



Trails, Tourism & Community Growth

South Dakota Governor's Conference on Tourism, January 22, 2026



About Us

Uriah Steber



Mike Mueller



Topics

- Bicycling in SD
- Trail Development
- Cycling Events

Takeaways

- Bicyclists are a visitor market of opportunity
- Trail development has many community benefits
- Cycling events attract visitors to rural locations

128 Years
Ago!



Source: South Dakota State Historical Society, Digital Archives

2023

SOUTH DAKOTA
**STATEWIDE COMPREHENSIVE OUTDOOR
RECREATION PLAN**



Prepared by South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks

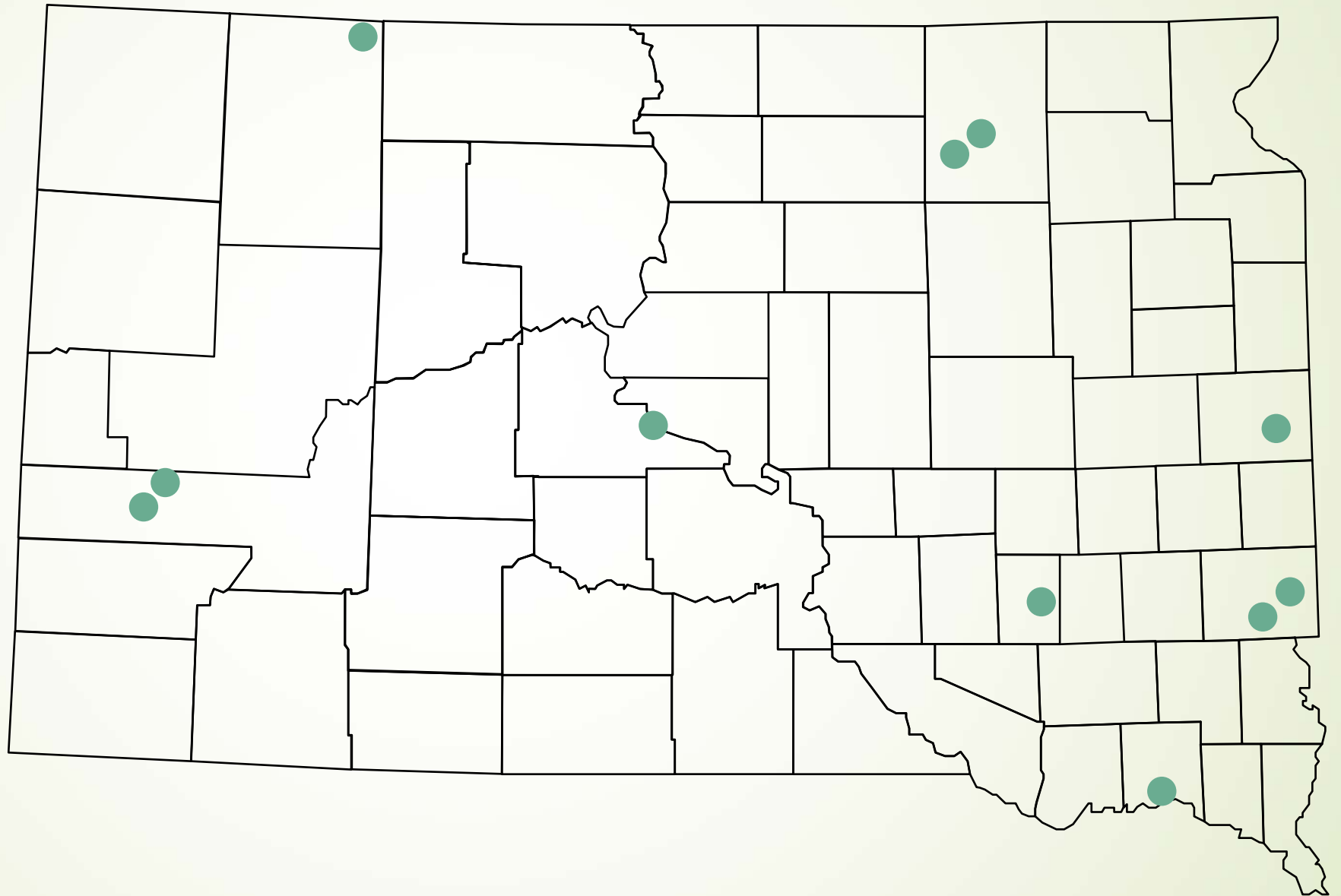
81% of South Dakotans reported using trails in the last 12 months.

How did they use them?

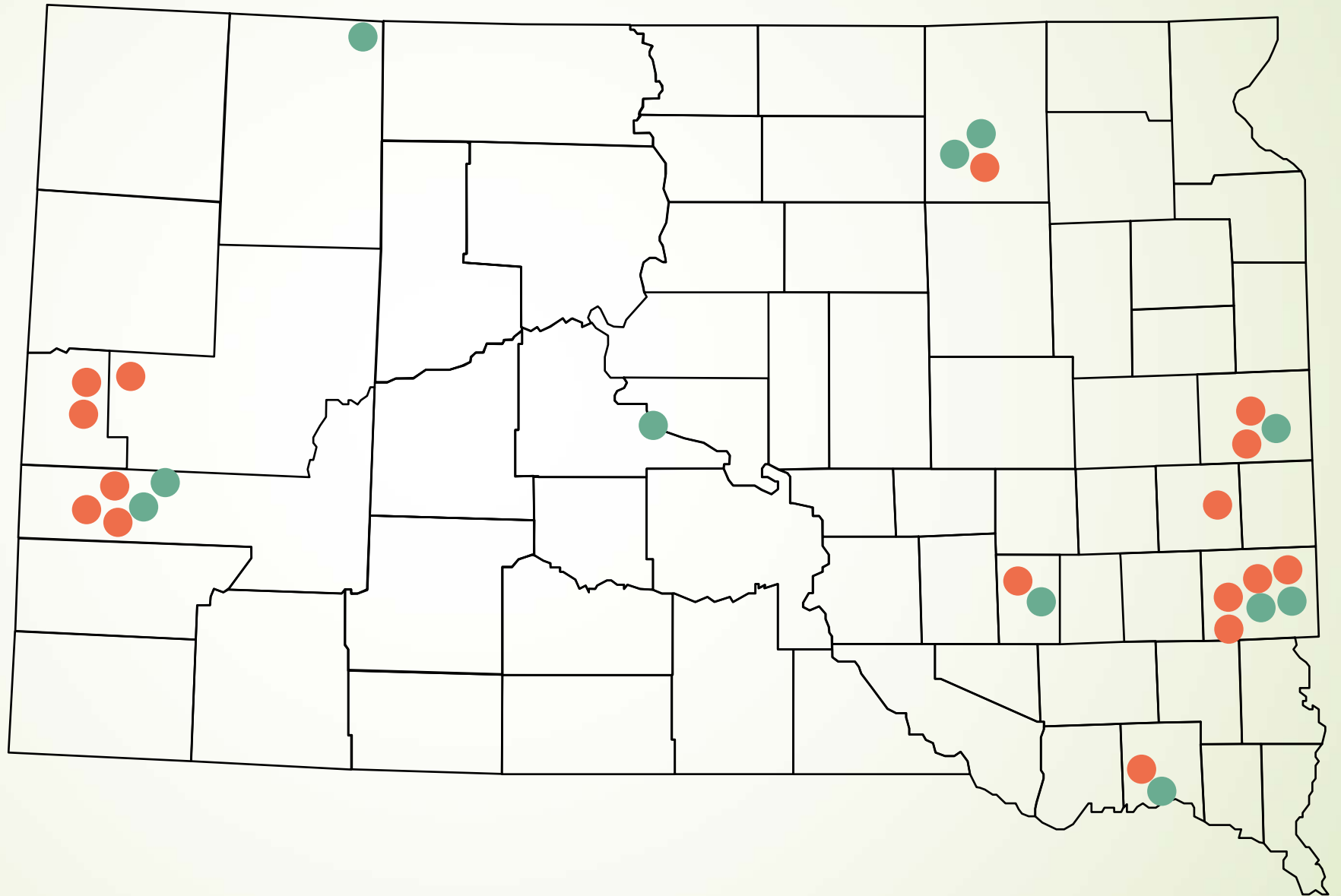
- 50.8% - walking on paved trail
- 40.3% - walking on natural surface trail/hiking
- 30.6% - biking on a paved road/trail
- 26.6% - biking on an unpaved trail

Bike Stuff!

● Bike Clubs

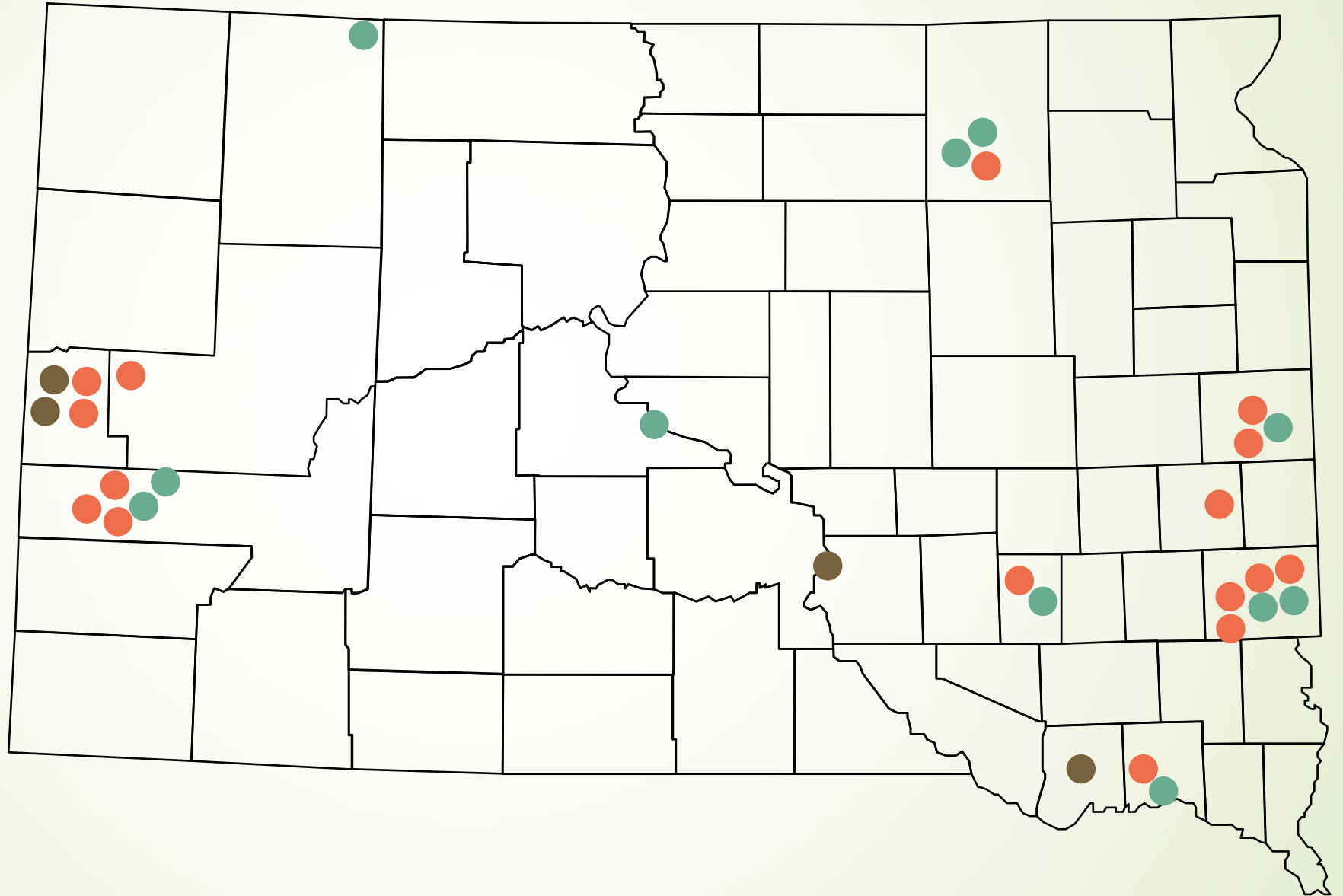


Bike Stuff!



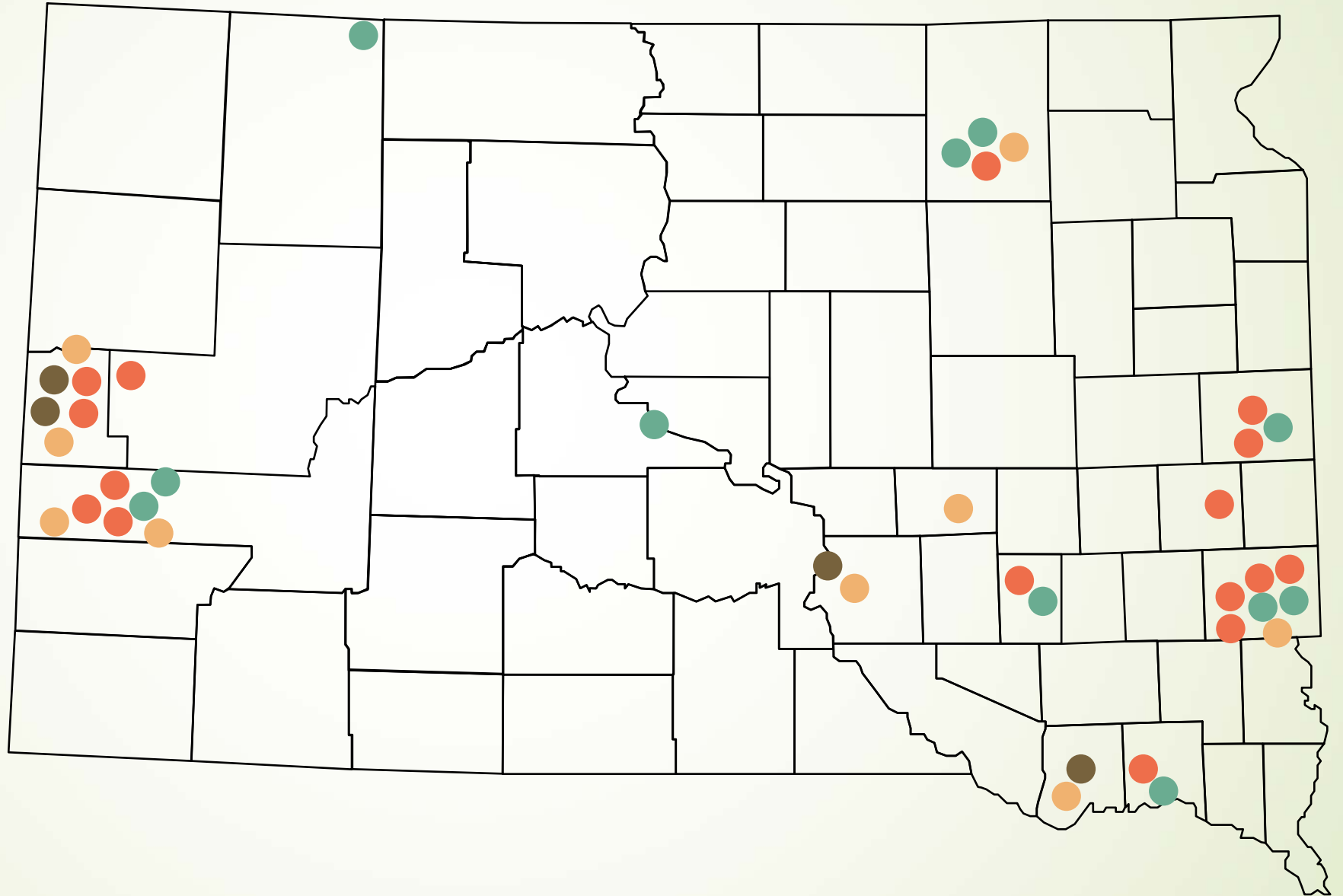
Bike Stuff!

- Bike Clubs
- Bike Shops
- Trail Orgs



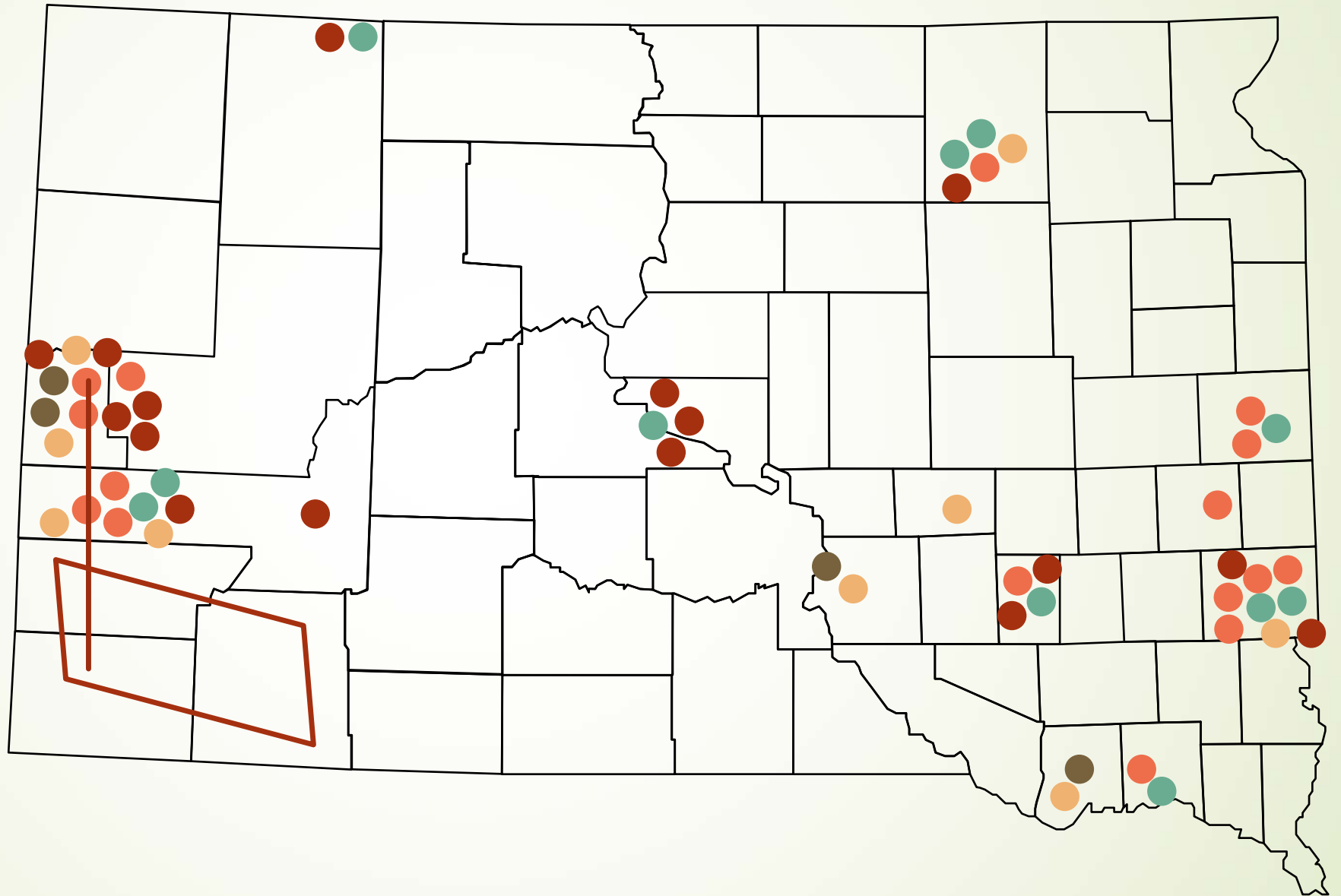
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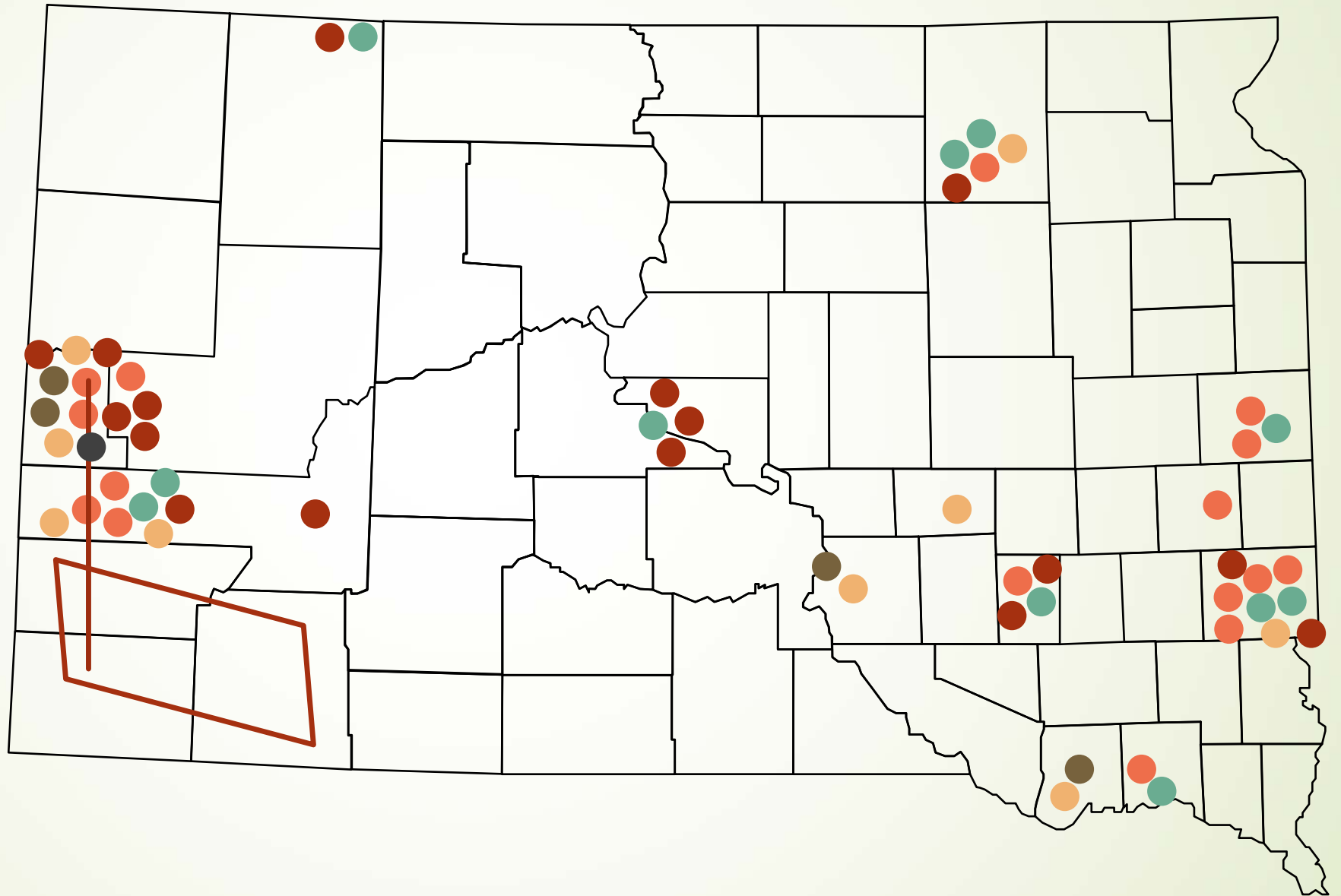
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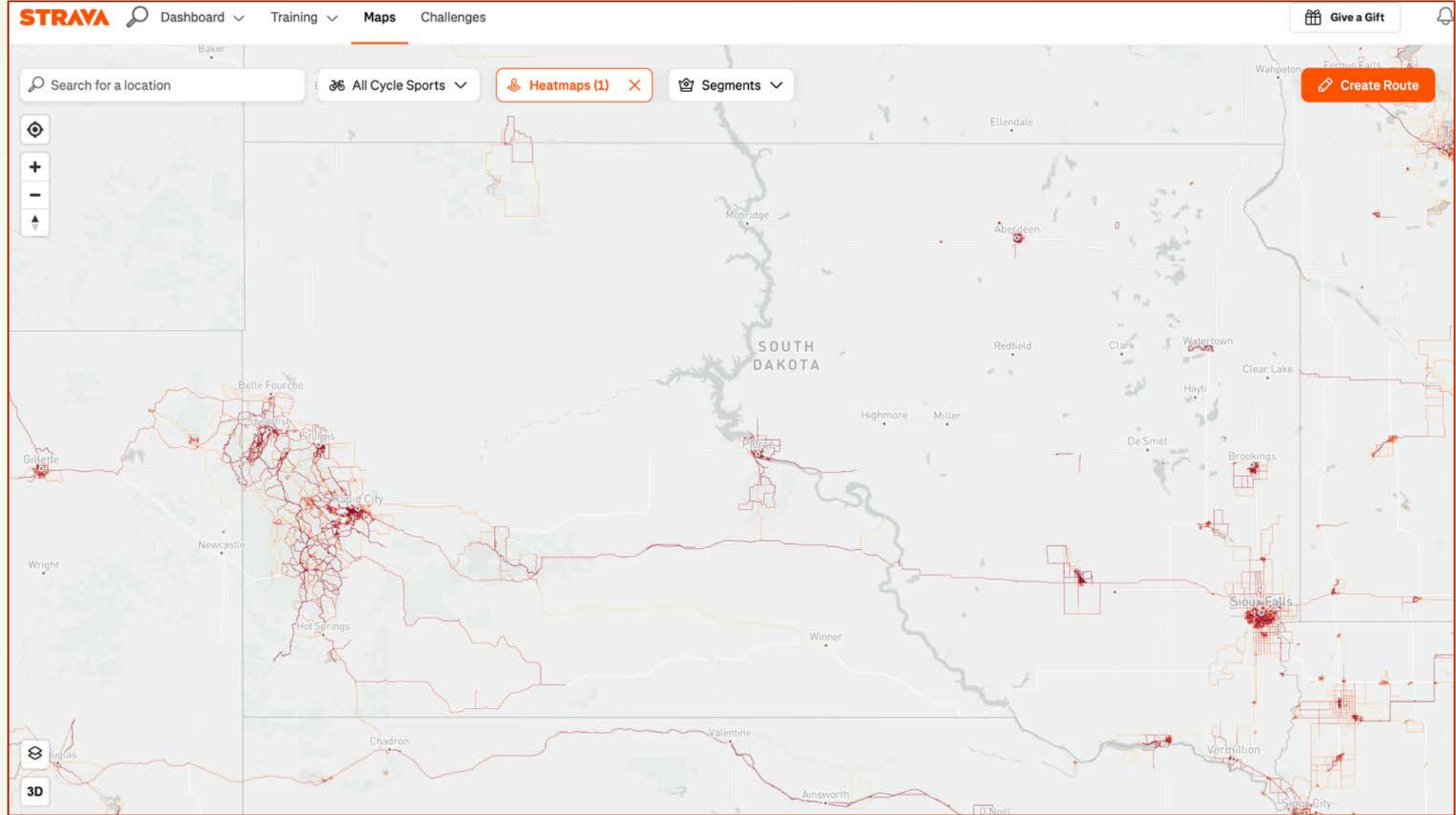


Bike Stuff!

- Bike Clubs
- Bike Shops
- Trail Orgs
- Trail Dev Projects '25
- Bike Events '25
- Youth Racing Team



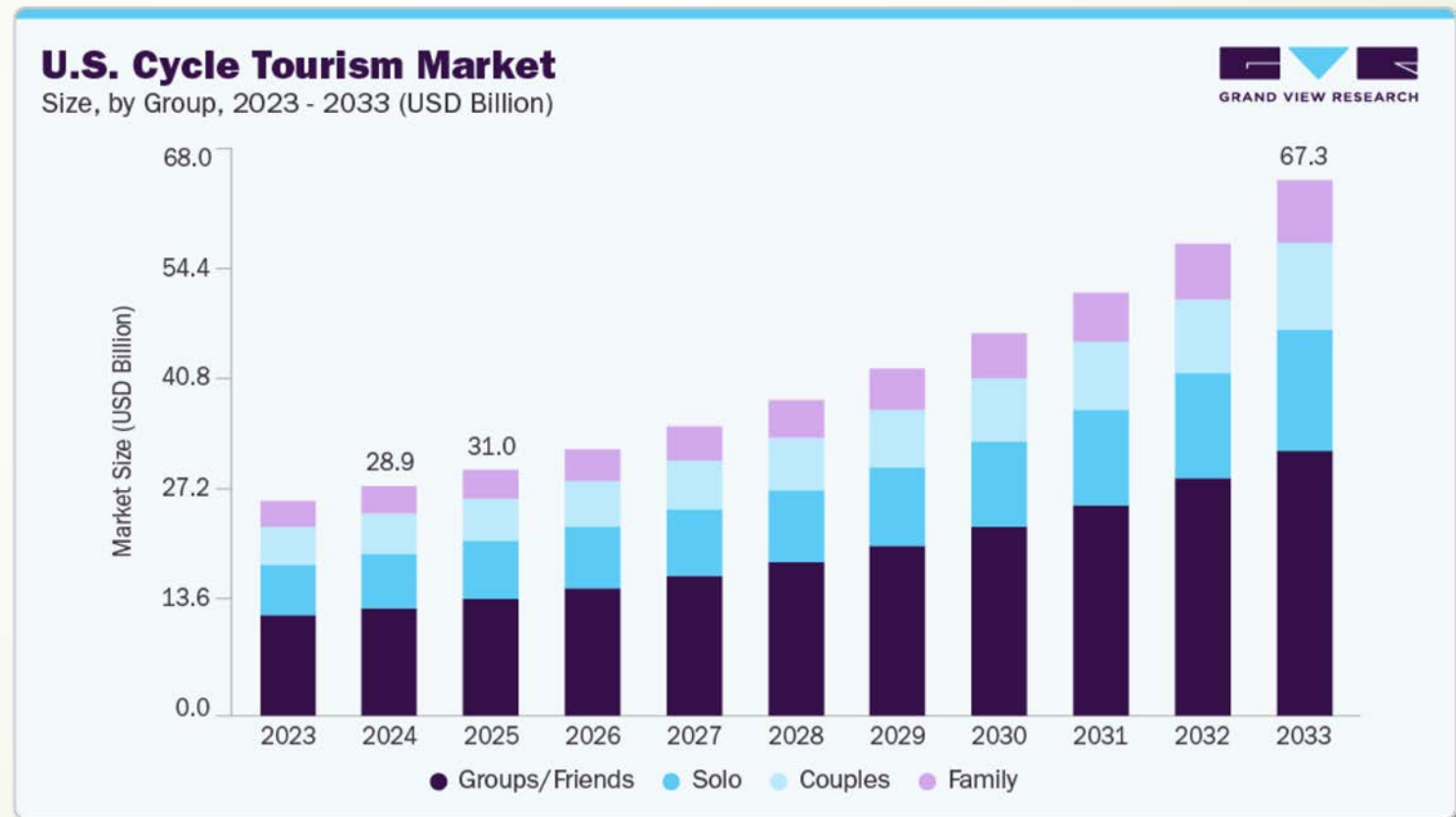
Strava Heat Map



What is the potential?

Market Size

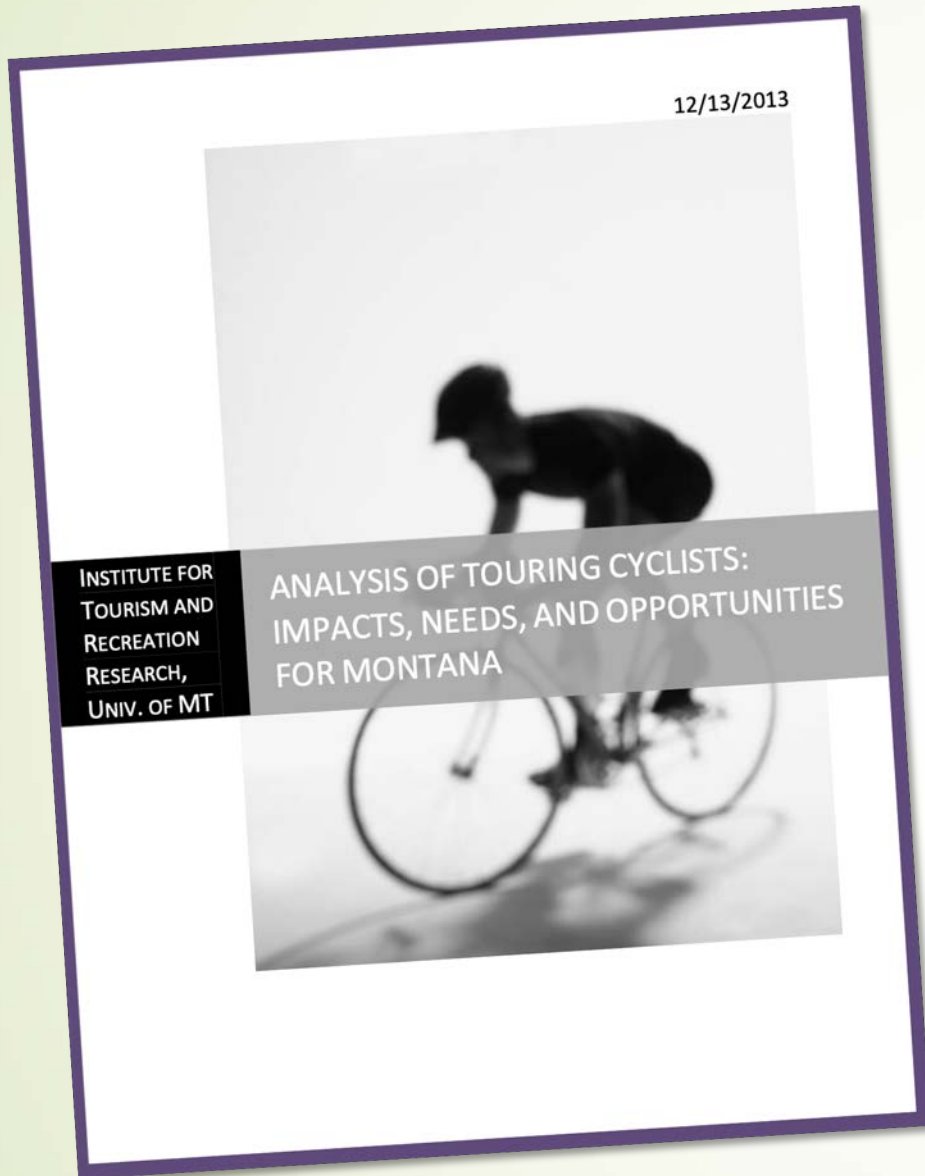
The U.S. cycle tourism market size was estimated at \$28.9 billion in 2024 and is expected to reach \$67.3 billion by 2033



Source: <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/us-cycle-tourism-market-report>

Who are these people?

Bicycle travelers tend to be geotourists – interested in experiencing the distinctive characteristics of a place, including its culture, landscape, history, and the well-being of its residents. They tend to prefer to spend locally, make meaningful connections with locals, and explore off the beaten path.



Source: <https://www.adventurecycling.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Multi-dayCyclingStudyWeb.pdf>



BILLY G

2017

Trail Types

- Paved Recreation Paths
- Aggregate / Improved Paths
- Machine-built Natural Surface
- Hand-built Singletrack

Trail Networks: combined surfaces serving walkers, runners, cyclists, hikers, equestrians, winter users, etc.



Paved
Recreation

Accessible

Multi-use

Year-round



Aggregate /
Improved

Lower cost

Often
ADA-
compliant

Multi-season



Machine-built
natural surface

Durable

Optimized for
youth,
families, and
riders



Hand-built Singletrack

Natural-
surface

Narrow

Immersive



Bike Parks, Skills Parks & Pump Tracks

Compact, high-impact cycling infrastructure for all ages

Why communities invest in them:

- Beginner- and family-friendly
- High use per square foot - often the busiest recreation feature in a park
- Fit into small spaces; low permitting complexity
- Perfect for youth programs, camps, and events
- Strong draw for both locals and visitors



Pump Track

Looping
tracks where
riders use
momentum,
not pedaling



Skills Park

Progressive
zones for
learning
balance,
cornering,
braking



Bike Park

Combinations
of pump
tracks, skills
areas, and
flow/jump
lines



Why Trails Matter

Trail Benefits

For residents:

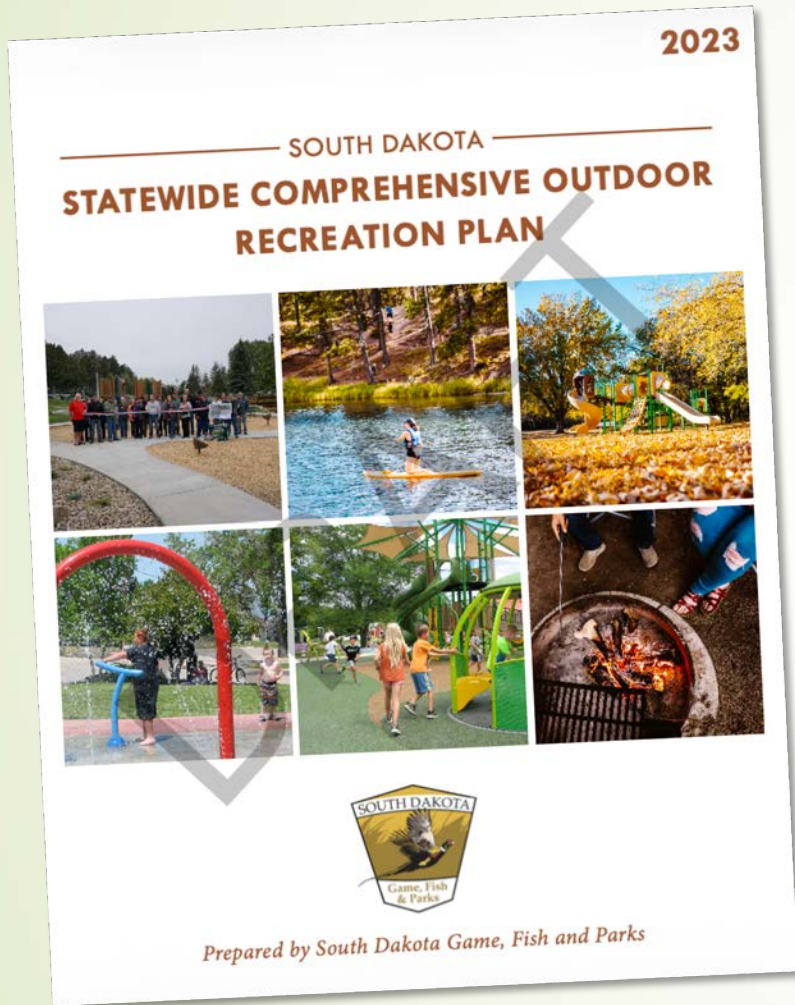
- Everyday recreation
- Quality-of-life enhancement
- Mental and physical health benefits
- Higher property values & neighborhood appeal

For visitors:

- Unique, authentic outdoor experiences
- Platforms for events and tourism
- Spending at local businesses



Demand for More Trails in SD



South Dakotans clearly want more outdoor infrastructure:

- 40% identified a need for more paved trails
- 20% identified a need for more unpaved walking and biking trails

“The most needed recreation facility within South Dakota communities according to survey respondents are trails. The term ‘trails’ was mentioned 514 times throughout the survey results.”



Economic Benefits of Mountain Biking

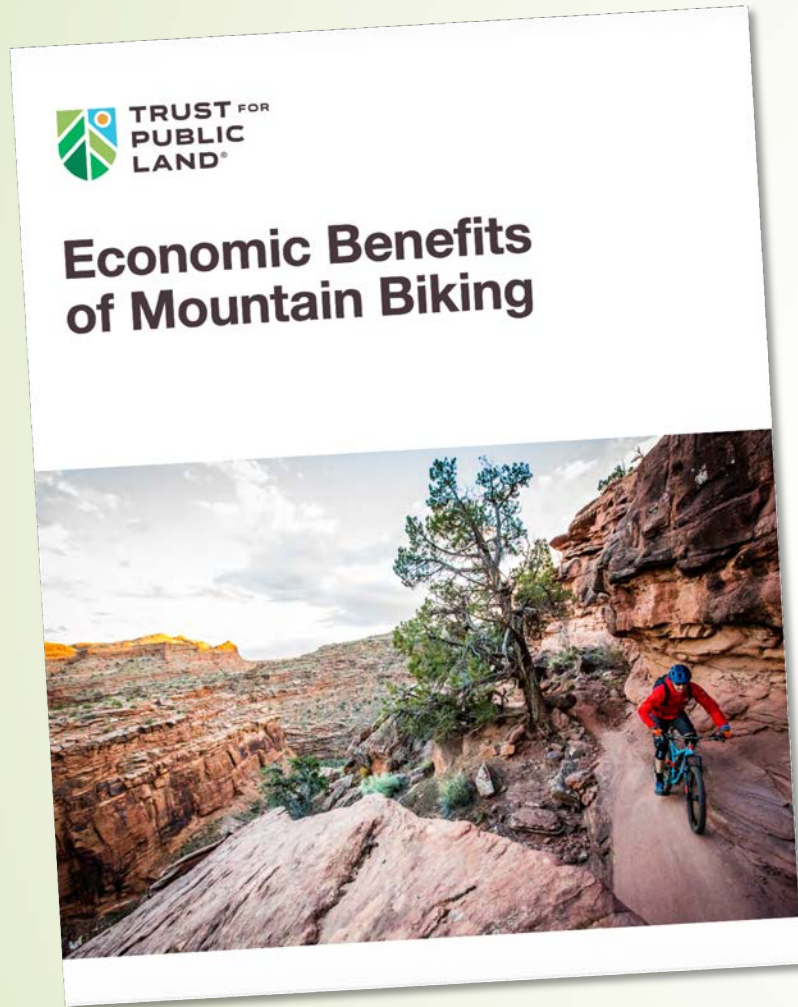


Trail Use & Mountain Biking Growth in the US

- 8.7 million mountain bikers (ages 6+)
- Average rider takes ~5 trips per year
- Riders travel specifically to seek unique trail experiences
- MTB tourists spend more, stay longer, and choose small towns

Trail visitors are intentional travelers; they choose places because of trails.

Economic Impact of Trail Visitors



Analysis of 13 trail destinations:

- \$416 average spending per nonlocal MTB visitor
- Spending categories: lodging, restaurants, groceries, shops, transportation, gear, entertainment
- Supported 1,522 –1,626 jobs per destination
- Created \$50.4M–\$54.1M in total labor income

Trails are proven economic engines, especially for rural communities.

Trails Are Community Infrastructure

Trails offer long-term, compounding returns:

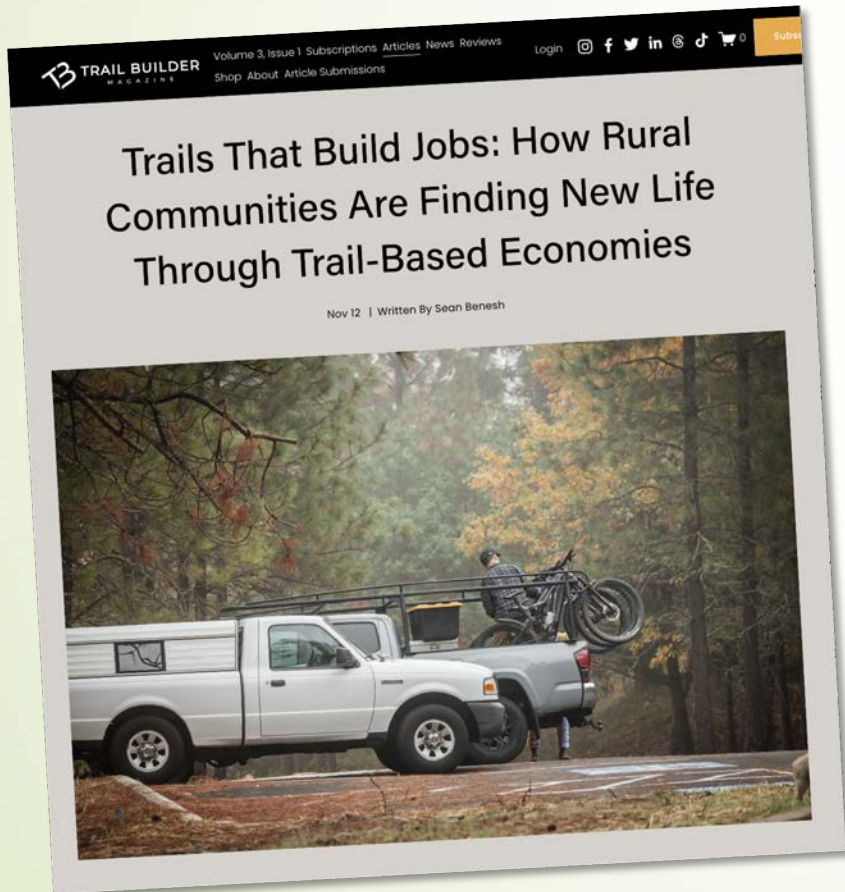
- Attract new residents
- Support local businesses
- Improve mental & physical health
- Enhance daily transportation & recreation
- Build community identity and pride

80% of outdoor enthusiasts say trail proximity influences where they travel and where they choose to live.



Trails Are Rural Economic Development

“Trails are emerging as one of the most reliable economic development tools for small, rural communities.”



Trails:

- Bring visitors & event participants
- Fuel entrepreneurship
- Support hospitality & retail
- Diversify economies once dependent on extraction or agriculture
- Activate local volunteerism & community engagement

South Dakota Examples

Community Models

- West Shore Trails (Fort Pierre)
Grassroots volunteer-built beginnings (not ideal, but shows demand)
- Spearfish Trails Coalition
Community nonprofit hiring professional planning → long-term strategy
- Chamberlain/Oacoma Trails Coalition
Community development leadership + targeted grants
- Falls Area Single Track (Sioux Falls)
MTB club + fundraising campaign + city partnership → IMBA x Benchmark professional build
- Black Hills Bike Hub (Rapid City)
Regional advocacy + programming hub connecting multiple towns, businesses, and riders

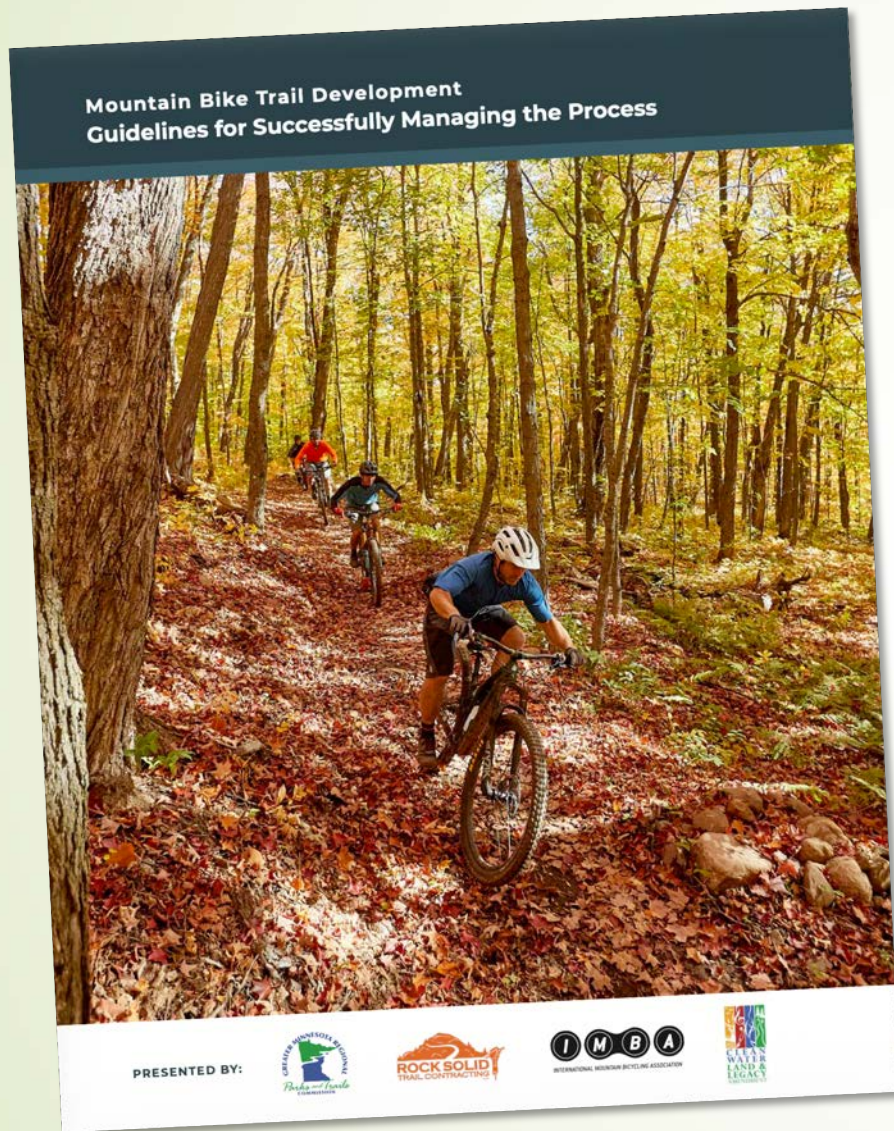


Your Trail Playbook

IMBA's *Mountain Bike Trail Development: Guidelines for Managing the Process*

- Free, comprehensive guide
- Covers assessment → planning → design → construction → maintenance
- Used by communities nationwide

If you read one document, make it this one.



Core Principles of Trail Development

- Start with a clear vision & goals
- Engage a broad stakeholder group early
- Connect trails to existing assets (schools, parks, downtowns, riverfronts)
- Identify trail champions to carry momentum

Continued:



Core Principles of Trail Development

- Gather baseline economic & use data
- Leverage partnerships with agencies, nonprofits, land managers
- Plan for all ages & abilities
- Anticipate conflicts & long-term maintenance

Good process = sustainable, community-backed trails.



Resources



Massive library of webinars, guides, and DIY economic impact tools

AmericanTrails.org



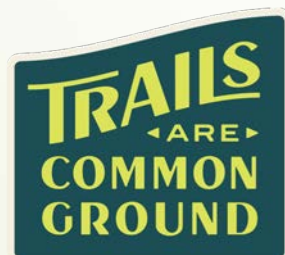
National leaders in design, planning, trail accelerator grants

IMBA.com



Directory of vetted trail contractors + industry standards

TrailBuilders.org



Guidance on shared-use, etiquette, conflict reduction

TrailsAreCommonGround.org

Now What?



How to begin?

1. Start with what you have
 - Inventory your parks, ROW corridors, gravel roads, public lands
 - Early wins build momentum
2. Identify your champions
 - Local riders, walkers, parents, tourism staff, clubs, land managers
3. Build the coalition early
 - City + chamber + land managers + volunteers = long-term success

Trails + Events = Tourism

The math

Every South Dakota community already has:

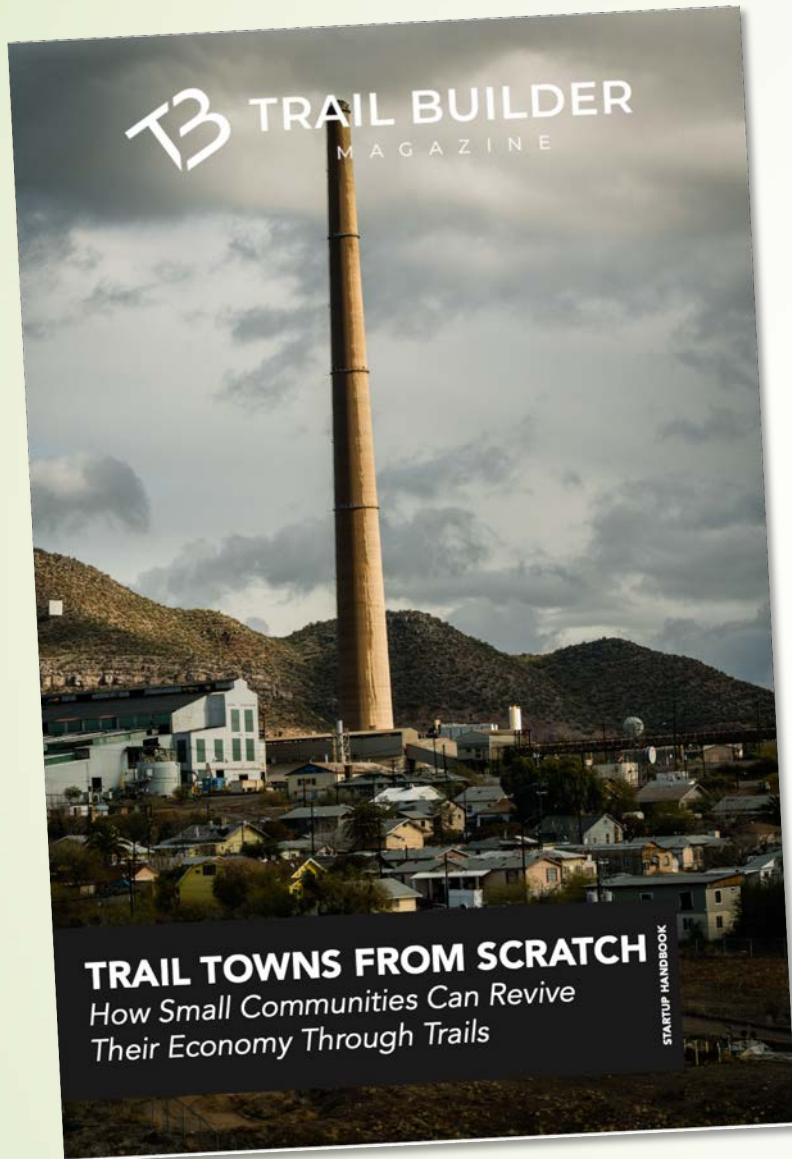
- Gravel roads
- Paved paths
- Parks and public lands
- Volunteers eager to help

These can instantly support:

- Gravel rides
- Family-friendly events
- Youth programming
- Tourism weekends
- Partnerships with local businesses

Events and trails work together; one builds demand for the other.





Start with what you have.

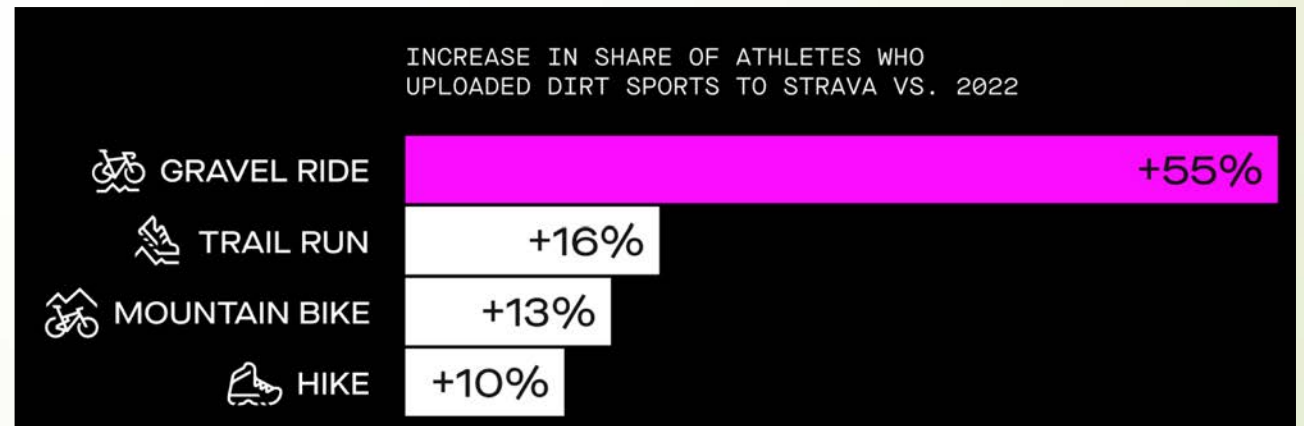
"This is the scrappy startup phase of trail building. Where the goal isn't perfection, it's momentum.

Build one route. Host one dig day. Hold one community meeting. Or put on a gravel race."





“Gravel riding is one of the fastest-growing sports on Strava, with a 55% increase in the share of athletes who’ve given it a shot.”



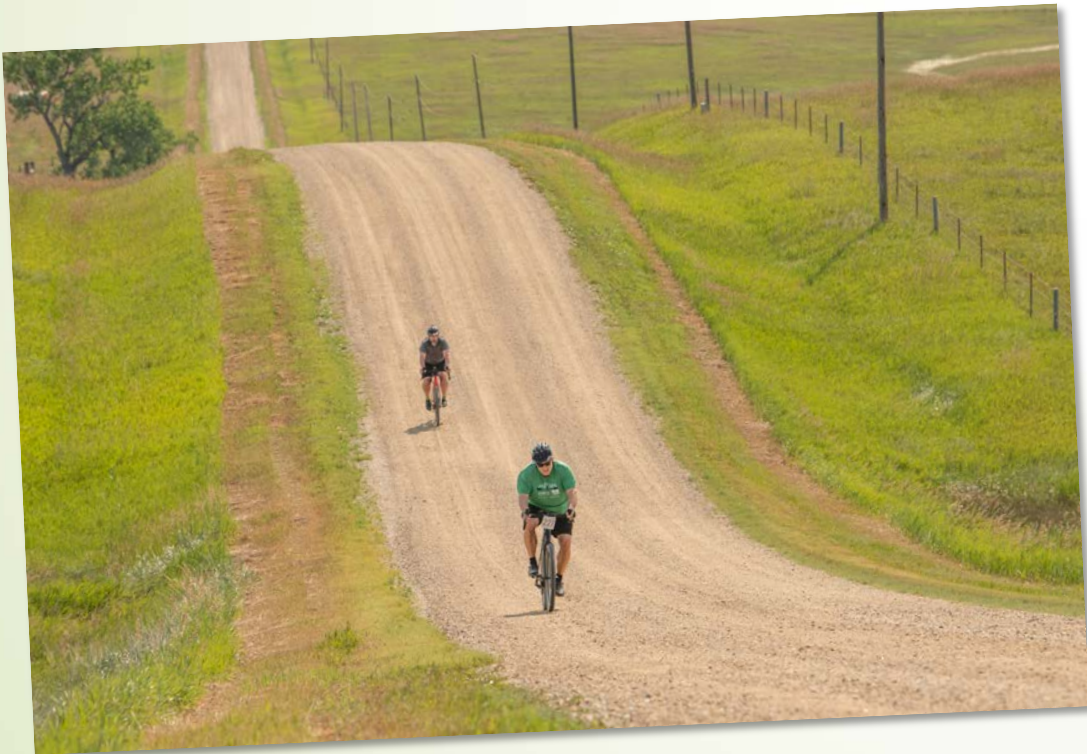
“Gravel events are one of the lowest-barrier, highest-impact ways to kickstart a tourism economy.

The spirit of
gravel!

What you need is a route, a reason, and a welcoming vibe.

Your job is to give them a sense of place and maybe a plate of tamales or a local beer when they roll back into town.”

TRAIL TOWNS FROM SCRATCH
How Small Communities Can Revive Their Economy Through Trails



General Elements of a Cycling Event

Bike Event Basics

- Small range of route distances to choose
- Race or tour or both
- Aid stations
- Food and drink at finish
- Rider registration fee of \$50 - \$150



Rural West
River Events



Fort Pierre

Mid-July

31 / 53 / 71 miles

Fort Pierre
National Grassland



Lemmon

Mid-August

25 / 50 / 113 miles

Grand River
National Grassland



Wall

Late Sept.
(Natl Public Lands Day)

35 / 64 miles
(+ road-only routes)

Badlands National
Park & Buffalo Gap
National Grassland



Collaboration!



- Goal to cross-promote our events and celebrate our prairie and public lands
- Riders earn points on designated **STRAVA** segments at each event
- Rider's points multiply for riding in multiple events
- No change to each event format
- No additional cost or sign-up to participate

GTC partners



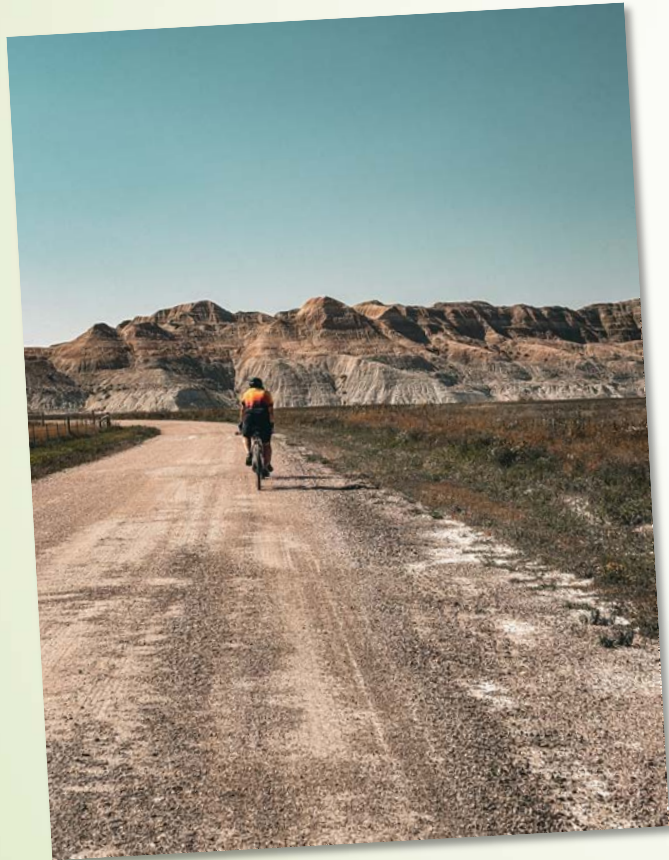
**NORTHERN
GREAT PLAINS**
JOINT VENTURE



South Dakota
**GRASSLANDS
INITIATIVE**



Outcomes



All three events had record high registrations

- Grassland Gravel, Ft Pierre: 49 (2 states)
- Thunderhawk Wide Open, Lemmon: 98 (7 states)
- Wheelin' to Wall, Wall: 145 (11 states)

239 unique riders registered for the 3 events

Christine Zych
August 16, 2025 at 6:00 AM · Wahoo
ELEMNT ROAM
Lemmon, South Dakota

Thunderhawk Women's Grand Cedar

5th Annual Thunderhawk! Race coordinator said this FIRST year they had enough women to stand on each podium block 🙌 Today four women showed up to ride! Read more...

Distance	Elev Gain	Time	Achievements
112.03 mi	6,217 ft	8h 3m	

👑 Christine just became the QOM on Out the Fields!

Christine Zych
September 27, 2025 at 8:06 AM · Wahoo
ELEMNT BOLT
Wall, South Dakota

Grasslands 🙌 Triple 🙌 Crown 🙌

First Place Female 🏆 and earned it having a BLAST!! This final ride of a three part series was simply jaw dropping... Never in my life could I imagine riding my bike through the... Read more...

Distance	Elev Gain	Time	Achievements
64.49 mi	2,329 ft	4h 2m	👑🏆👑 3

👑 Christine just became the QOM on Grate to Great!

Christine Zych
July 12, 2025 at 7:06 AM · Wahoo
Fort Pierre, South Dakota

Grassland Gravel 2025

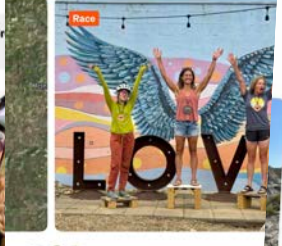
First Place Women's 71 miler 🙌 BUT vastly improved riding through! 🙌 Second half constant rollers 🙌

Distance	Elev Gain	Time
71.78 mi	3,868 ft	5h 1m

🏆 Christine just became 3rd on first hill!



You and 130 others gave kudos



You and 126 others gave kudos



You and 121 others gave kudos



Ride!

Start with community activities



- Add a kids bike rodeo to an existing community event
- Invite a bike float in the homecoming parade
- Do a weekly bike bus in the fall to get kids to ride a bike to school
- Light up the night community family ride
- Get yours out of the garage and go for ice cream

Hit us up!



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Happy trails
to you!

