.^[4] Early European settlers skirted the region and preferred the fertile lands to the west where the Chickasaw built agrarian town sites.^[5]

Even this rural part of America made a monumental impact on the nation's culture and social history. The mountains of East Tennessee are rooted in the sounds of folk and bluegrass, which influenced musicians performing for the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville – America's longest running radio broadcast.

Along the Cumberland Plateau, just a few miles from some of Tennessee's most popular climbing areas, the Highlander Folk School nestled in Monteagle is where Rosa Parks and many other social justice activists learned nonviolent protest methods throughout the 1950s.^[12]

Decades later in 1998, a group of middle schoolers in Whitwell started the Paper Clips Project, now called the Children's Holocaust Memorial, to educate visitors about the tragedies of genocide.

In the mid 20th century, Tennessee transitioned from an economy primarily focused on agriculture, to becoming a state with significant utility and hydropower resources after President Franklin D Roosevelt established the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in 1933. One year later, FDR and Tennessee officials accomplished another remarkable achievement for the state: the creation of Great Smoky Mountain National Park.

-- Conservation Landmarks --

The story of conserving the Great Smokies mirrors the same efforts by modern organizations trying to protect privately held land in the Tennessee mountains and Cumberland Plateau. In the early 1900s, the Smokies in East Tennessee were severely threatened by mass-scale clearcutting. Only 20% of the forest within Smoky Mountain National Park remained uncut by the time the park was protected.

Establishing the national parks in the western United States was relatively straightforward because most of the lands were already federally owned. Great Smoky Mountain required more effort and money from legislators, foundations, individuals, and local fundraisers to conserve the land from private farms, mines, and timber companies.

Once the final deeds were transferred in 1934, Tennessee and North Carolina started building public facilities and giving the forests time to rehabilitate in the new national park. The result? Great Smoky Mountain National Park is the most visited park in America and contributes \$2.5 billion annually to the Tennessee and North Carolina economies.^[6]

Further establishment of national and state lands fell into place shortly after, and laid the foundation for sustainable outdoor and conservation efforts still underway today. Historical remarks and modern-day endeavors prove it takes a multitude of user groups, agencies, and community members to safeguard diverse ecosystems.

In 1937, The Tennessee Public Act commenced the beginning of the state park system, and now Tennessee has 56 State Parks including the newly established South Cumberland State Park with the popular Denny Cove climbing area.

Tennessee also has 15 State Forests. Prentice Cooper State Forest, proclaimed in 1945, has some of the most esteemed traditional single-pitch climbing in the United States.

In 1968, Tennessee created the first State Scenic Rivers Program in the nation. Eight years later, 45 miles of the Obed river in East Tennessee was declared Wild & Scenic. Climbers and whitewater paddlers alike actively use this striking gorge for recreation.¹

¹ <https://www.rivers.gov/rivers/obed.php>

-- Economic Impact --

Over half of Tennessee's GDP comes from the service sector in the form of entertainment, tourism, and health care.^[7] According to the Tennessee Department of Tourism, tourism is the #2 industry in the state. In 2019, \$23.3 billion tourism dollars were spent in Tennessee.^[8] In the Cumberland Plateau and Appalachian regions, tourism is the main economic driver.

Alongside tourism, manufacturing, healthcare, and TVA electrical capitals, Chattanooga has become Tennessee's "Gig City." The local utility provider, EPB Fiber Optics, was the first telecommunications company in the world to supply 1 Gbit/s to every home in a community.^[9] With America's fastest internet speeds offered at an affordable rate, EPB's services have spurred tech incubators, startups, entrepreneurs, and remote workers to move to Chattanooga—ultimately stimulating the outdoor economy in the process.

In 2020, there were 34.7 million visitations to Tennessee state parks.^[10] Tennessee is one of only seven states that doesn't charge state park admission fees. Even with free access, Tennessee state parks still had an economic impact of \$2.1 billion in 2021. Tennessee state parks and forests are also home to some of the most popular climbing areas in the state, like Foster Falls, Tennessee Wall, and Denny Cove.

Travel-generated tax revenue is a major influence in reducing resident household tax burdens by nearly \$750 annually. In addition to zero income tax, Tennessee is typically ranked as one of the top five states with the lowest tax burdens.^[11]

-- Outdoor Recreation Benefits --

Aside from the significant economic value connected to Tennessee outdoor tourism, recreation can have a positive effect on the health and wellness of residents too.

According to the CDC, more than 35% of adults in Tennessee are obese^[13] and heart disease is residents' leading cause of death.^[14]

The Tennessee Department of Health says spending time outside in parks can help reduce the risk of obesity, myopia, and behavior problems in children while simultaneously improving physical coordination and social development during adolescence.^[15]

A 2005 study says people who recreate outside are three times more likely to reach recommended physical activity levels as opposed to inside a gym or home.^[16] Another 2015 study shows time spent in nature decreased symptoms of depression in patients.

From the protection of precious ecosystems to a higher quality of life for citizens, the creation, conservation, and recreation of public lands in Tennessee is an essential component to the vitality of locals, the economy, and environment.

A Tennessee Climbing Overview

Even though the Cumberland Plateau cliffs are nowhere near the magnitude of El Capitan or the Rockies, the humble hills of East Tennessee are cherished by thousands of climbers who live and recreate in the state. From a grassroots community that turned into the biggest local climbing coalition in the nation to superlative conservation successes, Tennessee climbers have an awe-inspiring story to tell.

-- Humble Beginnings --

Tennessee is a slow burner in terms of climbing history. While states like California, Utah, and North Carolina already had numerous crags and routes archived, Tennessee climbers were just beginning to cut their teeth on the local Southern sandstone in the 1960s when the first documented ascents occurred at Sunset Rock on Lookout Mountain.

Sunset Rock was the first climbing area developed in the TAG (Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia) region—an area that crosses state lines but is recognized by climbers as a contiguous area. Sunset remains historically significant as the only public crag in America found on a National Military Battlefield.

In the 1970s, other sought-after crags like Foster Falls and Tennessee Wall were established. By the 1990s and early 2000s, more iconic climbing zones in Tennessee such as the Obed, Stone Fort, Castle Rock, Deep Creek, and Dayton Pocket came into vogue. At this time, Tennessee was recognized as a major destination for climbers in national climbing publications, and the state's reputation for offering world-class sandstone has flourished ever since.

-- A Growing Community --

What started as a handful of climbers in Tennessee has turned into a community of thousands with more climbers moving to the state each year. Climbers enjoy Tennessee because of the quality sandstone rock, ample options for traditional, sport, and bouldering disciplines, easy access to both wilderness experiences and developed commerce, and a lower cost of living compared to states like California, Colorado, and Washington.

In 2018, there were 7.7 million climbers in America.^[172] In 2021, The Access Fund had 22,000 active members and partnered with 12 newly founded local climbing organizations (an increase of nearly 10% over the previous year).

Climbing's user group continues to increase each year due to the sport's introduction into the Olympics, the initiation of more youth teams and college programs, and the consistent

² <https://sgbonline.com/study-reveals-climbings-powerful-impact/>

construction of new climbing gyms. In Tennessee, there are over a dozen climbing gyms including one of America's first nonprofit climbing gyms that allows low-income residents in Memphis to pay through volunteer hours.

-- Local Climbing Organizations --

There are two major non-profit climbing organizations in Tennessee: the Southeastern Climbers Coalition (SCC) and the East Tennessee Climbers Coalition (ETCC). The driving mission of both organizations is to preserve and maintain climbing areas.

Founded in 1993 only two years after the Access Fund, the SCC is one of the oldest coalitions in the country. The SCC has received tremendous support from its 900+ members. In 2021, the coalition clocked 2,000 hours of volunteer work (a 60% increase from the previous year) and fundraised more than \$45,000 for sustainable land access.

The ETCC focuses much of their stewardship and conservation efforts on the climbing areas of the Obed Wild and Scenic River. Along with trail maintenance, land acquisition, and route rebolting work, the ETCC also organizes volunteer groups to help save native Eastern Hemlocks from the invasive woolly adelgid pest.

-- Expanding Economic Value --

A University of Tennessee Chattanooga Tourism Center report in 2016 discovered Chattanooga's Hamilton County sees over 8,600 unique climbers from the fall-to-spring season. These visitors add an annual economic impact of \$6.9 million to Hamilton County.^[18]

The report concludes, "investment in climbing management, marketing, and infrastructure would greatly enhance tourism attraction" because the return on investment is very high considering the lack of human resources and site maintenance needed for climbing tourism.

On a national level, climbers contribute about \$12.5 billion to the American economy—over 85% of which is derived from travel and trips.^[19] Furthermore, climbing gyms are projected to become a \$1 billion industry within the next few years.

-- Prolific Preservation Feats --

With the support of numerous foundations, land trusts, and local coalitions, Access Fund has assisted in preserving 19 crags in Tennessee—the second highest amount of any state after California.^[20]

In the early 1990s, the Foster Falls land manager closed the crag to climbing and the area was under risk of deforestation. The SCC and Access Fund worked hard to build a solid relationship with the land manager and state officials who agreed to remove the logging rights. By 1994, the

state purchased the property and secured climbing and hiking at Foster Falls indefinitely. A few years later, the Fiery Gizzard Trail, a critical access point for Foster Falls, was also purchased.

Foster Falls was the first of many acquisition successes to follow in Tennessee. In 2001, a 528-acre parcel on Black Mountain just west of Knoxville was acquired with initial grant support from the Access Fund. The bouldering and rope climbing area was later transferred to Tennessee State Parks and pieced together an important section of the Cumberland Trail State Scenic Trail.

In 2016, the SCC's largest land acquisition, in both monetary and acreage size, was accomplished with the opening of Denny Cove. Denny Cove is a 685-acre parcel of undeveloped land in the Cumberland Plateau. Along with superb climbing, the climate resilient corridor is a crucial habitat for protecting the 20 rare plant and animal species found in the area.^[21]

By 2020, the \$150,000 Denny Cove land loan was completely paid off thanks to the support of SCC fundraisers and donors. With the completion of one loan, the SCC was able to purchase another property in 2021: Woodcock Cove.

Woodcock Cove is found in Sequatchie Valley, another valued zone in the Cumberland Plateau due to its biodiversity, carbon sequestration, and climate resilience. The crag will not only conserve 64 acres, but also bolster the economically at-risk communities of Sequatchie which hope to see more outdoor recreation participants contribute to local commerce.^[22]

– What's Next? –

Denny Cove, Woodcock Cove, along with other recent acquisitions like Dogwood West and Wauhatchie Boulders, are the success stories that keep the Access Fund and local climbing organizations in Tennessee motivated to fight for more public land access.

A staggering 80% of the climbing areas in the Southeast are still on private property with no permissible admission or guaranteed protection. Our goal is to safeguard more of these jeopardized zones to preserve diverse ecosystems, strengthen local economies, and enhance citizen health in East Tennessee.

[1] <https://tenngreen.org/exploring-tennessees-wildlife-habitats/>

[2]

<https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/tennessee/stories-in-tennessee/cumberland-plateau/>

- [3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Smoky_Mountains
- [4] <https://www.smokiesinformation.org/history-of-the-smokies>
- [5] <https://www.chickasaw.net/our-nation/history.aspx>
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