

# New Directions in Sustainable Recreation Research: Results of a U.S. National Assessment and Multi-stakeholder Workshop

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## Introduction

Protected areas provide countless benefits to people seeking opportunities for recreation, outdoor experiences, connections to nature, and natural resources for everyday needs. Unfortunately, the capacity of U.S. public land management agencies to provide opportunities for these experiences has declined while the number of visitors to U.S. public lands has increased and become more culturally diverse. Most visitor use management and monitoring frameworks and tools currently used in the U.S. were developed prior to recent changes in recreation and tourism patterns, and are not responsive to the many ways people use public lands. Recreation managers and the scientific community are struggling to keep pace with these rapid changes, and there is an immediate need to address these changes and overall sustainability of outdoor experiences on U.S. public lands. Since protected area tourism as well as the sharing of management tools and solutions are international issues, we are seeking input through participation at the MMV9 conference.

In 2017, a group of 14 U.S. public land managers, researchers, and non-governmental partners from around the country started an effort to convene key players in outdoor recreation to take a holistic look at outdoor recreation management through a social-ecological sustainability lens. The goals of this effort were to identify current gaps in recreation management and research, identify new and emerging tools and processes for managing recreation, build a research agenda to develop and evaluate new tools and concepts, and cultivate a community of practice. First, the group launched an online assessment of recreation and tourism management challenges and information needs, which was distributed through national and international professional networks. The group then organized the Sustainable Recreation Research Workshop of outdoor recreation practitioners, researchers, and tourism providers to Golden, Colorado in April 2018 for three days of discussion that led to the development of research priority areas, working research papers on key topics, and a community of practice.

In this presentation, we will present the assessment and workshop results and open the opportunity to broaden collaboration internationally. The primary objectives of this presentation are to (1) present findings of the survey and workshop related to information needs and priority research areas, (2) gain feedback on these outcomes from an international audience, and (3) expand international collaboration toward meeting these information and research goals. Results we will share include themes of management challenges and information needs which emerged from the assessment and the Sustainable Recreation Research Workshop.

## **Methods and Results**

Through a multi-step process, we engaged a wide range of public land managers, researchers, and private sector stakeholders to identify thematic areas for future research needed to improve the sustainability of recreation and other outdoor experiences. This process began with a recreation and tourism research assessment, using a snowball sampling approach, in which 146 respondents explained their management challenges and ways to address these challenges through an online survey platform. Respondents included researchers from universities and land management agencies, public land managers, policy makers, and non-governmental organization and private industry professionals with outdoor recreation and tourism management expertise. Approximately 30 of these responses came from individuals working outside of the U.S.

During the workshop, 88 participants identified management challenges and subsequent information needs. These were grouped into thematic areas, which included: (1) defining and operationalizing sustainable recreation; (2) recreation and tourism impacts and ecological integrity; (3) collaboration, partnerships, and stewardship; (4) innovative approaches to financing recreation and assessing economic benefits; (5) expanding opportunities to new recreation visitors; (6) tools and approaches for recreation and tourism management and planning; (7) emerging recreation technology and trends. Workshop participants discussed these seven thematic areas and began to outline plans to implement new research needs within each theme as well as methods for collaborating across themes.

Since the workshop occurred, participants have continued to elaborate thematic areas, collaborate on a series of working papers and research articles, and develop a community of practice around outdoor recreation and tourism on U.S. public lands. This collaborative process continues to provide a space for recreation and tourism professionals both in the U.S. and internationally to contribute their thoughts on how nature-based recreation and tourism might be managed more sustainably.

## **Next Steps**

Results and ideas presented here are part of an on-going effort to expand and update research related to visitor use management by bringing together researchers, managers, industry associations, advocacy and user groups, and other stakeholders to discuss the future of sustainable recreation and tourism management. Specific products in progress include a focused agenda for recreation research, a series of working papers to stimulate new discussions, a special edition of a journal, and the continued building of our community of practice. We are also working to maximize our capacity and reach through briefing papers and press releases targeted to agency leaders and policymakers.

Considering the increasing international movement of people both for livelihoods and leisure, as well as existing transfer of knowledge and management models between continents, working through recreation and tourism management issues internationally is crucial to the long-term sustainability of protected areas. We aim to build this on-going effort through international collaboration.