

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS OUTDOOR SUMMIT



MARCH 27



SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
**TOUCH OF NATURE
OUTDOOR EDUCATION CENTER**

**SI
NOW**

CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

FRIDAY, 3/27

8:30AM-9:00AM	Registration & Coffee Service	Freeberg Hall
9:00AM-9:30AM	Opening	Freeberg Hall
9:45AM-10:30AM	Workshop 1	
10:45AM-11:30AM	Workshop 2	
11:45AM-12:30PM	Lunch	Freeberg Hall
12:45PM-1:30PM	Feature Presentation	Freeberg Hall
1:45PM-2:30PM	Workshop 3	
2:45PM-3:00PM	Closing	Freeberg Hall
3:00PM-5:00PM	Open Play/Free Time	



OPEN PLAY & FREE TIME

Join the Touch of Nature team in some free play including new Cargo Net Tower & Climbing Wall!.

Community Connections Bar is available from 3 PM - 5 PM.

A NOTE FROM THE TOUCH OF NATURE DIRECTOR

Welcome to the Southern Illinois Outdoor Summit

This summit began with a simple yet powerful idea: Southern Illinois is a Midwest outdoor mecca, and we have the potential to harness that identity into becoming a true outdoor destination. The opportunities within the outdoor economy are limitless—but it all starts with getting the right people in the room. That’s exactly what today is about.

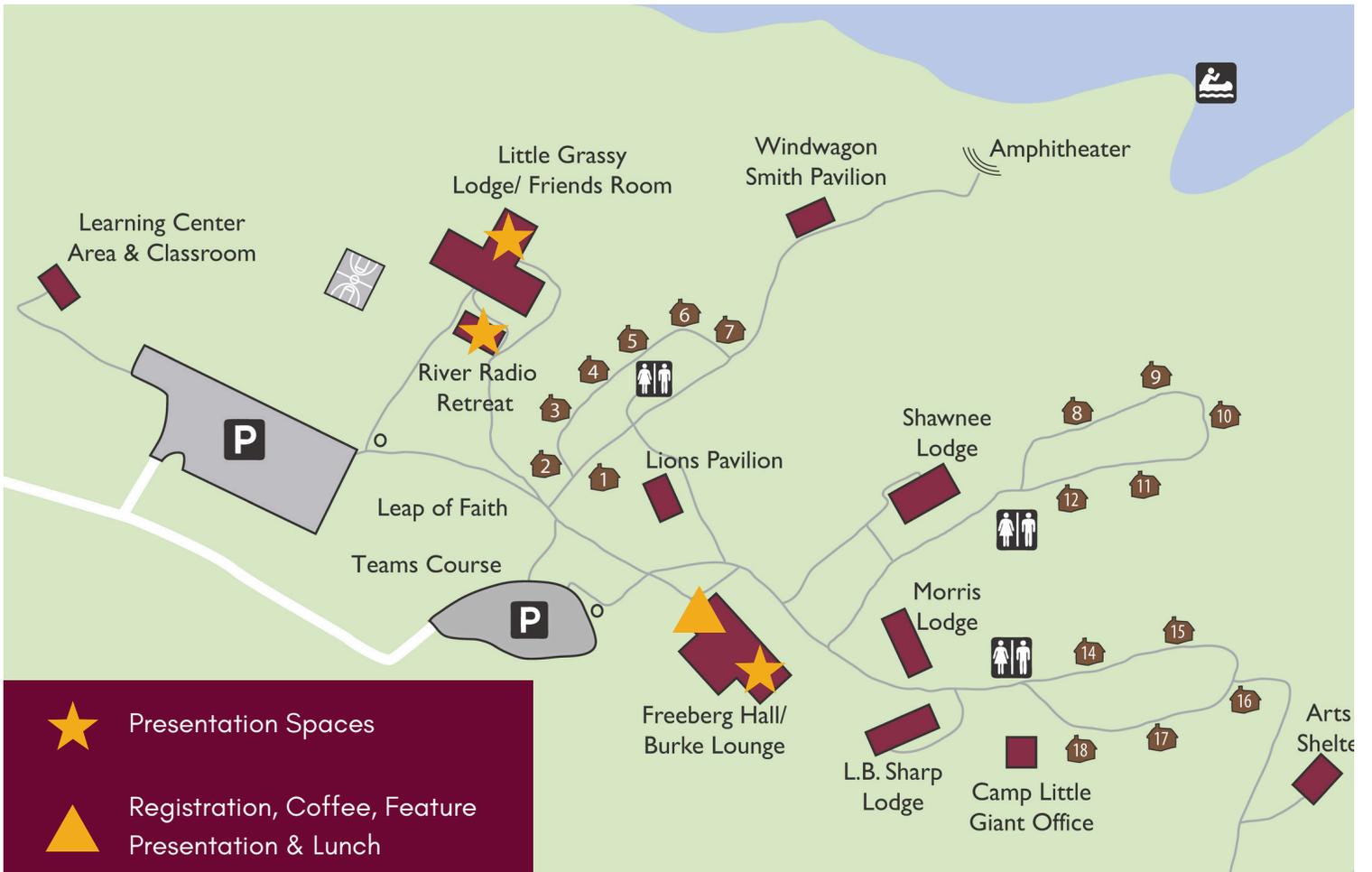
Building a thriving outdoor economy requires a unified vision—one that brings together nonprofits, private businesses, tourism offices, hospitality leaders, outdoor recreation professionals, and everyone in between. This summit is our chance to start the conversation about what that shared future looks like and how we can work together to make it a reality here in Southern Illinois.

It is a true honor to host this event at Touch of Nature, where our mission is to enhance the lives of all people through meaningful outdoor experiences. This work reflects our purpose, and I couldn’t be prouder to see it take shape here. Let’s collaborate, dream big, and lay the foundation for a stronger, more connected outdoor economy in Southern Illinois.

Welcome, and thank you for being part of this journey.

Brian Croft, Director of Touch of Nature Outdoor Education Center

TOUCH OF NATURE MAP



Advocacy 101 for the Outdoors

Linda Warner

River Radio Room

Advocacy 101 is a lively, discussion-based workshop that gives participants a clear view of advocacy through both a foundation and applied lens. You'll learn how decisions are made, how to effectively make your voice heard, and leave with practical tips to start advocating for safer streets, better trails, and active transportation. Bring your curiosity - real-world examples and conversations make this session a chance to see advocacy in action, with an optional take home activity for those ready to take the next step.

Southern Illinois Youth Conservation Corps: A Stewardship Forward Workforce Solution*Phillip Hosfelt, Nolan Hurst, Evan Coulson*

Burke Lounge

Southern Illinois possesses vast public lands but faces a critical land-management capacity gap and a "brain drain" of local talent. This workshop introduces a scalable Youth Conservation Corps model designed to bridge these divides. By creating paid, credentialed career pathways for high schoolers, the initiative builds a skilled workforce for priority stewardship projects. The pilot (a partnership between Camp Ondessonk, the Trailhead Collective, and Vienna High School) integrates academic programming with an intensive summer work crew supporting the Shawnee National Forest. This model proves that family-sustaining careers in the outdoor economy are attainable locally. In this session, we will examine logistical barriers like transportation and equipment while facilitating a partner-mapping exercise to help you launch similar initiatives. Join us to discover how investing in regional youth sustains both our natural resources and our economic future.

Southern Illinois Outdoors: Where Visitors Come and Communities Grow*Deb Barnett & Carol Hoffman*

Friends Room

This session highlights how the region's extraordinary natural landscapes—anchored by the Shawnee National Forest, beautiful vineyards, scenic byways, lakes, and trail systems—are fueling both tourism and community growth. This presentation explores how outdoor recreation attracts visitors, supports small businesses, inspires new investment, and strengthens quality of life for residents. Attendees will discover how Southern Illinois' natural assets create shared value for travelers, locals, and the regional economy, and why the outdoors is emerging as one of the most powerful tools for building vibrant, resilient communities.

Nature-Based Tourism for Neurodivergent Families

Jessi Thomas

River Radio Room

It's a fact; nature-based interactions in group therapy settings provide short-term improvement in sensory, behavioral, and social functioning for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Here are some more facts; over 32 million trips taken per year are by individuals with cognitive differences. 15% of the population is neurodivergent, 2 million children are currently diagnosed with autism. What's more? In a recent study, 87% of parents to children with autism do not take family vacations, but 93% would be more likely to travel to autism certified options or with neurodivergent-friendly accommodations.

In this discussion, we'll talk about challenges the parents of an autistic child or neurodivergent family face when taking to the outdoors, what changes can be made to make spaces and events more inclusive, and how to market in a way that is appealing but informative. By utilizing the abundance of nature, forests, retreats, lakes, and lodging in Southern Illinois, we become THE destination for Special Needs Travel; which the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards calls "the fastest growing segment of the market."

Crafting Your Big Idea

Susan Odem

Burke Lounge

This hands-on workshop equips participants with the basics needed to begin "crafting their big idea." Grants can help nonprofits, educational institutions, community groups, government agencies, and occasionally, businesses and individuals achieve bigger things than they can do on their own. While grants can be the means to obtain these needed resources, to be a contender, you need to learn how to play the game. Before grant writers seek out a funding source, the first step is getting words down on paper, including what your organization does and what you want to accomplish with a grant. While grant writing can be a daunting task, breaking it down into steps can be the key to success. During the workshop, Odum will outline the key elements of a grant proposal and provide participants with basic concepts that grant seekers can use to make a case for why a funder should support their "big idea."

Rend Lake - A Recreation Destination, Exploring the History, Economic Impact, Recreational Opportunities, and Natural Resources of Rend Lake

Breanna Trovillion

Friends Room

The US Army Corps of Engineers is one of the nation's top recreation providers. Rend Lake is a USACE managed lake that powers the local economy, provides water to communities across Southern Illinois, supports wildlife, and attracts over 1 million visitors annually. In this workshop, participants will learn about the history of Illinois's second largest man-made lake, the diverse recreational activities offered, various management strategies, and how the US Army Corps of Engineers utilizes creative solutions to overcome budget constraints to continuously provide high quality customer service.

Weaving the Web of Southern Illinois Leisure Culture

Lindsay and Tim Stockhecke

River Radio Room

This session reframes recreation in Southern Illinois through the lens of leisure culture, showing how history, art, food, and outdoor spaces can be intentionally connected to create cohesive, immersive experiences. Participants will explore storytelling as infrastructure and learn how curated language, imagery, digital assets, in-person touchpoints, and marketing strategies can thread across corridors, industries, and experiences. Leaders, small business owners, and experience creators will learn why it's essential to embody the leisure culture they promote, experiencing the region firsthand to understand natural rhythms, customer touchpoints, and marketing nuances unique to Southern Illinois.

Rooted Presence: Exploring Forest Therapy

Emily Webb

Burke Lounge

In this experiential workshop, participants will explore the foundations of forest therapy and its relevance to outdoor recreation, wellness, and environmental interpretation. The session begins with a concise introduction to the origins, benefits, and guiding principles of forest therapy. From there, participants will be led through a short, accessible forest-bathing style walk that encourages slowing down, engaging the senses, and reconnecting with the land. Through simple invitations and moments of quiet reflection, attendees will experience how curiosity and mindful presence can transform the way people relate to natural spaces. The workshop closes with a group sharing circle and practical suggestions for weaving forest therapy techniques into programs, classrooms, or personal practice.

Evidence-Based Advocacy: Integrating Health, Education, and Economy in Outdoor Recreation

Dr. Brooke Jacobs, Dr. Katie Dudley, and Dr. Evan Coulson

Friends Room

Southern Illinois's natural landscapes are an economic engine driving public health and high-impact youth development. In this discussion-forward panel, we explore how investing in outdoor recreation creates a strategic 'win-win-win' for regional vitality and prosperity. Three experts will connect the dots between wellness, workforce, and economic resilience: Dr. Brooke Jacobs (Delve Health Consulting) will detail health and wellness impacts; Dr. Katie Dudley (U of I Extension) will map connections between recreation infrastructure and economic development; and Dr. Evan Coulson (The Trailhead Collective) will illustrate how place-based service learning cultivates career readiness and holistic wellbeing in our region's youth. Beyond theory, this session focuses on application. Attendees will participate in a collaborative 'action mapping' exercise, equipping them with research-backed language to articulate the full value of public lands. Join us to develop concrete strategies for championing outdoor investment as a driver of community well-being and resilience.

ABOUT THE PRESENTERS

BREANNA TROVILLION

Breanna Trovillion is a lead Natural Resources Specialist for the US Army Corps of Engineers Rend Lake Project. Breanna's career at Rend Lake began in 2015 as a student intern. After completing her M.S. in Plant Biology at SIU Carbondale, Breanna was selected as the team lead for the Interpretive Services and Outreach Programming department at Rend Lake. Breanna's role is focused on educating Rend Lake's 1 million visitors about Rend Lake's natural resources, recreational opportunities, and water safety. Breanna is also responsible for cultivating partnerships with community organizations and businesses and employing creative strategies to leverage resources to address flatlining budgets and rising operations costs.

DR. BROOKE JACOBS, DR. KATIE DUDLEY, AND DR. EVAN COULSON

Dr. Brooke Jacobs (Delve Health Consulting), Dr. Katie Dudley (U of I Extension), and Dr. Evan Coulson (Trailhead Collective) form a multidisciplinary team dedicated to regional vitality. This panel of experts will collectively share evidence on the wellness benefits of nature, the community development implications of investing in an outdoor recreation economy, and how regional natural resources serve as a platform for place-based service learning, workforce development, and the development of agency in regional youth. Together, they present an integrated model that provides the tools necessary to champion outdoor investment as a driver of community resilience.

DEB BARNETT & CAROL HOFFMAN

Deb Barnett is the Executive Director of Southern Illinois Now, a regional economic development organization serving the 17 southernmost counties of Illinois with business development, workforce, and marketing the region as top priorities. Carol Hoffman is the Executive Director of the Southernmost Illinois Tourism Bureau, a key figure in promoting the southern region of Illinois as a travel destination. For more than 30 years, Carol has coordinated efforts that showcase the region's attractions, including its outdoor amenities like the Shawnee National Forest and the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail. Both lifelong Southern Illinoisans, Deb and Carol have dedicated their careers to advancing Southern Illinois and celebrating the region they call home.

EMILY WEBB

Emily Webb is a forest therapy guide, creative facilitator, and founder of Shawnee Goddess Guides. With a background in Outdoor Recreation Leadership and Management, she weaves nature connection, mindfulness, and gentle ritual into experiences that support emotional well-being and curiosity. Emily leads forest bathing sessions, nature gatherings, sound journeys, and yoga-infused practices that invite participants to slow down and reconnect with the land. Her work centers on creating accessible, heart-centered spaces for personal renewal and community connection through the healing power of the forest.

PHILLIP HOSFELT, NOLAN HURST, EVAN COULSON

Phillip Hosfelt, Dean of System Programs at Vienna High School, Nolan Hurst, Camping Services Director at Camp Ondessonk, and Evan Coulson, Founder of the Trailhead Collective bring their belief in the value of investing in the region's outdoor economy to tangible collaborations that embrace and promote their shared vision for a vibrant and livable Southern Illinois.

ABOUT THE PRESENTERS

JESSI THOMAS

Jessi Thomas is the creator behind @thomasfamilygoes and Southern Illinois Social Media. Jessi began social media coordination and community event planning in 2017 for non-profit organizations and libraries. She attended McKendree University for Marketing, Public Relations, and Organizational Leadership. Shifting to tourism marketing in 2022, she works as a content coordinator, creator, and creative strategist for tourism bureaus and local businesses. Thomas Family Goes showcases the area through nature exploration, staycations, and nostalgic stories from a Southern Illinois native. As a neurodivergent family, she has perspective on creating inclusive spaces and special needs travel.

LINDA WARNER

Linda Warner has been running and bicycling for fitness for years. Linda took a Leadership Training Course with Adventure Cycling out of Missoula, MT and led two self-contained bicycle tours. Linda became concerned with safety while riding in rural neighborhood on farm roads. Linda saw the opportunity to become a Board Member for Ride Illinois to become more involved with the safety and advocacy efforts of bicycling in Illinois. Linda has volunteered for the Grand Illinois Bicycle Tour, served as Secretary of Ride Illinois and is Chairperson of the Events & Program Committee.

LINDSAY & TIM STOCKHECKE

Lindsay and Tim Stockhecke own Deliciously Ordinary (DO So/ILL), a creative agency specializing in immersive experiences, out-of-the-box fresh florals, and social media storytelling that ignite the magic in between the lines. Lindsay holds a bachelor's degree from SDSU, and Tim holds a master's in Therapeutic Outdoor Recreation from SIUC. Together, they began their careers designing leisure and motivational programs in a juvenile methamphetamine treatment setting. For over 16 years, they have been exploring Southern Illinois, and for the past five, they have focused on creating programming, tourism research, marketing, and storytelling that elevate regional experiences. Living, working, and raising their family in the area has given them a deep understanding of the region's leisure culture, challenges, and potential. They share this work with their three children and a lively household of pets, who keep creativity, play, and connection at the center of daily life.

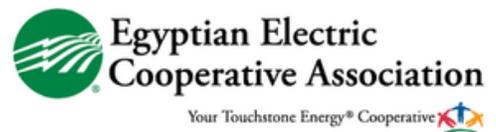
SUSAN ODUM

Susan Odum is a Community Development Extension Specialist at the University of Illinois. In her role, Odum is charged with working collaboratively with communities and counties across the region to address the most pressing issues they face. She graduated summa cum laude from Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) with a Master of Business Administration (MBA) and received certification as a Professional Community and Economic Developer (PCED) from the Community Development Council. Odum is also a certified trainer of Purdue University Extension's Beginners Guide to Grant Writing. Odum resides in southernmost Illinois and serves on the Southernmost Illinois Tourism Bureau board.

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SOUTHERN ILLINOIS OUTDOOR SUMMIT 2027

TOUCH OF NATURE OUTDOOR EDUCATION CENTER

MARCH 26, 2027