



PA WILDS REGION FINDINGS: Challenges, Strengths, and Pathways for Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Growth

This report is part of a broader research initiative which examines the dynamics of entrepreneurial ecosystems in rural and micropolitan areas of Pennsylvania, focusing on how anchor economies and institutions shape economic development, support entrepreneurship, and impact community resilience in the North Central Pennsylvania/Pennsylvania Wilds, Hazleton, and Berks regions. It highlights the role of the Invent Penn State LaunchBox Network, a strategic initiative aimed at fostering entrepreneurship and innovation across the Commonwealth.

This summary report highlights findings for the Pennsylvania Wilds region. Grounded in the larger research project, which entailed 41 key informant interviews, document and website reviews, and participant observation, this study provides new insights into how anchors, such as tourism and outdoor recreation in the Pennsylvania Wilds, manufacturing in Hazleton, and education and healthcare in Berks, contribute to sustainable economic development. It underscores the importance of place-based entrepreneurial support systems, highlights the potential for innovation and business growth in often-overlooked regions, and offers recommendations to inform policy and practice that strengthen long-term community resilience.

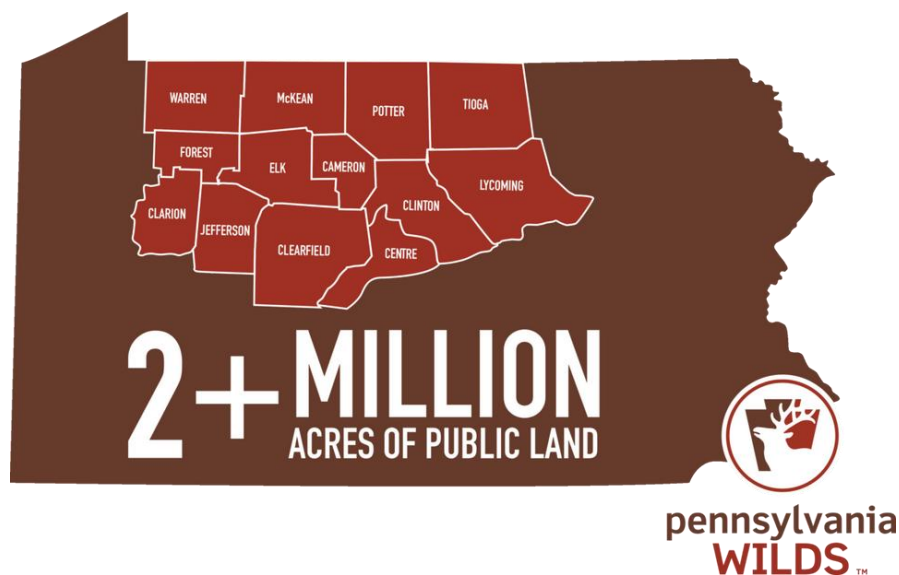


Image source: PA Wilds Center

The PA Wilds region, home to approximately 500,000 residents, is celebrated for its breathtaking landscapes, abundant wildlife, and strong community bonds that drive a unique entrepreneurial ecosystem. As the region increasingly capitalizes on its natural assets, the interplay of local strengths and challenges defines the economic environment, with tourism and place-based identity forming the core of its growth. This report synthesizes insights from regional stakeholders, offering a snapshot of current realities and actionable recommendations for advancing PA Wilds' entrepreneurial potential.

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| <i>Elevating Local Voices*</i> | 5 Entrepreneurs interviewed | 5 Community partners interviewed | 3 PA Wilds Center staff interviewed |
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Methods This research draws on interviews with entrepreneurial community members, insights rooted in their lived experiences, direct observations during research visits to the region, and a review of relevant documents, websites, and literature. The findings in this report are based on a limited sample and are not necessarily definitive. While these perspectives provide valuable firsthand accounts of the ecosystem in the PA Wilds, they are not all-encompassing. The findings reflect individual experiences and should be considered as part of a broader, ongoing conversation about entrepreneurship in the region.

a region with unique challenges...

The PA Wilds spans vast, often remote rural areas, where entrepreneurs face challenges that are unique to a region rich in natural resources but limited in infrastructure. Long travel distances between towns make it difficult for individuals and businesses to access resources, network with others, and engage in community support systems. This weak connectivity limits frequent in-person collaboration and fosters a sense of detachment from larger business networks. One local entrepreneur explains that,

"When you're an entrepreneur, you can feel like you're on an island."

Limited broadband access further isolates these businesses from modern commerce tools, digital training, and remote networking opportunities, which are increasingly essential in today's digital economy. Entrepreneurs in the PA Wilds cite the absence of a centralized, clear entry point for navigating available resources. Without consolidated access, business owners struggle to obtain vital support like grants, loans, skill-building programs, and strategic guidance.

Additional Barriers to Business Success Include-

- **Limited Financial Resources:** Entrepreneurs face obstacles in securing funding due to scarce loan and grant opportunities compared to their urban counterparts. The high costs of supplies and operations compound these financial constraints.
- **Uncoordinated Marketing & Awareness:** Despite the presence of valuable programs, many entrepreneurs are unaware of how to enter regional support systems, largely due to fragmented outreach and a lack of unified marketing efforts.

...and extraordinary opportunity!

Despite these obstacles, the PA Wilds is rooted in a strong community culture and regional pride that fuels entrepreneurial spirit and place-based growth. Small businesses, farmers' markets, and artisan shops are vital to the local economy, fostering a cycle where dollars remain within the community, creating jobs, and reinforcing local services.

Organizations such as the PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship and the PA Route 6 Alliance are crucial to the region's success, striving to provide essential resources like training, networking opportunities, and promotional support for businesses. These initiatives bolster tourism by amplifying the PA Wilds brand, helping local entrepreneurs grow alongside regional tourism. This deep sense of place and shared commitment to community development is echoed by entrepreneurs in the region. As one noted:

*"Small communities within the Wilds, they have this closeness...
and everybody wants to see their town grow."*

This place-based development approach strengthens community ties and allows businesses to connect their offerings with the region's natural beauty, giving tourists and locals alike an experience steeped in regional culture and pride.

The Pennsylvania Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship

The PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship serves as a vital connector for local businesses, offering resources, networking, and branding that help rural entrepreneurs thrive. Entrepreneurs in the region value the Center for fostering connections, providing a much-needed sense of community and support in an otherwise isolated area. Through its PACE (Plan, Accelerate, Commit, Expand) business development program, the Center equips artisans with essential business skills and networking opportunities, enabling growth and collaboration among local creators. As one entrepreneur put it, "The PACE program gave me the skills I didn't know I was missing."

Aligning with the PA Wilds brand further benefits entrepreneurs by attracting eco-conscious visitors and strengthening business identity, with one study participant noting, "It's more than a logo; it's being part of a community that cares about our environment." Additionally, the Center's partnerships with state parks and initiatives like the Wilds Cooperative of PA increase visibility for local products, drawing in visitors who appreciate the region's culture and natural beauty. Through these initiatives, the PA Wilds Center empowers local entrepreneurs to grow sustainably while staying deeply connected to the region's identity and natural assets.

North Central PA LaunchBox

The North Central PA (NCPA) LaunchBox at Penn State DuBois serves as a critical resource for entrepreneurs in the PA Wilds, providing services such as prototyping, educational programs, and workforce development tailored to rural needs. By partnering across counties, the LaunchBox aligns with the PA Wilds' mission to support place-based growth, delivering resources to entrepreneurs who might otherwise lack access to business support. Programs like

K-12 education and local skills training build a pipeline of future business leaders and strengthen the regional workforce, reflecting the PA Wilds' emphasis on community-driven economic resilience.

Despite its strengths, the LaunchBox faces challenges with visibility and accessibility. Many entrepreneurs are unaware of its offerings, and the lack of coordinated outreach limits its reach within the region. Additionally, geographic distance makes in-person access challenging for those in remote areas, creating a barrier to full engagement. Increasing visibility through targeted marketing and establishing virtual or satellite offerings could make the LaunchBox more accessible to all PA Wilds entrepreneurs, helping it more effectively serve the region's economic growth and community-centered development goals.

Tourism & Outdoor Recreation as an Economic Anchor

Tourism and outdoor recreation anchor the PA Wilds economy, bringing in visitors year-round for activities such as hiking, fishing, wildlife observation, and cultural festivals. This influx of visitors fuels a range of local businesses, including accommodations, dining, gas stations, and retail shops, creating a ripple effect that sustains regional economic activity. Beyond nature-based experiences, the PA Wilds is dedicated to eco-tourism, ensuring that tourism development aligns with conservation principles, protecting the natural environment while promoting sustainable growth.

Events like the Elk Expo and the Autumn Leaf Festival showcase the PA Wilds' heritage, drawing both locals and tourists into the community. These events not only enhance the region's cultural profile but also reinforce its image as a responsible, sustainable tourism destination. In this way, the PA Wilds sets itself apart, aiming to balance the economic benefits of tourism with a commitment to preserving the pristine landscapes that define the region.



Image source: Left, The Record Online; Right: Pennsylvania Wilds

Opportunities for Sustainable Growth

To nurture the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the PA Wilds, targeted improvements in connectivity, resource accessibility, and local collaboration are essential. Key areas for action include:

- **Expanding Broadband Infrastructure:** Enhancing internet access in rural areas will enable businesses to engage more fully in digital markets, access online resources, and

foster remote networking opportunities. Better broadband infrastructure is a foundational need that could transform rural business operations.

- **Centralizing Resources for Entrepreneurs:** A central online hub or physical resource center would provide a clear, accessible pathway for entrepreneurs to connect with support programs, funding sources, training, and partnership opportunities.
- **Strengthening Awareness and Outreach:** Expanding marketing for existing resources, such as those offered by the NCPA LaunchBox, PA Wilds Center, and the PA Route 6 Alliance, can ensure that local entrepreneurs know where to find assistance and how to leverage available programs to grow their businesses. Better coordination and a unified approach to outreach will maximize the impact of these initiatives.

Better accessibility mechanisms, such as user-friendly platforms and designs created for connectivity, are essential to ensure that central sourcing opportunities effectively support entrepreneurs across the PA Wilds.

For More Information:

Community members and entrepreneurs interested in learning more or engaging with local resources can connect with:

- PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship: hello@pawildscenter.org
- PA Route 6 Alliance: info@paroute6.com
- DuBois LaunchBox: NCPALaunchbox@psu.edu

This report is part of a series of entrepreneurial ecosystems research briefs prepared by undergraduate research assistants and faculty members based in Penn State's Center for Economic and Community Development: Olivia Karoly, Maggie Fechtman, Emma Walker, C. Daniel Azzara, and Theodore R. Alter.

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