

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-106149](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Some veterans leave military service with wilderness survival and other skills related to outdoor recreation. VA also provides eligible veterans with benefits to pursue additional education and training. However, little is known about the educational or employment pathways for veterans into the outdoor recreation sector.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022, includes provisions for GAO to review veterans' use of educational benefits and pursuit of careers in outdoor recreation. This report describes the opportunities and challenges for veterans to (1) use the GI Bill and other VA benefits toward outdoor recreation education and (2) pursue federal employment in outdoor recreation.

GAO identified GI Bill-approved outdoor recreation education programs as of 2022 using VA and Department of Education data. GAO also analyzed 2021 OPM data—the most recent available—on federal employment at four agencies with missions connected to the outdoors: the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior, NOAA, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. GAO also interviewed officials at these four agencies and reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations.

In addition, GAO interviewed officials at VA and outdoor recreation certificate programs selected based on veteran enrollment and approval for VA educational benefits. GAO also interviewed representatives of an outdoor recreation industry association and veteran advocacy groups.

View [GAO-23-106149](#). For more information, contact Melissa Emrey-Arras at (617) 788-0534 or emreyarrasm@gao.gov

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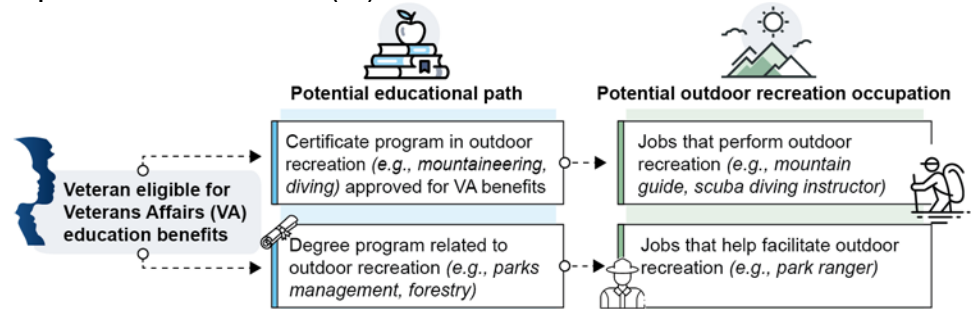
VETERANS EMPLOYMENT

GI Bill Benefits Can Help Lead to Outdoor Recreation Careers

What GAO Found

Eligible veterans can use the GI Bill and other education benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to pursue certificate or college degree programs related to outdoor recreation. This is a \$159 billion industry involving outdoor physical activities, such as skiing or fishing, according to a 2021 federal estimate. GAO identified 34 GI Bill-approved certificate programs and about 1,400 college degree programs related to outdoor recreation. However, veterans may face challenges pursuing outdoor recreation education, such as the seasonality or specific locations of some programs. For example, some courses in avalanche rescue are available only in mountainous regions during the winter.

Examples of Veterans' Potential Education Pathways to Outdoor Recreation Careers Using Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Benefits



Source: GAO analysis of program data from Departments of Veterans Affairs and Education. | GAO-23-106149

In 2021 federal agencies employed about 4,900 veterans in a number of outdoor recreation positions. These veterans comprised 11 percent of the more than 44,000 federal outdoor recreation employees, according to GAO's analysis of Office of Personnel Management (OPM) data. GAO identified 11 federal outdoor recreation positions at the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Officials at these agencies told GAO that they attract veterans to outdoor recreation positions through career fairs, internships, and other programs or initiatives. More than one-third of these employees hold seasonal or part-time jobs. This can deter veterans seeking full-time, year-round employment from pursuing these careers. Further, federal officials told GAO that some outdoor recreation jobs are entry level and low paying, and thus may not be a good fit for veterans who are transitioning to civilian employment mid-career.

Most Common Federal Outdoor Recreation Positions for Veterans, as of 2021

Outdoor recreation position category	Number of veterans employed
Forestry technician	1,710
General natural resources management and biological sciences	967
Maintenance mechanic (e.g., trail worker)	959
Park ranger	732

Source: GAO analysis of September 2021 Office of Personnel Management data for selected agencies.

Note: For more details, see Table 1 in GAO-23-106149.