

Making the great outdoors more accessible to everyone

PhD student compiles resource guide to help remove social, physical barriers to outdoor recreation

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
March 10, 2026

Americans adore the great outdoors, flocking to national parks and relaxing in their local green spaces.

A 2025 report by the Outdoor Industry Association, a trade group, found that 181.1 million people — nearly 60% of all Americans age 6 and older — recreated outdoors. That's a 3% increase from the previous year.

Zoe Reep, a PhD student in the School of Social Work at Arizona State University, grew up loving the outdoors and worked for years in the recreation field.

But her research at ASU has revealed that there are barriers to outdoor play for some groups of people. Cost, lack of access, lack of role models and the perception that outdoor activities are unwelcoming are all obstacles — highlighted by a [2024 report](#) from the National Center for Outdoor & Adventure Education.

“It could be sensory differences, religious differences that make it hard to get into the outdoors, like your clothing or your exposure to different genders,” she said, adding that some of the barriers are historic.

To address these issues, Reep created a [300-page collection](#) of low-cost and free opportunities to engage with the outdoors in Arizona, highlighting organizations serving people from all backgrounds, including veterans, minority groups, the LGBTQ+ community, people with disabilities and children. The collection includes legacy recreation groups, informal meetups, advocacy organizations, books, podcasts, gear retailers, webinars, apps, social media accounts, films and places to visit.

“I tried to capture different organizations in Arizona that either catered to diverse populations or were engaging in diverse activities in the outdoors beyond hiking and walking,” she said.

Her list includes geocaching, horseback riding, climbing, skating, birding, gardening, disc golf, foraging and more. To address financial inequity, she also added sources that provide funding to organizations or individual scholarships.

One of her favorite groups she included is Arizona SXS Adrenaline Therapy.

"It's a really unique way of getting people into nature. They take veterans, first responders and active military (members) and their spouses into the backcountry and they go off-roading side by side with them. I just love that idea," she said.

Reep grew up enjoying the outdoors and worked as a climbing and canyoneering wilderness therapy guide in Utah for a few years.

"We would take kids out for wilderness therapy and try to create optimal amounts of stress. Then we would help them figure out how to manage conflict and anxiety using their own tools and coach them through that process," she said.

"But what's the right amount of stress that somebody experiences in the outdoors to create that experience? Because we know that wilderness therapy has a history of being traumatizing for some people, but for other people it's really beneficial."

When she came to ASU, she worked on the Adolescent Child and Adolescent Survivor Initiative, in the Office of Gender-Based Violence. That program provides healing services to families affected by intimate partner violence.

"They wanted me to bring in some outdoor programming, so I did a lot of research. And that led me to see how people experience the outdoors differently," she said.

Reep is working with several undergraduate psychology students on reviewing the literature about psychosocial barriers to outdoor engagement. Her goal is to create policy that would help local organizations reduce those obstacles.

"At the policy level, everybody channels funding or structural changes into introducing more green spaces and addressing logistical barriers like park proximity," she said, "... and they forget that some people may feel uncomfortable going into the outdoors, even though in the U.S. we have this idea that outdoors is beneficial for everyone."

Reep said she hopes her work communicates this: "Nature can be nearby and small, and we don't have to have the best brands or most 'outdoorsy' outfits to engage with nature, and there are other activities besides hiking and camping in the outdoors."

Cool things from 'Affordable, Local Outdoor Opportunities in Arizona and Beyond' by Zoe Reep

Two great apps:

[From Seed to Spoon](#) makes gardening simple with step-by-step guides, personalized recommendations and interactive tools.

[Playground Buddy](#) locates playgrounds from a worldwide database of over 700,000 sites, with directions and photos.

Fun places to visit:

[Arizona Worm Farm](#), a 10-acre urban farm in Phoenix that uses red wiggler worms, black soldier flies and hot compost piles to turn waste into gardening products and produce.

The Arizona Game and Fish Department operates [six fish hatcheries](#), producing over 3 million fish that are stocked into 118 locations throughout the state.

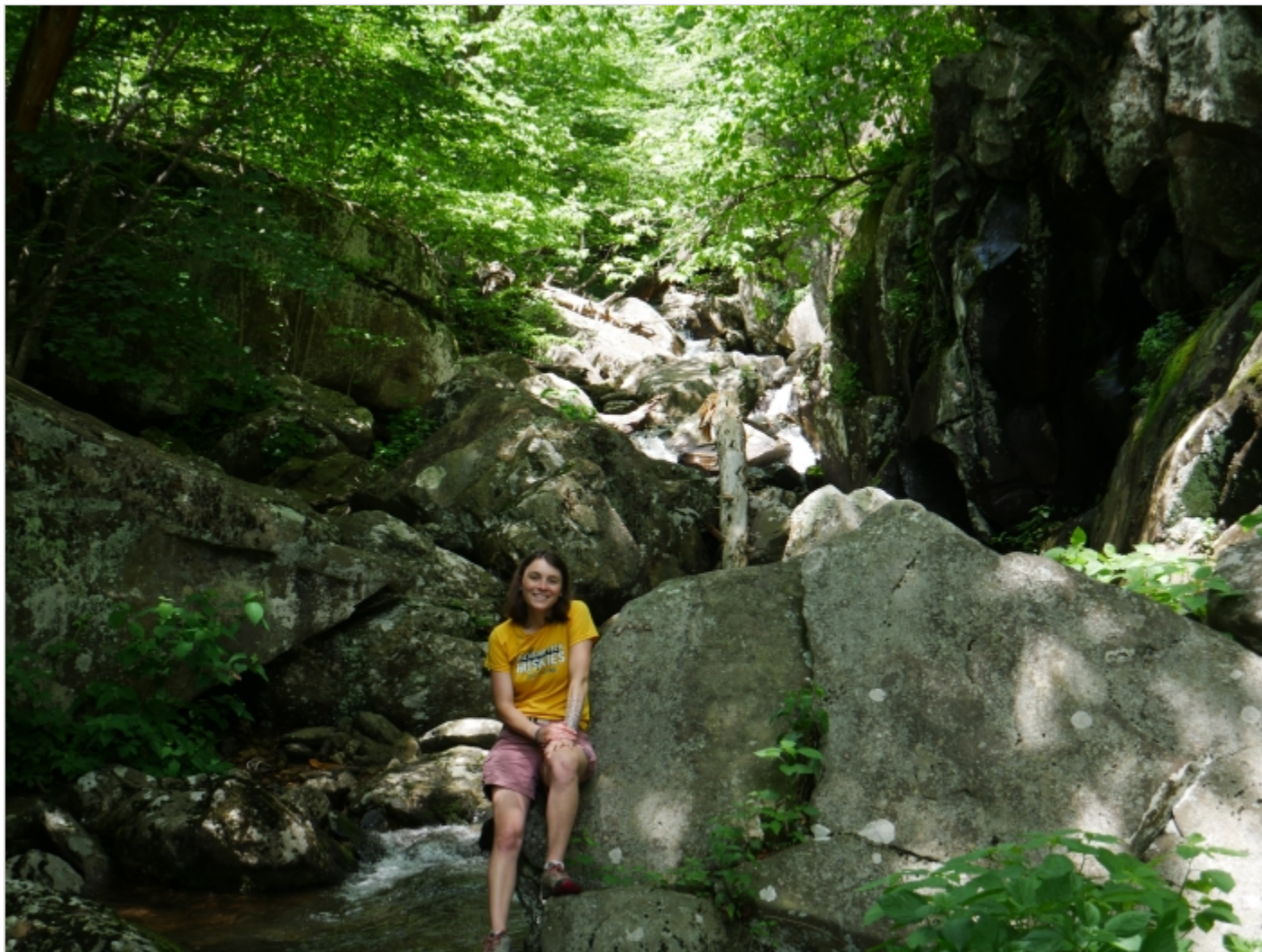
[Southwest Wildlife Conservation Center](#) rescues and rehabilitates native animals that have been injured, displaced or orphaned, and the Scottsdale sanctuary can be toured.

A podcast:

"[Outdoorsy](#)" stems from the belief that the outdoors are for everyone and offers real-world stories from educators, small-business owners, content creators and nature enthusiasts who haven't always felt represented in the traditional "outdoorsy" community.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



ASU PhD student Zoe Reep has created a 300-page collection highlighting resources that help people overcome barriers to engaging with Arizona's outdoor spaces. Courtesy photo