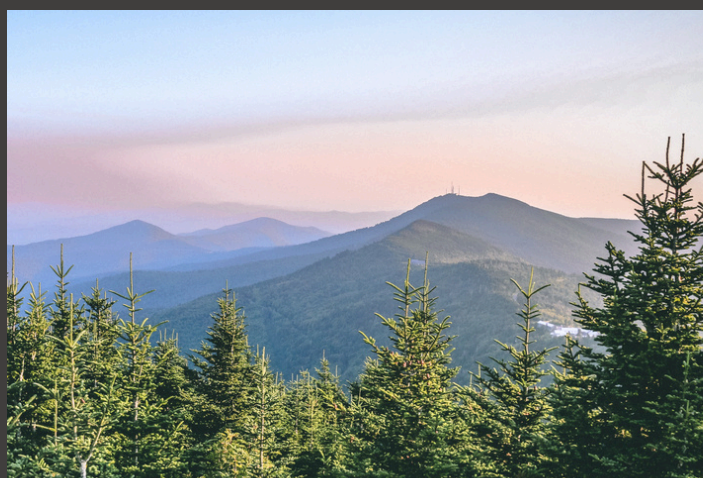


THE OUTDOOR NC BLUEPRINT

From mountains to coast, North Carolina offers some of the most iconic and diverse outdoor experiences in the country.

In 2020, a surge in outdoor demand led to overcrowding, trail erosion, and strain on local communities — underscoring the need for state leadership to safeguard the assets driving demand. Visit NC responded with the Outdoor NC campaign — a responsible recreation partnership with Leave No Trace. But they quickly saw a deeper opportunity: move beyond messaging and provide destinations with the tools and structure to take action.

Visit NC partnered with Tourism Impact Services (TIS) to build a blueprint for action — one that turns statewide principles into local implementation strategies.



Program Snapshot

- **Client:** Visit North Carolina
- **Project:** Outdoor NC Stewardship Programming
- **Duration:** Aug 2022 - Aug 2024
 - 9 months of research
 - 9 months of program development
 - 6 months pilot implementation
- **Impact:** 60+ partners trained, 50 Trail Towns designated, 50+ accessible outdoor assets identified, 5,000+ businesses engaged



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Early in the project, TIS identified **THREE CORE CHALLENGES** facing DMOs:

- No structure, support, and shared incentives to define their stewardship voice.
- No process to align their local messaging with the statewide campaign.
- No path to connect their short-term activities to a long-term strategy.

Local tourism stakeholders also agreed on these **FIVE KEY THEMES**:

- Tourism has a responsibility to protect the outdoor assets it relies on.
- Responsible travel messaging only works when paired with visible, local action.
- Accessibility and inclusion are essential to a resilient visitor economy.
- DMOs must shift from marketing alone to active management.
- The biggest barriers to stewardship? **Time, money, and capacity.**

These findings shaped a clear directive for Outdoor NC: Build a framework that links messaging, community priorities, and on-the-ground action — bridging marketing and management, moving from communication to activation.

This case study documents the methods TIS used to help Visit NC equip DMOs with the tools and structure to scale stewardship in their communities.

FROM VISION TO IMPACT

TIS designed a flexible implementation process grounded in its Tourism Impact Modeling™ framework and built in close collaboration with local stakeholders.

Research & Design:

Evaluated 90+ global programs, engaged 200 stakeholders, developed Outdoor NC's Strategic Vision and Priorities to align programmatic objectives, and established a Quality Assurance (QA) model to guide implementation.

Development & Testing:

Hosted workshops with 60+ DMO partners to validate educational content and program design for the Trail Town Stewardship Designation and Accessible Outdoors Toolkit

Implementation:

Piloted program architecture and toolkits with 15 DMOs, who launched stewardship initiatives and helped adapt tools for broader scalability.



Built. Tested. Proven

Trail Town Designation & Guide:

A QA-based recognition program that activated local stewardship in 50 destinations and aligned trail tourism with responsible travel.

Accessible Outdoors & Stewardship Toolkits:

Ready to use resources enabling DMOs to launch inclusive recreation and stewardship campaigns without needing new staff or funding.

Educational Workshops & Webinars:

Multiple online learning labs and in-person workshops built to fit DMO workflows and boost implementation confidence.



"The Trail Town Program gave our team clarity and confidence. We knew what to do, how to do it, and how it fit with the statewide stewardship message. It's the first time we've had a toolkit that was both flexible and structured — and it worked." - Pilot Evaluation Response

STEWARDSHIP AT SCALE

What began as a campaign to promote responsible recreation has evolved into a statewide system that helps destinations embed stewardship into day-to-day operations

Pilot Program Outcomes (Jan - Jun 2024)

**2,200+ downloads
of the Trail Town
Guide within the
first four weeks.**

- 15 DMO partners launched local stewardship initiatives using Outdoor NC tools and frameworks.
- 50 Trail Towns designated and featured in the Trail Town Guide — promoting responsible travel to 105 trails and 50+ accessible outdoor attractions.
- Over 5,000 businesses encouraged to adopt sustainable tourism practices that protect natural assets and improve visitor experience.
- 100% of Trail Town partners said they would recommend the program; 93% reported a return on their time and resource investment.



Why it Works

- **Tourism Impact Modeling™:** Grounded in a theory of change, TIS connected every input to long-term outcomes — delivering a program with measurable, lasting results.
- **Community-Centered Design:** Programs were shaped through input from 200+ stakeholders — ensuring they were relevant, usable, and grounded in local priorities.
- **Tested & Refined Tools:** Toolkits were piloted with 15 DMOs and refined through implementation — making them practical, adaptable, and field-ready for others.
- **Messaging Alignment:** Enabled DMOs to amplify their local voice while reinforcing a consistent statewide message — creating cohesion without losing place-based identity.
- **Focused on What DMOs Control:** The program centered on levers DMOs control: communications, business engagement, and visitor experience — embedding stewardship through achievable steps in year one, then advancing activation in year two.

Designed for destinations. Tested with DMOs. Structured to scale.



From global frameworks to local trailheads, TIS closes the gap between vision and impact — crafting actionable plans, practical tools, and strategic partnerships that manage tourism pressures and elevate overlooked communities. **Want to get started? Let's talk.**