



2023 ACCOMPLISHMENTS OVERVIEW

We are proud of the significant strides we've made in 2023 throughout the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources toward our mission and the goals laid out in our [strategic plan](#). Throughout 2023, DNR staff across our programmatic divisions and geographic regions continued the department's commitment to work with Minnesotans to conserve and manage the state's natural resources, to provide outdoor recreation opportunities, and to provide for commercial uses of natural resources in a way that creates a sustainable quality of life.

Below you can read about a number of DNR's high-level accomplishments in 2023, which are categorized under the priority areas outlined in our strategic plan. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but rather some examples that illustrate the scope, breadth and depth of DNR's work over the last year.

Of particular note in 2023 is the funding and launching of DNR's transformative Get Out MORE (Modernize Outdoor Recreation Experiences) initiative. The \$150 million in Get Out MORE investments will help ensure Minnesotans of all abilities enjoy a world-class recreation system, regardless of the outdoor experience they choose. Below you will see examples of the types of accomplishments this funding will enable DNR to achieve as the Get Out MORE initiative is implemented over the next several years.

We invite you to stay up-to-date on DNR's work by signing up for one of our [topic-specific email lists](#), exploring opportunities on our [Engage with DNR](#) platform, or by following us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter/X](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [YouTube](#).

ADDRESS CRITICAL NATURAL RESOURCE ISSUES PROACTIVELY

REINTRODUCING THE DAKOTA SKIPPER BUTTERFLY

In the summer of 2023, DNR staff, in partnership with the Minnesota Zoo, released hundreds of Dakota skipper butterflies back to the prairie at Glacial Lakes State Park. Once common throughout much of Minnesota's native tallgrass prairie, this butterfly has since vanished from nearly all sites in the state and is listed as an endangered species in Minnesota. In 2018, DNR staff began enhancing remnant native prairie sites at Glacial Lakes State Park in preparation for the Dakota skipper's return. That enhancement included removal of more than 250 acres of woody vegetation, prescribed burns and the introduction of grazing as a tool to manage prairie habitat for the butterfly. Staff harvested and planted seed from native prairie vegetation and hand-planted thousands of narrow-leaved purple coneflower, a preferred nectar source of the skipper. [You can watch a mini-documentary video about this project on DNR's YouTube channel.](#)

STOCKING THE DRIFTLESS STRAIN BROOK TROUT

In August 2023, DNR staff stocked heritage native brook trout fingerlings in 14 southeastern Minnesota streams, a strain almost 20 years in the making. DNR staff began studying the genetics of brook trout in southeastern Minnesota in the early 2000s to see if any remnant native strains still existed in area streams. Staff eventually identified 37 streams where brook trout retained their original heritage genetics. Staff collected eggs and milt from the strongest remnant native populations, conducted rigorous disease testing, and then reared the resulting fish to adulthood at the Peterson State Fish Hatchery. The adult fish then produced fingerlings that were stocked in southeast streams where these fish likely existed in the past. Staff will continue to stock fingerlings in the 14 southeast streams over the next two years to establish populations. Staff have also begun stocking fingerlings in suitable streams outside of southeastern Minnesota, including in the Twin Cities metro, Detroit Lakes, Duluth, Fergus Falls and Little Falls areas. [Learn more about this effort by watching a video about the Driftless brook trout on DNR's YouTube channel.](#)

PREVENTING AND MANAGING INVASIVE SPECIES

The DNR works to proactively prevent the spread and manage the impacts of invasive species on Minnesota's resources, ecosystems, and economy. This year, the DNR installed the first state-owned, on-demand watercraft decontamination station at Big Bog State Recreation area as part of a project with Red Lake Nation to respond to the discovery of larval zebra mussels in Red Lake. This new system provides efficient decontamination to clean aquatic invasive species from boats leaving the lake, as well as helping to protect the lake from potential new introductions. The DNR also continued to help fund, through a federal grant, a coordinated effort to manage nonnative Phragmites (wetland plants) throughout the state. In 2023, DNR contractors visited 420 Phragmites sites in 38 counties and found that treatments to manage the invasive wetland plant have been successful. At almost one-quarter of the sites visited, no additional treatment was done because the nonnative plants were no longer found. The DNR also worked with the U.S. Geological Survey to lead a comprehensive series of discussions with stakeholders to evaluate additional options for active invasive carp management in the Mississippi River. The process incorporated public stakeholders and invasive carp experts to evaluate options. The outcomes will be used to inform an update to the statewide Minnesota Invasive Carp Action Plan.

MODIFYING AND REMOVING THE DRAYTON DAM

A historic milestone representing 30 years of work by the DNR and its partners was reached in 2023 with the completion of a project to remove the Drayton Dam and replace it with a rock arch rapids. Drayton Dam was the last and largest of the Red River's low head dams and the removal and replacement work allows fish passage, addresses public safety concerns, and enhances water recreation activities. With the project now complete, fish can pass the entire length of the river in the United States. Fragmentation of rivers has played a key role in the decline of many native species, including the once-extirpated Red River Lake Sturgeon. Improved passage is a major step for the health of the fish population in Red River and for DNR's lake sturgeon recovery program.

Dam removal and modification is one example of the type of work that DNR will be able to replicate thanks to the [Get Out MORE \(Modernize Outdoor Recreation Experiences\)](#) investment approved during the 2023 legislative session. Ten million dollars of the \$150 million in Get out MORE funding will go toward replacing culverts and bridges to improve stream ecology, removing or modifying dams and restoring habitat to enhance fish passage, and renovating other water control structures to address the impacts of climate change and support waterfowl production.

ONLINE LAKE HEALTH ASSESSMENT TOOL LAUNCH

In January 2023, the DNR released the new Watershed Health Assessment Framework for Lakes as another part of our overall, ongoing Watershed Health Assessment Framework. This new online tool provides easy access to water quality and health information for thousands of Minnesota lakes. Users can compare a lake's health measures to other nearby lakes. Through the use of graphics, the tool shows lakes' relative water quality, biology, and hydrology, along with information about basic lake characteristics and lake stewardship. Quick access to this information will help Minnesotans, local government, and water resource agencies work together to develop and implement comprehensive watershed management efforts and to track progress toward the goal of healthy lakes.

BOLSTERING DNR'S K9 UNIT

Three new DNR handler/dog teams graduated from the St. Paul Police Department's K9 School in 2023, bringing the total number of DNR dog/handler teams to five. The DNR K9 Unit's dogs are trained in a wide array of tasks, including locating lost people, recovering evidence such as spent rifle casings and shotgun shells, and detecting potentially illegally taken wildlife. In addition, three of the dogs are trained to help stop the spread of invasive species. During the course of the year, K9 Unit teams attended dozens of public events, prevented the spread of aquatic invasive species by locating zebra mussels on boats and water-related equipment before they entered public waters, and helped protect Minnesota's natural resources by locating evidence in poaching cases.

CONNECT PEOPLE TO THE OUTDOORS

EXPANDING THE ALL-TERRAIN TRACK CHAIR PROGRAM

As of fall 2023, there are 13 all-terrain track chairs available at state parks across Minnesota, an increase from five the past year. The battery-powered chairs enable visitors with limited mobility to explore trails and other areas within state parks that can't be accessed using a regular wheelchair. These track chairs represent one type of investment DNR will make of over the next several years thanks to historic legislative funding for our [Get out MORE \(Modernize Outdoor Recreation Experiences\) initiative](#), which aims to ensure Minnesotans of all abilities and interests enjoy world-class outdoor experiences. State parks included in the track chair program were selected based on a number of factors, including the presence of trails suitable for track chair use, availability of storage space and charging outlets near a suitable trailhead, and the desire to distribute track chairs broadly throughout the state.

UPDATING WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA MASTER PLANS

Over the past year, the DNR embarked on an effort to update the management plans of five of the eight major units within the DNR's Wildlife Management Area (WMA) system. In 2023, plans for Mille Lacs, Red Lake and Whitewater WMAs were updated. Plans for Carlos Avery and Lac Qui Parle will be completed in 2024. All these units are popular hunting, fishing, and wildlife-watching destinations across the state.

The WMA Master Plans were drafted by multidisciplinary teams of technical experts led by division planners and area wildlife managers. Representatives from several DNR divisions including Forestry, Ecological and Water Resources, and Parks and Trails contributed to these efforts. The project teams also work closely with tribal governments, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and many conservation groups to assure broad interests are incorporated. Public input opportunities were key to the planning efforts and help ensure the plans reflect current public values and attitudes about how the land should be managed into the future. The updated master plans will guide management of WMA Major Units over the next 10 years.

EXPANDING THE ADOPT-A-WMA PROGRAM IN SOUTHERN MINNESOTA

The Adopt-A-WMA Program was established in 2011 to encourage Minnesotans to help with maintenance of wildlife management areas. The foundation of the program is to establish agreements with volunteer individuals or groups to provide maintenance services on designated WMAs. The program received new energy in the DNR's southern region after being promoted through local DNR wildlife managers and by word of mouth from passionate volunteers. That led to a 65 percent increase in agreements with volunteers in 2023. In some counties, a single conservation group has adopted all the local WMAs. In Brown and Nobles counties alone, 80 WMAs were adopted totaling 11,623 acres. The excitement for Adopt-A-WMA in the southern region is creating increased interest across the state.

KICKING OFF THE NEW JUNIOR RANGER PROGRAM

The DNR created a new Junior Ranger booklet to help families connect to the outdoors. Designed for ages six to ten, or anyone young at heart, the booklet is full of illustrations and activities created by park naturalists, and safety tips and prompts for exploration. Activities help kids learn about park habitats, animal movements, using their senses, protecting wildlife, avoiding poison ivy, outsmarting ticks and more. After completing activities, participants receive a special Junior Ranger patch. In just four months, more than 2,500 kids have learned about park wildlife and plants and earned their patch. This is more than double the annual completion rate of the past booklet program. Both the new booklet and patch are available to families at no cost.

LAUNCHING BIRD BY BIRD PROGRAM

The DNR launched the Bird by Bird program, which aims to share the joy and wonder of birding with classrooms and communities. With the guidance of knowledgeable volunteers, students explore the fascinating world of birds through hands-on indoor and outdoor exploration. Students engage in community science using tools like binoculars, field guides and journals to observe birds in schoolyards and neighborhoods. Bird by Bird also supports current high school students or recent high school graduates interested in exploring natural resource careers through its Birding Outdoor Leadership Development initiative.

SUPPORTING OFF HIGHWAY VEHICLE AND BOATING SAFETY

The DNR Enforcement Division is committed to helping Minnesotans and visitors recreate safely on public lands and waters. Despite another busy year on the state's trails and waterways, as of November 28, 2023, off-highway vehicle and boating fatalities in Minnesota were at historic lows. Through multi-media and in-person outreach, conservation officers continue to remind everyone on the trails or water of the importance of taking the proper safety precautions, including wearing a helmet on an OHV or a life jacket on a boat.

The DNR is already the statewide leader when it comes to boat and water safety and enforcement, and the new statewide Marine Unit launched this year aims to build on that service. The Marine Unit places increased emphasis on patrolling particularly busy bodies of water, training conservation officers and law enforcement partners in boating safety and enforcement and offering on-scene assistance to law enforcement and first responders.

CONSULT AND COLLABORATE WITH TRIBAL GOVERNMENTS

CREATING THE OFFICE OF TRIBAL RELATIONS

The DNR created a new Office of Tribal Relations in 2023. The establishment of the new office will pave the way for additional tribal relations staff and enhance DNR's ability to work with tribal governments to improve understanding and decision-making on natural resource matters and other issues. This work takes a number of forms, including timely and meaningful consultation with Tribal governments, addressing issues as they arise, implementing policies to guide DNR's work with Tribal governments, and prioritizing tribal-state relations training for DNR staff.

ENHANCE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

EMPLOYING NEW RECRUITMENT METHODS FOR ADVISORY GROUP APPOINTMENTS

The DNR relies on public advisory groups and task forces as ways to work with Minnesotans to achieve the department's mission. To help ensure advisory groups best represent a diverse set of viewpoints, the DNR seeks inclusive and well-rounded advisory committees, encompassing differences including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, education, marital status, language, age, gender, sexual orientation, mental or physical ability, life experience, ideas, knowledge and learning styles. DNR staff leveraged new approaches, including the [Engage with DNR](#) online public engagement site, in addition to more traditional methods to reach Minnesotans who may be interested in serving on an advisory group. DNR's advisory groups include the Aquatic Invasive Species Advisory Committee, Governor's Council on Minnesota's Coastal Program, Natural Heritage Advisory Committee and Parks and Trails Legacy Advisory Committee.

ENSURE DNR'S FINANCIAL VITALITY

SECURING AND IMPLEMENTING TRANSFORMATIVE INVESTMENTS

The DNR secured historic investments for the agency's operating and capital budgets, totaling more than \$550 million, which will connect people to the outdoors, mitigate and adapt to climate change, manage natural resources proactively, and address the DNR's operational needs. The investment for DNR's FY24/25 operating budget was \$308.4 million and the DNR received a total of \$247.2 million in capital funding. Of note in the FY24/25 operating budget is the \$150 million in one-time funding for the Get Out MORE (Modernize Outdoor Recreation Experiences) initiative. That investment will focus on five areas: enhancing access and welcoming new users to public lands and outdoor recreation facilities, revitalizing camping and related infrastructure, enhancing fisheries and fishing infrastructure, modernizing boating access, and restoring streams and modernizing water-related infrastructure to support outdoor recreation. The public is invited to stay up-to-date on the implementation of Get Out MORE funds by checking for updates and signing up for our email list on the [Get Out MORE webpage](#).

IMPLEMENTING 4 THE OUTDOORS INITIATIVE

The [4 the Outdoors funding framework](#) was created through a year-long process of public engagement, resulting in a framework that identifies four steps Minnesota can take to help ensure predictable and sustainable funding for conservation and outdoor recreation. The four steps include: optimizing the use of current funding, exploring the use and application of fees, increasing opportunities for direct support, and securing stable and predictable base and operational funding. In 2023, the DNR's primary area of focus was optimizing the use of current funding. That included pursuing opportunities to improve efficiency and prioritizing funding for the most critical needs and those which will help reduce costs in the future. For example, the federal government recently clarified that state spending on Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) is eligible to be matched by Pittman-Robertson dollars. Using PILT as Pittman-Robertson matching dollars puts an additional \$7 million annually into the DNR's Game and Fish Fund, which has improved the health of the fund dramatically. Additionally, this past legislative session, lawmakers made investments in conservation that will allow the DNR to receive an additional \$29.8 million in Pittman-Robertson funding. The Game and Fish Fund is the DNR's most important fund to support our fisheries and wildlife management work and natural resource law enforcement.

MODERNIZING SELF-PAY OPTIONS

Another example of how the DNR improved customer service and optimized its funding, in alignment with the 4 The Outdoors effort explained above, is by replacing onsite self-pay envelope collection systems across state parks, state recreation areas and state forest campgrounds. The DNR moved to an online payment system that is supplemented by a mail-in option for people without internet access. The mobile app Yodel allows park visitors to pay for firewood, one-day vehicle permits, and forest camping fees. This shift away from onsite self-pay envelopes prevents thefts from the pay stations, eliminates the associated risk of loss of visitors' private data, and addresses safety concerns for staff and visitors. With the introduction of the app, revenue numbers look steady and field staff are spending less time processing payments from payment boxes, allowing them to redirect efforts toward other work.

EXPAND DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

EXPANDING OUTDOORS OUTREACH

In 2023, the DNR made significant strides in championing diversity, equity and inclusion while introducing people to outdoor experiences. At the forefront was the “No Child Left Inside” program, embodying DNR’s commitment to connecting youth, particularly those with limited opportunities, to the outdoors. Over the past year, NCLI positively impacted the lives of nearly 16,000 participants – from youth at Anoka County’s juvenile detention center to children with disabilities, and more. Beyond NCLI, collaborations with the YMCA’s system of metro-area day camps and DNR’s system of state parks and recreation areas further expanded DNR’s reach, with over 10,000 individuals participating in fishing programs.

The Minnesota Outdoor Skills and Stewardship webinar series drew nearly 7,500 viewers in 2023. This series, designed to inspire Minnesotans to explore the outdoors, has become a virtual gateway to outdoor discovery. Likewise, the Minnesota Moms Fishing Challenge, held in partnership with the Student Anglers Organization, brought together in virtual community more than 2,400 moms from 70 Minnesota zip codes, fostering shared experience and a deeper connection to the outdoors.

Responding to high demand, DNR expanded the Becoming an Outdoors Woman program – introducing a spring weekend workshop and new learn-to-hunt opportunities. In 2023, BOW served more than 300 participants through various workshops, hunts and events, encouraging women to connect with nature through hands-on experiences.

ENGAGING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE PARTNERSHIPS

To better understand the needs of Minnesota communities, the DNR’s new forestry environmental justice coordinator engaged with 55 community-based organizations, 12 tribal nations, and six local governmental agencies on their environmental justice priorities and programs. These proactive conversations resulted in a record number of new organizations applying to the 2023 ReLeaf Community Forestry Grants, two projects to establish mini forests in the Rondo and Frogtown neighborhoods of St. Paul, and a coloring book to promote awareness about the diversity and importance of North Minneapolis’ urban tree canopy.

INCREASING DIVERSITY IN ENVIRONMENTAL CAREERS PROGRAM

The fourth cohort of the Increasing Diversity in Environmental Careers Program kicked off in January 2023 with 12 fellows. The fellows completed a paid summer rotational experience with the DNR, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, and the Board of Water and Soil Resources. The rotational experience allowed the fellows to learn and explore the various environmental careers at the three state agencies while getting hands-on experience. Of the fellows who started in previous cohorts, fourteen completed paid agency internships, which provided fellows with more focused and direct experience in their areas of interest.

ESTABLISHING THE LANGUAGE ACCESS PLAN

The DNR's internal Language Access Plan Implementation Team supports the implementation of and training for the department's Language Access Plan. This helps ensure that individuals with limited English proficiency who are participating in DNR programs or services have access to language assistance services. The team is working to identify, prioritize, and address the language access needs of communities served by the DNR.

MANAGE NATURAL RESOURCES RESPONSIBLY FOR ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY BENEFIT

LAUNCHING THE OUTDOOR RECREATION INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIP

According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, outdoor recreation is a more than \$10 billion dollar per year industry in the state, supporting more than 93,000 jobs. To enhance and expand that industry for the social and economic benefit of Minnesotans, the DNR joined in partnership with Department of Employment and Economic Development, Explore Minnesota Tourism, and Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation. The new [Outdoor Recreation Industry Partnership](#) builds on previous work by the Minnesota Outdoor Recreation Task Force and Governor's Council on Economic Expansion. It brings together the unique strengths of each agency to connect individuals and communities to outdoor recreation resources, build coalitions, and communicate significant benefits of outdoor recreation.

PROVIDING GRANTS TO CREATE A RESILIENT FOREST CANOPY

Over the last few years, the DNR has assisted local communities in managing emerald ash borer (EAB) through financial, technical, and educational assistance, with the goal of establishing a resilient tree canopy for the future in the face of climate change. During the 2023 legislative session, the DNR received significant funding and subsequently awarded almost \$6.9 million through the ReLeaf Community Forestry Grants Program to bolster Minnesota's urban and community forest management, particularly to address EAB. And, for the first time, funding eligibility was extended to non-profit organizations, and funding could also be used for tree management on low-income residential property in addition to public lands. A total of 38 communities and non-profit organizations statewide are receiving funds to protect and replace forest cover to enhance community forest health and sustainability, improve water quality, reduce atmospheric carbon dioxide levels, and promote energy conservation. More than 80 percent of the awardees plan to assist environmental justice communities statewide as a component of their project. Another \$6.9 million will be available to communities and non-profit organizations in fiscal year 2025 to create additional resilient tree canopies.

IMPROVING INFORMATION ON FORESTS THROUGH 3-D MAPPING

The DNR used LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging), a remotely sensed mapping technology that uses lasers from aircraft or satellites, to help compile a 3-D picture of forest features like tree height and canopy cover. As of 2023, DNR staff have used LiDAR to collect information on 95 percent of the forested areas of Minnesota. Processing of that data is underway. Additionally, staff and contractors have completed more than 4,000 field plots to accompany the LiDAR data and build new forest inventory models. Together, the LiDAR data and field plots allow foresters to gain a much more detailed picture of forest conditions and track changes over time.

STRATEGICALLY MANAGING LAND

The DNR manages 5.6 million acres of state land on behalf of Minnesotans and is continually working to improve our land portfolio to ensure the land is managed to maximize DNR's ability to meet our mission. Through Strategic Land Asset Management, the DNR regularly evaluates its land holdings and looks for ways to improve habitat, conservation, and recreation. In 2023, the DNR brought more than 9,700 acres into public ownership, adding 5,300 acres to state forests, 3,500 acres to Wildlife Management Areas, 450 acres to the Native Prairie Bank easement program and more than 480 acres for other management programs.

Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) are made to local governments for state-owned natural resources land located within a county. These PILT payments help counties pay for local services like law enforcement, fire safety, and schools, just as property taxes do. In 2023, the in lieu of tax payment was \$39.7 million for all DNR administered lands and was distributed to local governments throughout the state.

Public land sales are a critical part of the agency's efforts to actively manage its public lands and improve the value of its land holdings. The DNR sells state-owned lands that no longer meet conservation or recreation needs or are isolated from larger management areas or parcels. In July 2023, an online auction resulted in the sale of 90 acres of School Trust land. Proceeds from the sale of these properties were deposited into the Permanent School Fund, benefiting school districts statewide.

ADMINISTERING MINERAL LEASES

In 2023, mineral leases administered by the DNR brought in \$44 million, benefiting Minnesota's K-12 public schools, the students at the University of Minnesota, and local communities.

Following DNR recommendations, the State Executive Council approved the renewal of a peat lease in Koochiching County, ten new taconite leases to Hibbing Taconite in St. Louis County, and 30 new taconite leases to Cliffs in Itasca County. The leases to Hibbing Taconite and Cleveland-Cliffs have the potential to extend the life of the Hibbing Taconite mine by at least 20 years.

Minnesota provides more than 80 percent of the iron ore used to make iron and steel in North America, and the United States Geological Service ranks Minnesota third in the nation for metallic mineral production.

MITIGATE AND ADAPT TO CLIMATE CHANGE

ADAPTING TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change is fundamentally affecting how resources are managed within Minnesota's public lands. In southern Minnesota, Nerstrand-Big Woods State Park's upland hardwood forest is suffering the effects of increased rainfall events caused by climate change. Wetter conditions have led to a rapid forest decline in flat, poorly drained areas of the park. In the past year, more than 2,000 bottomland bur oaks were planted across a five-acre site that experienced significant loss of mature trees that could not tolerate the increased soil moisture. This effort also involved clearing green and black ash, which were at risk of emerald ash borer infestation, prior to planting the bur oaks. This work is part of a broader effort to help the ecosystem transition to new species mixes that may better tolerate the future climate in this area.

In northern Minnesota, a spruce budworm infestation at two of Minnesota's most popular state forest campgrounds, Eckbeck and Finland campgrounds in Finland State Forest, created significant safety hazards for campground visitors. Spruce budworm outbreaks have become more severe because of climate change. The infestation caused a massive die-off of more than 50 percent of the spruce and balsam fir in the campgrounds. The DNR partnered with The Nature Conservancy to quickly address the issue and remove hazard trees as well as clean up the sites to make them available for public enjoyment during camping season.

BUILDING BRIDGES FOR THE FUTURE

Replacing aging, failing culverts and bridges at stream-road crossings with an updated design that fosters natural systems processes is a win for climate resiliency, public safety, fish habitat, and stream health. Under-designed crossings create downstream erosion by increasing water velocity during high water periods, which are becoming more common as the climate shifts. In 2023, DNR advanced efforts to replace aging, inadequate culverts and bridges at stream-road crossings affecting both DNR-managed and local infrastructure. For example, in fall of 2023 the installation of a new bridge on the Beaver River Road was completed after spring flooding in 2022 washed out a set of steel culverts that crossed a designated trout stream. The new, wider crossing is designed for climate resiliency, fish passage, and traffic safety.

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