

# Outdoor Business

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## On the Move

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# Political Activism



**By Will Manzer**  
**CEO, Eastern Mountain Sports**

I wish I could say that joining Eastern Mountain Sports was a calculated business decision, but it wasn't. Having hiked, biked, camped and backpacked my entire life, I reacted to the opportunity to become CEO of an outdoor retailer like a 4-year-old reacts to a shiny new toy – I grabbed it with both hands and took off.

As I immersed myself into my dream job, my considerable enthusiasm was almost immediately tempered by two sobering social/political challenges: our federal government's profound failure to finance land and water conservation efforts, and the child obesity epidemic that has exploded over the past two decades.

I quickly realized that these two issues pose a significant threat to both my new company and the outdoor industry as a whole. First and foremost, our customers need open and accessible places to use the gear and apparel that our industry provides. Fewer places to play is not healthy for our industry or our customers.

Second, today's children are our customers of the future. Disturbing numbers of them are inactive, overweight and suffering from afflictions at an alarming rate, such as high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol, gallstones and painful joint conditions. More than a threat to the health of our future customer base, these disorders put our children at risk for significantly shorter life spans, mostly due to unhealthy diet and lack of exercise.

After processing all of these harsh realities, I became incredibly concerned.

Fortunately I'm not alone. Long before I joined Eastern Mountain Sports, the Outdoor Industry Association and the Outdoor Industry Foundation had been doing excellent work to raise public awareness about conservation, childhood obesity and the need for our government to rearrange its priorities.

A perfect example of recent progress is the "I Will" campaign introduced at the Outdoor Retailer Summer Market. This creative program asked each person at ORSM to pledge to take two kids outside during the next year in an effort to connect youth to the outdoors and help reverse downward participation trends in our industry.

In fact, nowhere is the adversity facing the outdoor industry more obvious than the disheartening story of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). Established by Congress in 1964, the LWCF Act directed the federal government to allocate royalties from offshore oil and gas development to purchase land, waterways, wetlands and other resource lands for national parks as well as close-to-home state and local parks.

Although the LWCF has a budget cap of \$900 million annually (\$450 million state-side and \$450 million matching federal funds), this level has been authorized by the federal government only twice in the more than four decades the program has existed. That's not merely shameful, it's bordering on criminal, as the current administration is literally stealing crucial funding that should go to finance the LWCF's conservation efforts.

The more I learned about these issues, the deeper my conviction grew to do something about them – mainly making volunteerism, conservation, stewardship and fitness more prominent in our society.

Since I joined Eastern Mountain Sports, I have tripled the number of paid-time-off days each employee receives to volunteer for worthy conservation projects or outdoor organizations in their local communities. In my industry, I am a regular attendee at the Outdoor Industry Association's Capitol Summit in Washington, DC.

Recently, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to participate in a small delegation that met with senior advisors of one of the presidential campaigns. At the campaign's request, senior staff members of the OIA and the Conservation Alliance drafted a 10-point conservation and stewardship action plan, which has been presented to the campaign.

The things that I have been able to do in support of my business, my industry and my community pales in comparison to the number of things I would like to do and encourage others to do as well. I believe the \$730 billion recreation economy, of which our industry is a part, demands respect. I know in my heart that change is inevitable when a group of concerned and organized people like us rallies around an honorable cause in the face of indifference.

With a presidential election around the corner, the choice we all have to make will play a critical role in this country's future. We must urgently raise the decibel level of our collective voices and demand measurable action so that future generations have nature's resources to enjoy and be healthy enough to enjoy them.

You, too, have a voice. Use it. Arm yourself with information, including each presidential candidate's voting track record on conservation issues. Decide which candidate will make changing our flawed environmental policy a true priority versus which one will continue to look the other way. Then make your voice heard by voting in the upcoming election.

In conclusion, I offer this simple call to action to everyone in the outdoor industry: be as attentive to the health of our children as you are to the needs of your business and as active in the defense of our natural places as you are in your enjoyment of them. More than the right thing to do, it's the responsibility we all share to protect the people and places on which our future depends. ■

**"It is our shared responsibility to change what is wrong and do more that is right."**