

Promoting the America's Great Outdoors and the American Heritage Rivers Initiatives

On April 16 President Obama announced “America’s Great Outdoors Initiative.” This program recognizes that we are blessed with a vast and varied natural heritage. The great outdoors has shaped the rugged independence and sense of community that defines the American spirit. Our working landscapes, cultural sites, parks, coasts, wild lands, rivers, and streams are gifts that we have inherited from previous generations. They are the places that offer us refuge from daily demands, renew our spirits, and enhance our fondest memories, whether they are fishing with a grandchild in a favorite spot, hiking a trail with a friend, or enjoying a family picnic in a neighborhood park. They also are our farms, ranches, and forests -- the working lands that have fed and sustained us for generations. Americans take pride in these places and share a responsibility to preserve them for our children and grandchildren.

This program fosters these values we hold dear and recognizes that we are losing touch with too many of the places and proud traditions that have helped to make America special. Farms, ranches, forests, and other valuable natural resources are disappearing at an alarming rate. Families are spending less time together enjoying their natural surroundings. Despite our conservation efforts we are losing too much of our natural resources. Too many of our rivers and streams are suffering as a result of overdevelopment and congestion. We have impacted air quality and water recharge. We are losing our connection to the parks. In fact, last year Governor Paterson threatened the closure of State Parks at a time when we need to invest in reconnecting our communities to wild places and open spaces we grew up with and cherish. Children especially are spending less time outside running and playing, fishing and hunting, and connecting to the outdoors just down the street or outside of town. There is a nature deficit syndrome that exists which is leading us to an environmentally disconnected society. Modern day efforts are often scattered and sometimes insufficient. We must look to the private sector and nonprofit organizations, as well as towns, cities, and states, and the people who live and work in them, to identify the places that mean the most to Americans and leverage the support of the Federal Government to help these community-driven efforts to succeed. Through these partnerships, we will work to connect these outdoor spaces to each other and to reconnect Americans to them.

Across America, communities are uniting to protect the places they love and to develop new approaches to saving and enjoying the outdoors. In the Hudson River Valley we are blessed to have the Palisades Park and the Hudson Highlands. We have engaged groups like the Open Space Institute, Scenic Hudson, Riverkeeper, land trusts, recreation and conservation groups, sportsmen, community and park groups, governments and industry and people from all over New York State to develop new partnerships and innovative programs to protect and restore our outdoors legacy. On August 6th, Marist College hosted the listening tour. Many in the Hudson River Valley had the opportunity to listen to Secretary of Agriculture Vilsak, the Undersecretary of the Interior, and representatives from the EPA and to offer solutions for building a 21st century conservation and recreation agenda which will reconnect people with the outdoors.

The goals of the Initiative shall be to: reconnect Americans, especially children, to America's rivers and waterways, landscapes of national significance, ranches, farms and forests, great parks, and coasts and beaches by exploring a variety of efforts. These efforts include: promoting community-based recreation and conservation including local parks, greenways, beaches, and waterways; advancing job and volunteer opportunities related to conservation and outdoor recreation; supporting existing programs and projects that educate and engage Americans in our history, culture, and natural bounty. We must also build upon State, local, private, and tribal priorities for the conservation of land, water, wildlife, historic, and cultural resources, creating corridors and connectivity across these outdoor spaces and enhance neighborhood parks. We must determine how the Federal Government can best advance those priorities through public/private partnerships and locally supported conservation strategies. By using science-based management practices we can restore and protect our lands and waters for future generations.

The interagency approach to this Presidential Memorandum is similar to Executive Order 13061, The American Heritage Rivers Initiative, in spirit and structure. It is important for the fourteen rivers represented in this initiative to continue to define local action plans, collaborate within communities and bring federal resources and recognition to the local communities. The American Heritage Rivers Alliance has been working to create a holding place within America's Great Outdoors Initiative. Working with the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture, the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Chair of the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), much has been accomplished despite the challenges CEQ has faced this year. We will continue to work with the new Congress toward permanent funding as a line item in the federal budget for the American Heritage Rivers Initiative.