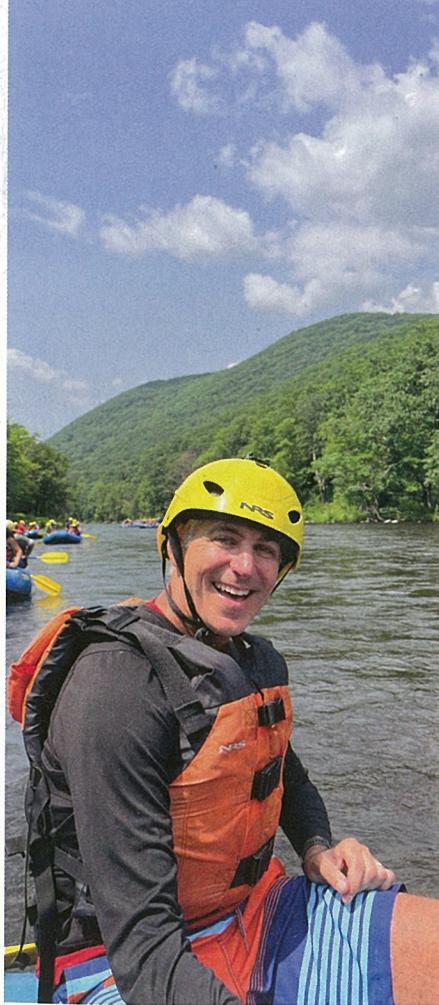


PAUL
JAHNIGE
LEADS
THE
STATE'S
OUTDOOR
RECREATION
VISION

BY
SCOTT
EDWARD
ANDERSON



Betting BIG on the OUTDOORS

With over 103,000 jobs and \$13.2 billion in state GDP at stake, Massachusetts is betting big on outdoor recreation. Leading this ambitious initiative is Paul Jahnige (pronounced JAN-a-gee), whose journey from an urban forester to the first director of the Massachusetts Office of Outdoor Recreation (MOOR) reflects the growing recognition that nature isn't just an escape—it's an economic engine.

Jahnige was born and raised in Williamsburg, located in neighboring Hampshire County. Growing up in a family that valued exploration, he developed a deep appreciation for the state's natural beauty through childhood adventures, Scout expeditions, and college bike trips. "As kids, we recreated in the Berkshires a number of times," says Jahnige. "I canoed on the Housatonic with family and neighbors, visited Bartholomew's Cobble, and hiked Monument Mountain." His mother led a Girl Scout troop and brought the young Jahnige along, including a campout at Camp Bonnie Brae in Otis. These formative experiences, among others, would later shape Jahnige's professional trajectory and passion for accessible outdoor recreation.

His professional path is a testament to his commitment to environmental stewardship and community development. After graduating from Yale with a BA in psychology and an MA in Forestry and Environmental Studies, Jahnige worked internationally—in Kenya, studying wildlife management, and in Ecuador, focusing on the value of non-timber rainforest products. These global experiences have informed his approach to local conservation and recreation efforts. Ultimately, though, he felt he needed to come home.

"I was interested in international conservation development and then rethought that," Jahnige explains. "What do I bring to international conservation and development? I should focus my attention on U.S. communities of need."

Jahnige worked as a community forester in Baltimore, where he helped plant trees and founded the urban environmental nonprofit Community Resources, now DC Greenworks. He returned to Massachusetts to work with the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), first as a forester and then as a trail planner for nearly 17 years.

As a volunteer, Jahnige has served on various community boards, including the Williamsburg Woodlands Trails Committee, and has been an active youth soccer and ultimate frisbee coach. These community connections have given him a grassroots understanding of how outdoor recreation can bring people together and enhance local life.

A Visionary Role for Outdoor Recreation

As the inaugural director of MOOR, Jahnige is tasked with a groundbreaking mission. Launched in September 2023 with an initial budget of approximately \$200,000, the state office aims to coordinate outdoor recreation policy across governmental bodies and the private sector.

The idea for an office dedicated to outdoor recreation was long in the works, an effort spearheaded by former State Senator Adam G. Hinds (Berkshire, Hampshire, Franklin, Hampden). The person who now holds that seat, Senator Paul Mark,

is chairperson of the Joint Committee on Tourism, Arts, and Cultural Development.

"It was great to see Governor Healy put it into place and make it happen," says Mark, who is looking forward to partnering with Jahnige to help move investments into projects in the Berkshires. "It's going to be one of those things where the investments start to pay for themselves."

Former State Representative Smitty Pignatelli (3rd Berkshire District) sees tremendous potential in Jahnige's new role. "The Berkshires are a triple threat, combining natural beauty, rich culture, and incredible history," says Pignatelli. "An office dedicated to outdoor recreation can be a game-changer for our economic development."

Areas of Impact

Central to Jahnige's vision is highlighting the economic significance of outdoor recreation, including its impact on tourism. With recent data demonstrating the tremendous value of outdoor recreation in Massachusetts, Jahnige believes that by promoting the state as a premier destination for outdoor activities, it can further boost its economic health.

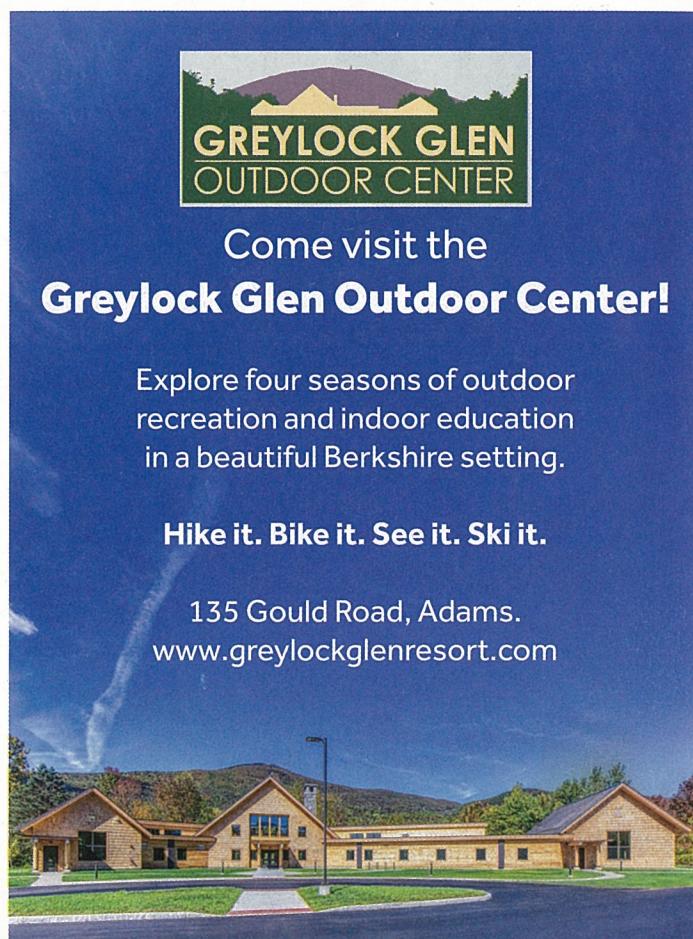
His next steps include marketing Massachusetts as a premier outdoor destination, partnering with the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism, and exploring federal and private grant opportunities to expand the office's reach.

Jahnige's approach is collaborative and inclusive. His initial priority has been listening to and meeting with stakeholders from the private sector, public agencies, and nonprofits to understand their perspectives and needs. He's particularly focused on working with María Belén Power, undersecretary for environmental justice and equity, to ensure that outdoor recreation opportunities are accessible to all communities in the state.

"Getting as close to nature as possible is huge for people," says newly elected State Representative Leigh Davis, who replaced Pignatelli. "Our environment is really the linchpin to everything: health, well-being, welfare, resources, everything. That became increasingly clear during the pandemic when outdoor recreation was popular as a socially distant activity." Davis points to that period as causing a shift in investments, recalling her time on the board of 1Berkshire when it added outdoor recreation to its economic clusters for the region. The countywide organization focuses on economic development and on promoting the region.

Although his office has statewide jurisdiction, Jahnige is in the Berkshires on a monthly, if not weekly, basis for work or play, including mountain biking, cross-country skiing, and hiking. Asked to list some of his favorite places in the Berkshires, Jahnige says he has a soft spot for Mount Greylock, whether for mountain biking, hiking, or climbing the mountain itself. A few years ago, his whole family climbed Ragged Mountain on Father's Day, on the shoulder of Greylock from the Glen. He's also partial to Southern Berkshire spots like Bash Bish Falls and, for backpacking, he recommends Mount Everett and Mount Race via the Race Brook Trail.

Jahnige points to projects like Greylock Glen, which he worked on while at DCR, as exemplary models of outdoor recreation's



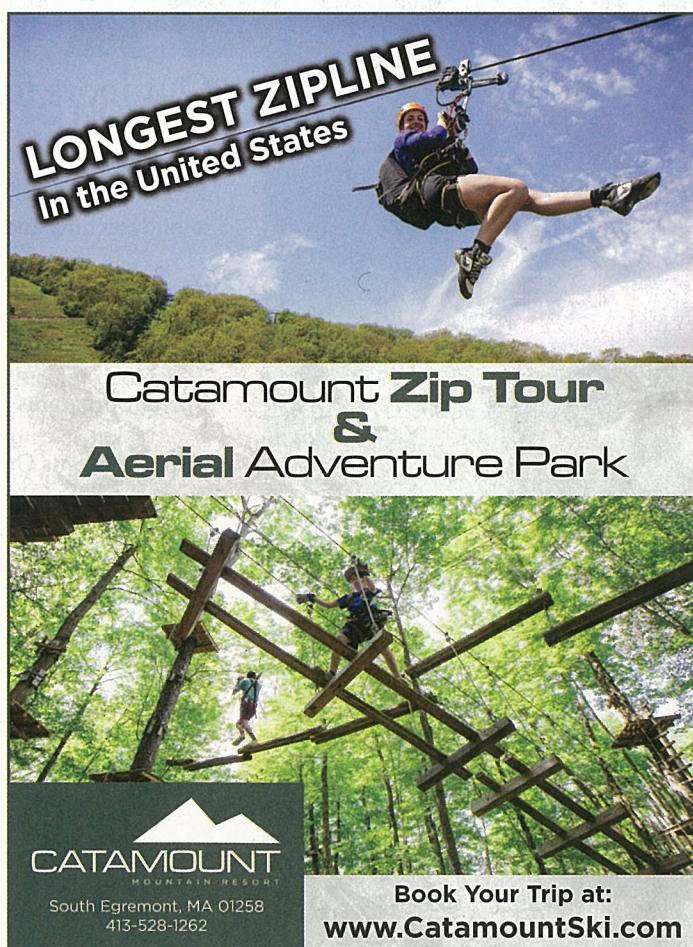
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economic development potential. Having previously managed the trail system development at Greylock Glen, he sees such projects as powerful demonstrations of how state, local, and private resources can collaborate to increase access and create economic opportunities in rural communities.

Looking Ahead

By joining the Outdoor Recreation Learning Network, organized by the National Governors Association in 2019, Jahnige is positioning Massachusetts to be at the forefront of inclusive and innovative outdoor recreation policy. The network allows governors and their outdoor recreation leaders to share and explore strategies to maximize economic, health, and conservation benefits from their states' natural and cultural assets.

Importantly, Jahnige is committed to making outdoor recreation welcoming and accessible. "We want to ensure that outdoor recreation in Massachusetts is as inclusive, diverse, and accessible as possible," he says. This commitment aligns perfectly with the Healey-Driscoll administration's priorities of equity and inclusiveness.

"Paul is the ideal person to lead this important initiative," says Jenny Haskell, president of Berkshire Natural Resources Council. "His depth of experience and strong relationships with agencies and nonprofits across Massachusetts will help him promote investment in trails, parks, and nature reserves in the Berkshires and beyond, both for human recreation and for the benefit of nature itself."

Jahnige represents a new vision for outdoor recreation—one that sees nature not just as a resource, but as a critical component of public health, community well-being, and economic development. As Massachusetts' first director of outdoor recreation, he is poised to transform how the Commonwealth approaches and values its natural spaces.

"What's really exciting about the Berkshires is the intersection between the outdoor recreation economy and the creative economy," Jahnige says. "This combination provides an opportunity to attract visitors from neighboring states who might otherwise spend their tourism dollars elsewhere."

Outdoors for All

The Massachusetts Office of Outdoor Recreation (MOOR) champions outdoor recreation across the state, from hiking and biking to hunting and fishing, from paddling and sailing to birdwatching and stargazing. Its mission centers on three core pillars:

Promote: Attract visitors and engage residents in outdoor activities.

Include: Create the most welcoming and accessible outdoor recreation environment.

Sustain: Balance growth of natural resources with community and economic development.

Current programs and future initiatives of MOOR:

Inclusive Events Grants: Supporting diverse outdoor programming, including recent awards to Berkshire Black Economic Council and Seeing Rainbows. Check their website for the next round: Summer 2025.

"Trails for All": Expanding access for low-income communities, people of color, and individuals with disabilities in woodland areas.

Mountain Biking Development: Awarding \$300,000 in December 2024 for trails in Lanesborough, Hancock, and Williamstown, partnering with New England Mountain Bike Association. Next RFPs (Request for Proposals): Fall 2025.

Digital Resources: Developing a statewide recreation database inspired by Berkshires Outside (berkshiresoutside.org). ■

For more information, go to

mass.gov/orgs/the-massachusetts-office-of-outdoor-recreation