

How Chattanooga became the 'Best Town Ever'

How a midsize city became a mecca for recreation and conservation

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Sara Lewis, Marvin Webb, Charlotte Bossy, from left, with Rock Creek, work on the Pot Point Trail Friday, March 31, 2017.

Photo by Angela Lewis /Times Free Press.

For decades, Chattanooga had a niche, underground outdoors scene. Some called its participants "The Hard Men," while others thought of them as hippies playing in the woods.

They knew the local spots and found areas for recreation. The city's nucleus was surrounded by mountains, a vibrant ecosystem and a river running through the middle, but adventurers had to search for recreation.

"There were major access issues, especially for climbing," said Chad Wykle, co-owner of outdoor retailer Rock/Creek.

Climbers snuck onto properties. Mountain bikers created their own makeshift routes. Trail runners wandered through mountainous woodlands, exploring with no maps and limited paths close to downtown.

"It wasn't completely clear how legal it was," said Andrew Bailey, a sports and leisure professor at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. "Originally it was guys running through the woods saying, 'This is amazing. We should do something about it.' Those are the guys who found the jewels. They went a little renegade."

Some recreation was in place by the late 1980s — caving, hang gliding and paddling, in particular — but despite a region full of possibility, organized recreation, mapped areas and trails were rare.

That soon would change. The scope of outdoor recreation in Chattanooga would shift. What was a city with a small, local group of outdoorsmen became a nationally renowned destination with recreation for people of all skill levels and hundreds of miles of trails, world-class events, thousands of acres of conservation and national recognition.

Outdoor Initiative

In 2003, nearly 1,000 people piled into The Chattanooga hotel for what became one of the largest gatherings of local outdoor advocates in the city's history. The meeting was part of a larger shift to place an areawide emphasis on outdoor recreation: the Outdoor Initiative.

"That was absolutely a shot in the arm for individuals and groups hoping to grow their area of play. That legitimized it," said Philip Grymes, executive director of Outdoor Chattanooga.

The public meetings came out of Chattanooga Venture, a project that brought the community together to discuss the future of the city. Residents spoke of wanting more green space, more outdoor recreation and a better riverfront. The initiative was the next step for city leaders to get input to focus on how outdoor recreation and conservation should be organized and overseen.

Many started to see the outdoor industry as a sleeping giant for Chattanooga, one that hadn't been properly nurtured for decades but could be an economic boon, give the city a new identity and improve residents' health while protecting the assets that now make the city an outdoor haven.

"That meeting at The Chattanooga was really the catalyst that shifted the outdoor movement from a fringe movement to something the community at large was going to focus on," said Ruthie Thompson, with Thrive Regional Partnership. "It was a visual representation for a lot of people that the outdoor community was a lot bigger than everyone thought it was."

The initiative was a project of then-mayor and current U.S. Sen. Bob Corker.

Corker, an outdoorsman himself, went for a century (100-mile) bike ride to celebrate his 50th birthday in 2002 and came across people outdoors, paddling and climbing. The trip helped him further realize the potential for outdoor recreation in the area.

Corker shifted his focus to growing the industry. He created the Outdoor Initiative, famously proclaiming that Chattanooga would become the "Boulder of the East."

"Bob Corker lands, starts having these meetings and puts the flag in the ground saying 'We're going to be the Boulder of the East,'" Rock/Creek co-founder Dawson Wheeler said.

It's a slogan many in the outdoor world are trying to part from, arguing Chattanooga doesn't need to compare itself to other cities.

"I got some ridicule and criticism," Corker said, but the phrase stuck and gave the city's outdoor population a goal to focus on: becoming one of the top outdoor cities in the country, something he said Chattanooga has achieved.

Meetings spawned conversation among conservationists, retailers, recreationists and other community members interested in the outdoors. They built relationships that last to this day and led to the creation of Outdoor Chattanooga, the city-funded department focused on promoting the outdoors. That, in turn, brought outdoor events such as Head of the Hooch, one of the world's largest rowing regattas, which takes place each November in the Tennessee River at Ross's Landing.

"The infrastructure was there, the interest was there, but the big thing was creating the vision that people could buy into and give them the energy to take it to a whole new level," Corker said.

The area

Before a mile of trail was carved or a single event put on, Chattanooga was surrounded by mountains, had a river running through its heart and was home to one of the most biodiverse freshwater ecosystems in the world.

"We have this unique geology and topography that has contributed to Chattanooga's fame as an outdoor destination," Lyndhurst Foundation President and Treasurer Bruz Clark said. "If you look at freshwater diversity, we are the epicenter."

Tennessee is home to the richest freshwater population of any state in the U.S. and has millions of acres of woodlands. The combination of a major river and woodlands in Chattanooga brings a unique opportunity for conservation and recreation.

"What we have, you can't duplicate," Chattanooga Convention and Visitors Bureau President and CEO Bob Doak said. "I look out my window, and we're surrounded by mountains, we have a river that comes through the heart of our downtown, and we have

some of the most incredible outdoor activities that you could possibly want, with the exception of winter sports."

However, the region's vibrant outdoor prosperity didn't automatically mean the city would be known for an outdoor culture with recreational opportunities.

Conservation

In 1981, it was evident to the community that the Tennessee River Gorge — 27,000 acres carved through the Cumberland Mountains by 26 miles of the Tennessee River — was an incredible resource, Tennessee River Gorge Trust Executive Director Rick Huffines said.

It is the only large river canyon bordering a midsize city and the fourth-largest river canyon east of the Mississippi, according to Outdoor Chattanooga. However, it was being developed, and a group of local citizens was concerned.

That concern led to the formation of the Tennessee River Gorge Trust, assigned to focus on land acquisition, conservation and education.

"The founding of Tennessee River Gorge Trust really focused people's attention on what we had, which had been overlooked," said Clark, an outdoorsman himself whose background is in biology and forestry.

To date, the trust — with multifaceted funding from community support, the Lyndhurst and Benwood foundations, and fundraising — has protected about 17,000 acres of the gorge. That land is used for a multitude of purposes including wildlife study, education, conservation and recreation. The area has trails, wildlife and part of the Tennessee Wall — a popular and renowned climbing location — located minutes from downtown.

Chattanooga is the only midsize city that can accurately claim to have a large river canyon, more than a hundred miles of recreational trails, protected forested land, mountains, a river and more so close to the heart of its downtown area.

"That's what helps make us the 'Best Town Ever.' It's the city's closeness to these natural resources," said Mariah Prescott, the trust's business and community access director.

The trust isn't the only local group controlling land for both conservation and recreation. Others, such as the Trust for Public Land, Lula Lake Land Trust, Lookout Mountain Conservancy, and Reflection Riding Arboretum and Nature Center have done similar work.

Local outdoor leaders point to the public-private partnerships those organizations have used to acquire land, protect it and use it for recreation, where appropriate, as the driving force behind Chattanooga's shift.

"If I'm giving credit to one person, it's to [the Trust for Public Land] and [former TPL head] Rick Wood," Wheeler said.

Through Trust for Public Land, Wood connected some of the city's natural and cultural resources through a web of trails and greenways. His projects included building the trails on Stringer's Ridge, the South Chickamauga Greenway and a section of the Tennessee Riverwalk.



Staff photo by Mark Pace

Photo by Contributed Photo /Times Free Press.

Recreation

At the turn of the 21st century, mountain biking in Chattanooga was nearly nonexistent. In 2003, the community had a grand total of seven miles of mountain bike-accessible trails. But looking at the vast amount of controlled land in the hilly Appalachia region, the small mountain biking community saw endless potential.

The Southern Off-Road Bike Association of Chattanooga took on what it believed to be a lofty goal: building 100 miles of narrow trails in the area.

By 2005, the group entered into an agreement with the Tennessee Valley Authority to build and maintain trails on Raccoon Mountain. The initial project brought 20 miles of mountain bike trails that became nationally renowned as some of the best trails east of the Rocky Mountains. SORBA continues to expand and maintain trail systems at Raccoon Mountain and across the area.

"Once Raccoon Mountain got developed, that increased the appetite for mountain biking," Lula Lake Land Trust Executive Director Mike Pollack said. "It whetted the appetite for mountain biking."

Trails began to be rapidly developed throughout the area.

Around the same time, the county and former city parks and recreation departments began shifting from an emphasis on traditional sports played on ball fields to embracing and expanding natural areas with outdoor recreation, according to Hamilton County Parks and Recreation Director Tom Lamb.

That direction, and a major acquisition of thousands of acres of land, led to the creation of Enterprise South Nature Park, with miles of trails designated for mountain biking, walking, nature observation and horseback riding.

"Enterprise South, hands down, is the biggest change [in the area's outdoors scene] since 1990," former Tennessee Greenways and Trails Coordinator and current consultant Bob Richards said.

Mountain bike trails have continued to be built and expanded across the area. SORBA has long passed its 100-mile goal and now is expanding mountain bike trails at Enterprise South and other sites in the region.

Lula Lake Land Trust added trails. Other trails opened on Stringer's Ridge, as did the 5-Points Trail System in Rising Fawn, Ga. The Booker T. Trail System at Booker T. Washington State Park was rehabilitated and expanded, and other locations throughout the region added mountain biking.

"We were always on the map for climbing and rivers, but we never were for mountain biking," Pollack said. "We are now."

While the city had a reputation among climbers for decades, the last 25 years have brought better access, climbing gyms and a move to the mainstream.

Nowhere is the change more apparent than at Stone Fort, also known as Little Rock City.

The site boasts one of the area's premiere bouldering locations. It's one of the host venues for the Triple Crown of Bouldering competition, Roots- Rated claims it is one of the nation's best bouldering fields, and it's only 30 minutes from downtown. It's also on a golf course, and for years climbers had to sneak onto the property to boulder, often being chased away.

Eventually, climbers and climbing groups worked with the landowner. Climbers agreed to sign waivers and pay a fee to use the property, and the owner reaped the benefits.

"That launched a different way of looking at it," Wheeler said. "[The landowner] wanted a permit system and to control volume."

Other landowners were concerned about liability, Wykle said, but climbing groups showed landowners they didn't have much to be worried about.

Across the region, access to what are now nationally renowned climbing areas began to open as private and public groups worked together.

"I think we're in a much better place," Wykle said. "We had a serious issue with accessibility. We didn't know if there would be any [legal] climbing. Where we sit today with climbing alone is incredible."

Marketing

"Even in the mid-1990s, the word on the street was Chattanooga was a place to go if you liked the outdoors, but it wasn't anything like it is now. It wasn't publicized," Bailey said.

"There was no reason to come downtown. The people who came here did the outdoors and left. Chattanooga was viewed as a dangerous city. That word was out there at least as much as the outdoors. You came, you hiked and you left."

Things were starting to change, but Chattanooga had a perception problem. Corker and the visitors bureau officials knew it, and they were determined to market the outdoors.

The town had been pushing itself as the city that had cleaned up its act after famously being designated the "Dirtiest City in America." But those days were long past, Thompson said, and it was time for something new.

After Corker's birthday bike ride, he knew the outdoors could be key to bringing younger residents and expanding the workforce.

"There were a lot of things already in place, and the waterfront was coming on," Corker said. "But we began to promote the heck out of the things that were happening. We began promoting many of the things that many Chattanoogaans had under way."

And the city began to see results.

The visitors bureau brought in travel writers to experience outdoor recreation. Climbing magazine called Chattanooga "America's New Climbing Capital" and a marketing campaign by Outdoor Chattanooga and the visitors bureau led to the town being the first city to be voted Outside Magazine's "Best Town Ever" twice.

"When national magazines are writing about it, that's when you know you made it," Grymes said.

Chattanooga would eventually earn more than \$1 billion dollars in tourism spending in 2015.

However, the marketing and national recognition didn't make Chattanooga an outdoor city, said Doak of the convention and visitors bureau.

"When it comes to marketing, you have to have the product to sell it," he said. "You can't market yourself as something you're not."

That marketing, perception, community support and work by public and private figures eventually brought national and international events to the city, none bigger than Ironman.

In 2017, Chattanooga became the first city in the world to host four Ironman events, including the Ironman 70.3 Men's and Women's Championships.

As the city made more money and brought in more events, officials continued to see the marketing and earning potential of the industry. They deepened their relationship with the private sector, many times partnering with individuals and groups to complete projects, grow trails and host events.

"At the end of the day, Chattanooga had some private and public figures that were tenacious about building out our natural resources," Wheeler said. "End of story."

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