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Re-Creating Public Land Recreation

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Location: Barber Park Event Center - Boise, Idaho
Conference Date: April 18, 2023

The Andrus Center for Public Policy is a nonprofit entity within Boise State University in Boise, Idaho.

Sponsored By:
• U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management
• Idaho Power
• Trout Unlimited
• Perkins Coie
• Idaho Conservation League
RE-CREATING PUBLIC LAND RECREATION

“Is the West in danger of being loved to death?”

Cecil D. Andrus, 1998
On Tuesday, April 18th, 2023, the Andrus Center hosted an in person conference focused on recreation and public lands with an eye towards resolving tensions and furthering best practices. This conference celebrated the popularity of outdoor recreation on public lands and convened a dialogue over how to improve policies, funding, and collaboration across shared recreation spaces.

In designing the conference, the Andrus Center drew on the quote from Charles Dickens, “it was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” The “best of times” reflects the rapid growth of recreation on public lands in the last decade. This growth has arisen from extraordinary interest and love for those public lands, and accelerated use during the pandemic. The growth presents opportunities for public-land adjacent communities to benefit from visitors, to diversify economies, and to develop enhancements such as trails, trailheads, and interpretive sites. More intimately, outdoor recreation provides opportunities for personal health and memories to last a lifetime. Time on a trail can be restorative, whether you’re on foot, bicycle, horse or an ATV. But in these best of times, can we manage recreation for social and ecological benefits at the same time?

The challenge that foretells potentially the “worst of times” ahead is the impact of more people recreating, in some places a lot more people. While often associated with the pandemic, much of this increased demand is a new normal. This creates on-the-ground ecological impacts, overwhelms existing recreation facilities and budgets, and reduces the quality of the outdoor experience people go out seeking. Additionally, crowding can cause conflicts over use types and compatibility. What will be our management strategies to meet the needs of people, rural communities and the stewardship of places?

Public lands act as anchoring institutions for surrounding communities. More can be done to value these recreation assets and ensure that agencies can adequately staff and support their management. County commissioners, mayors, and other local stakeholders can effectively engage with recreation managers to meet collaborative goals.
CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

8:00 am Welcome
Moderator: Emily Wakild, PhD., Cecil D. Andrus Endowed Chair for the Environment and Public Lands, Andrus Center for Public Policy, Boise State University
Welcome Message, Tracy Andrus, President and Chairman, Andrus Center for Public Policy

8:30am Opening Panel: Current and Evolving Trends in Public Land Recreation
Moderator: Vanessa Fry, Director, Idaho Policy Institute
Bob Keiter, Professor of Law, Wallace Stegner Center of Land, Resources, and the Environment, University of Utah
Megan Lawson, PhD., Research Lead, Headwaters Economics

9:00am Panel: State and Local Perspectives on the Future of Public Land Recreation
Moderator: Scott Martin, Chattanooga Department of Parks & Outdoors
Susan Buxton, Director, Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation
Luis Benitez, Endeavor Consulting/former Director, Colorado Outdoor Recreation Industry Office
Nate Duckett, Mayor, City of Farmington, New Mexico
Sara Arkle, Parks Resource Superintendent, City of Boise

10:15am Break

10:30am Panel: Tribal and Federal Perspectives on the Future of Public Land Recreation
Moderator: Kirk Siegler, National Public Radio
Sammy Matsaw, PhD. Research Scientist, Fort Hall Shoshone Bannock Tribes, co-founder, River Newe
Toby Bloom, National Program Manager, Tourism and Interpretive Services, United States Forest Service
Leon Thomas, District Manager, Bureau of Land Management - Phoenix District Office

11:45am Break

12:00pm Lunch and Keynote: Tracy Stone-Manning, Director, Bureau of Land Management
Moderator: Jenna Whitlock, Vice-Chair, Andrus Center for Public Policy
Introduction: Lauren McLean, Mayor, City of Boise

1:00pm Break

1:15pm The Governor’s Perspective-Remarks from Idaho Governor Brad Little
Moderator: Emily Wakild
Introduction: Andy Brunelle, Board of Governors, Andrus Center for Public Policy

1:45pm Partner and User Perspectives on the Future of Public Land Recreation
Panel Moderator: Kim Cross, Environmental Writer
Ashley Korenblat, Managing Director, Public Land Solutions and CEO, Western Spirit Cycling Adventures
Erik Weiseth, Vice President, Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association; Managing Partner, Orange Torpedo Trips
Brad Wilson, General Manager, Bogus Basin Mountain Recreation Area
Evan Robins, Education and Stewardship Manager, Tread Lightly!

3:15pm Break

3:30pm Closing: The Emerging Role of Foundations in Public Land Recreation. Where can philanthropy fill the gaps and catalyze change?
Moderator: Kirk Siegler, National Public Radio
Steve Bullock, former Governor of Montana, Chair, Foundation for America’s Public Lands
Mary Mitsos, President and CEO, National Forest Foundation (Missoula)

4:30pm Concluding Remarks and Reflections
Emily Wakild, PhD., Cecil D. Andrus Endowed Chair for the Environment and Public Lands, Andrus Center for Public Policy, Boise State University
The Andrus Center created this forum to bring together outdoor recreation users, partners, and land managers to consider challenges, share experiences, and shape a collaborative path forward. Keynote speakers and panelists discussed the best and worst of collaboration, funding, and policy, and collaborative strategies for managing recreation on public lands and waters.

The conference began with an overview of the Andrus Center’s commitment to expanding student experiences beyond the classroom, emphasizing impact through internships, field schools, and applied research opportunities. Legacy remarks by Tracy Andrus highlighted the importance of diverse perspectives and common-sense solutions in environmental conversations. The Board of Governors and the environmental committee were acknowledged for their contributions. Conference speakers and panelists included Federal and Tribal land managers, State and Local governments, and NGO and business leaders with expertise in recreation. Presenters were drawn from eight western states and Washington, D.C. Panel discussions centered on three themes:

- **Collaboration, especially working across jurisdictional proximities;**
- **Funding, especially to overcome infrastructure and operational shortfalls;**
- **Policy, especially gaps in current laws and policies.**

In the area of collaboration, panelists and speakers noted the ways in which equity of access is now on the radar. Nineteen nonprofits work in this space. Agency leaders expressed priorities for equitable recreation opportunities for current and future generations of Americans and imperatives to be smart and inclusive in efforts. Equity includes storytelling, identifying leadership in all segments, hiring diverse employees, and many other ways of making recreation accessible. Making space for alternative representations of space and time within recreation emerged as important. Connections to nature are essential in varied ways, for example, in seasonal rounds. Sharing Tribal Science with kids and elders on the river is a way to share stories and build connections (ex. River Newe provides free trips to allow Tribal members to return to the river). One historical genesis of recreation can be tied to Yellowstone and use has expanded exponentially (2 million visitors in 1965, 3 million in 1992, 4 million in 2015 and 4.9 million in 2021). Important Tribal engagement work around Yellowstone has taken place because treaty rights span public lands, but excise taxes and hunting permits don’t provide Tribes with revenue. Different world views interpret bureaucracies differently.

Other panelists noted that together we are writing a new playbook for recreation at the intersection of technology and growth. The interplay between motorized and non-motorized recreation gets complicated and agencies and communities need de-escalation tactics. For example, Phoenix is the fifth largest city and a big gateway community. The Bureau of Land Management has taken ownership, gotten buy-in, and sought collaboration to improve recreational shooting on public lands. (Example, at the Church Camp site with up to 3000 visitors on weekends, target shooters took out fiber optic cables six times each month). Forward thinking to fully develop target sites is a key alternative. The BLM built infrastructure, figured out policy gaps and filled resource needs.
Furthering the theme of collaboration, speakers noted that thinking about recreation as a tool for economic growth is new to the Federal government but bipartisan support and new research make non-land agencies then pay attention. Others noted that good outfitters help people fall in love and protect places through autobiographical advocacy. For example, river companies create advocates for recreational spaces.

For the challenging topic of funding, panelists and speakers noted in many ways simply that use is up, funding is down. Recreation’s economic impact is nearly 4 million jobs, $682 billion dollars; bigger than automobile and pharmaceutical industries combined. Tracy Stone-Manning noted that while BLM hosts a comprehensive array of programs across the public lands, including serving as the nation’s playground and outdoor church with 80 million visitors to BLM lands in 2021, BLM’s budget is the leanest of land agencies: it gets .79 cents to each $5 for the National Park Service. This means the BLM does a whole lot with a whole little. Over 99 percent of BLM sites are free so when considering new fees, thought must be given to the ability to pay and the right balance between fees and access. In Idaho $100 million, the largest investment in state history in the park system, was approved in 2023 for infrastructure and maintenance backlog. Boise’s ballot initiatives 2001 and 2017 are examples of people taxing themselves to protect open space. Bogus Basin is a nonprofit ski hill adjusting to new demands, looking at how to sell tickets, how to create summer opportunities, and building thoughtful timing and relationships.

More broadly, creative funding ideas can meet challenges. Panelists suggested putting trailhead meters in parking lots to collect fees; levying backpack taxes; viewing ecosystems as infrastructure by investing in their recovery and returning user fees to where they were collected. Other ideas include new ways to pay for recreation-making fee systems more user friendly with cell phone apps or special use permits for events like the Burning Man Festival. One problem is that the folks who live in recreation communities end up footing the bill for programs which really need to be shared between residents and visitors alike. How does a town of 5000 people pay for the wastewater treatment for 5 million visitors? Broadly, speakers noted that millions of ways exist to make a living today without land ownership; many of these livelihoods occur because of shared access to public lands. It is possible through planning and collaboration to build sustainable recreation economies.
Suggestions for policy interventions included the observation that recreation has been a sideshow for legal precedents and it now should be more of a main act. Months-long permit processes on federal lands delay the film industry or keep kids from going out on trails regularly. Ethics have to be part of the new management. Educating recreators is an essential piece through public service announcements, elementary kids, and getting community buy-in. An outdoor recreation review commission could work on a landscape scale. Data gathering methods could be supplemented with trail counters bringing in novel data sources like apps and cell phone data website searches. The good news is that we have amazing predictive power with these models bringing in statistical models to measure the amount and variety of outdoor recreation. Without good data on how much folks are recreating we can’t adequately advocate for recreation. Tying land management funding to economic development changes the conversation and alters priorities.

Speakers noted that not actively managing recreation still has an impact on the conservation of the land. Celebrating successes is important. The “Find your Park” marketing campaign brought 330 million visitors to parks. Nearly 70% of Yellowstone visitors are first time users, they aren’t mad about traffic jams but are excited to see buffalo. A recreational strategy for the 21st century and for all Americans has public support including 200 friend groups, partners in ranchers and recreationalists. Recreation staff are some of the most creative and hard-working people but the pace is not sustainable and we need to find ways to help make their work easier so we don’t risk burning them out. We need public will and pressure on a bipartisan issue—fund the agencies so they can serve communities.
The opening speakers set the stage for the recreation conversation by discussing the historical and economic context for recreation’s trajectory. Keiter focused on the legal aspects of outdoor recreation on public lands. He provided a historical overview, noting key events such as the establishment of the National Park system and the importance of multiple commissions in shaping recreation policies. He reviewed the long and complex history of recreation law and policy at the federal level, contrasting the multiple use agencies of the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service as having less specific policy direction. Specific designations, such as Wilderness Areas, National Recreation Areas and Wild and Scenic Rivers have more direct and detailed law and policy for outdoor recreation. This makes for a setup more similar to the National Park Service and the US Fish and Wildlife Service, agencies that carry specific missions and requirements for National Parks and National Wildlife Refuges respectively. He emphasized the growing economic impact of recreation on public lands, with funding discussed through laws like the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act and the Great American Outdoors Act. Keiter suggested that courts are playing a role in shaping a common law of outdoor recreation, addressing ongoing conflicts between recreation and other land uses.

“Agencies can better utilize their planning practices and strategies as well as engage in collaboration and coordination processes on a landscape scale to promote and expand recreational opportunities through broad public engagement and interagency coordination.”-Bob Keiter

Lawson introduced Headwaters Economics’ role as a non-profit research organization and discussed their roadmap for the outdoor recreation economy, emphasizing the multi-faceted impact beyond tourism. Lawson discussed the challenges of obtaining accurate recreation data, pointing out the discrepancy between increasing recreational use and decreasing budgets. She highlighted the importance of the America’s Outdoor Recreation Act of 2023, proposed legislation, which aims to improve approaches for counting recreation. Lawson then discussed the “amenity trap,” where communities face challenges like rising costs of living due to increased popularity. She stressed the need for communities to have creative solutions, mentioning examples like Moab, Utah, changing laws to allocate lodging taxes for public safety and affordable housing. Lastly, Lawson addressed the vulnerability of outdoor recreation gateway places to climate change and natural disasters. She emphasized the importance of building resilient communities and diverse economies.

“It’s really hard to measure how much recreation is happening. It’s not board feet, it’s not barrels, it’s not animal grazing units. It’s humans wandering across the landscape and it’s a lot harder to measure. As a result of this, outdoor recreation is often underfunded.”-Dr. Megan Lawson

The speakers expressed enthusiasm for the transformative potential in the outdoor recreation landscape. They encouraged the audience to engage in discussions around challenges and potential solutions, including the need for accurate data, strategies to navigate the amenity trap, and building climate-resilient communities.
The first panel addressed state and local level perspectives on the changing dynamics of recreation. Mayor Duckett shared insights into Farmington’s approach to outdoor recreation, emphasizing the city’s transition from an oil and gas-dependent community to fostering outdoor recreation as a strategic initiative. Highlighting the area’s unique confluence of industries, he discussed the Community Transformation and Economic Diversification Fund, aimed at enhancing outdoor amenities and attracting a diverse population.

“Our governor has taken broad steps to attract Netflix and film companies to New Mexico with huge tax rebates. But to get a film permit to go out onto BLM lands is a huge headache and it is stopping our local community from growing its economy by utilizing those public spaces.”
-Mayor Nate Duckett

Sarah Arkle provided a unique perspective on managing public lands, particularly in the Boise Foothills. She emphasized Boise’s commitment to providing accessible open spaces, citing a 60-year history of collaborative efforts among various stakeholders. Arkle acknowledged challenges such as homelessness and overuse, emphasizing the importance of continuous collaboration to address these issues.

“The ballot initiatives that the City of Boise has passed, that the community has begged for starting in 2001, shocked the country. A city in Idaho taxed itself to raise money for conservation. Twice the citizens asked, “Can we raise more money to protect open space, to protect clean water, to protect wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities? And twice the voters have answered a resounding yes!”
-Sarah Arkle

Luis Benitez spoke to the absence of a unified national approach to the outdoor recreation industry, proposing thoughts on creating a federal office for outdoor recreation. He presented compelling figures highlighting the industry’s economic impact and discussed the success of state-level offices, suggesting a potential federal model. Benitez underscored the need for collective governance to address policy, conservation, education, workforce development, and public health in the outdoor industry.

“That adds up to a $682 billion economy for the United States responsible for over 4 million American jobs. That’s bigger than the auto and pharmaceutical industry combined.”
-Luis Benitez

Director Buxton focused on the challenges faced by state parks, managing 30 parks across Idaho with limited resources. She expressed gratitude for a significant state investment of $95 million, highlighting its allocation for deferred maintenance and partnerships. Buxton stressed the importance of working collaboratively with stakeholders, including private entities, NGOs, and foundations, to address capacity issues and improve funding mechanisms.

“We’ve got 30 state parks across the state of Idaho...with 171 full-time employees. That’s approximately one full-time employee per 41,000 visitors a year.”
-Susan Buxton

The panel discussed the critical role of private-public partnerships in managing public lands, considering the increasing trends of urbanization. Acknowledging the shift in urban growth of Western cities, the panel highlighted the success of ballot initiatives in raising funds for conservation and emphasized managing for expected use and user expectations. Panelists spoke to the importance of flexibility, collaboration, and deliberate planning in providing diverse outdoor experiences closer to home.
The third panel considered Tribal and Federal approaches to the changing recreation landscape. Superintendent Cameron Sholly introduced Yellowstone National Park, highlighting its iconic status and the challenges of managing increased visitation. Sholly discussed the restoration efforts over the past 50-60 years and the changing visitation patterns, with the number of park visitors increasing rapidly. He emphasized the diverse definitions of recreation and the need for a nuanced approach to cater to visitor interests. Sholly emphasized the need for flexibility, adaptability, and understanding definitions of recreation. He expressed optimism about expanding conversations, building relationships with federal, state, and Tribal partners, and acknowledged the overwhelming public support for Yellowstone and changing patterns post-COVID-19.

“Yellowstone is 2.2 million acres. It has 1750 acres of roads, parking lots, and pull outs. Most of that park never sees a visitor and 98 percent of visitors never get more than a half mile away from their car. So we have a very large problem in a very small percentage of the park. We spend probably 97 percent of our budget time and energy in less than one percent of the park overall.” - Cameron Sholly

Sammy Matsaw introduced himself in the Shoshone language and expressed the need for grace in acknowledging cultural differences between Tribal people and white settlers. Matsaw discussed the seasonal rounds of Shoshone-Bannock people and highlighted how storytelling can play a significant role in recreation. He introduced the nonprofit organization River Newe, co-founded with his wife, Jessica Matsaw, aimed at reconnecting tribal youth with the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. Matsaw discussed cultural disparities, and expressed concerns about public-private partnerships, emphasizing the need to slow down and re-engage with nature. Matsaw concluded by expressing a desire for ongoing conversations and a collective effort to create a more inclusive and sustainable approach to outdoor recreation.

“English is primarily made up of nouns, thousands of nouns, less than a thousand verbs. Usually in Indigenous languages, it’s the opposite. Ecosystems are living in verbs. When we talk about our stories being interwoven into ecology and ecosystems so are our verbs. Verbs steer you towards cooperation and collaboration.”- Sammy Matsaw

Toby Bloom discussed our unique time period in public lands and the opportunities for lovers of public lands to shape the future of recreation. She emphasized the recent recognition of recreation as an economic development tool in the federal government, outlining a timeline that highlighted key moments, including bipartisan opposition to the disposal of excess Federal lands Act in 2017. Bloom underscored the importance of continued community efforts to secure funding and attention for recreation infrastructure.

“During Covid, America rediscovered its outdoors! Our numbers went up, we had 18 million more visitors in 2021 than we did in 2020 in the Forest Service and our land managers in the Forest Service were like ‘What is going on? Every day is the Fourth of July now!”- Toby Bloom

Leon Thomas discussed the challenges of managing public lands near a rapidly growing metropolitan area. He shared a case study about recreational target shooting and highlighted the importance of pro-active buy-in and collaboration to reduce conflict and create positive recreation experiences by driving users to organized sites ready to receive them. Thomas showcased successful efforts to manage shooting sites and engage with local communities, emphasizing the need for proactive planning. The panelists collectively highlighted the importance of understanding diverse perspectives, engaging with local communities, and implementing forward-thinking strategies to address the evolving landscape of public land recreation. The discussion touched on the significance of educational initiatives, ethical considerations, and the role of collaboration in managing recreational activities and the natural environment.

“It’s about ensuring that we have internship opportunities in our District and hiring a diverse workforce so that when we do have people out there working on the landscape they’re speaking the same languages, they’re understanding the backgrounds of the recreators that they’re out there interfacing with.” – Leon Thomas
Mayor McLean provided a warm welcome to Tracy Stone-Manning, acknowledging the City of Boise’s long-standing partnership with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Stone-Manning highlighted the BLM’s importance as the largest land manager in the United States, overseeing 245 million acres, or one in every 10 acres in the country. She emphasized the diverse range of responsibilities, from delivering energy, minerals, food, and wood to managing habitat for over 3,000 wildlife species. Stone-Manning shared personal experiences, including recreational activities such as shooting ranges, celebrating land conveyances, and dancing with the Fort Mohave Indian Tribe. Acknowledging the surge in public land visits during the pandemic, Stone-Manning expressed pride in the BLM’s evolving role as a recreation agency. She noted the exponential increase in visits, with 80 million people visiting BLM lands in fiscal year 2021, up 10% from the previous year. Public lands, once known primarily for extracting natural resources, are now recognized as premier destinations with world-class recreational opportunities. Stone-Manning identified challenges arising from increased visitation, strain on law enforcement, potential conflicts among recreation users, and the need for updated management plans. She stressed the importance of balancing recreation with other land uses like grazing, and highlighted the role of partnerships with various stakeholders. Stone-Manning emphasized the role of partnerships in managing recreational opportunities, citing the example of the Boise Foothills. She urged attendees to explore the many recreational opportunities provided by BLM lands, from hiking and camping to rock climbing, canyoneering, and mountain biking. She noted the importance of volunteers and over 200 friend groups supporting BLM’s work. Stone-Manning discussed the challenges posed by BLM’s limited budget, emphasizing the need for creative solutions. She compared the BLM’s funding to state park budgets, highlighting the vast difference despite managing significantly larger land areas. Stone-Manning provided examples of potential funding sources, including tapping into OHV registration fees, developing new site-specific fees, and partnering with nonprofits for major projects. She stressed the importance of making fee systems user-friendly and convenient for recreationalists. Stone-Manning introduced the concept of a 21st century Recreation Strategy, acknowledging the need for a proactive approach to manage the challenges posed by increased visitation. She expressed excitement about the partnership with the Foundation for America’s Public Lands and its potential to generate funding and support. Stone-Manning acknowledged the need for collaboration between federal and state jurisdictions to streamline regulations and enhance recreational experiences. In her closing remarks, Stone-Manning expressed gratitude for the audience’s commitment to public lands and urged them to actively participate in shaping the future of recreation at the BLM. She emphasized the shared responsibility of preserving public lands for current and future generations, encouraging thoughtful discussions and solutions.
“When it comes to managing recreation opportunities and ensuring everyone can still have meaningful experiences on our public lands, partners, of course, are the key.” –Tracy Stone-Manning

Tracy Stone-Manning addresses full conference for lunchtime keynote.
GOVERNOR BRAD LITTLE’S ADDRESS

Andrus Board member Andy Brunelle introduced Governor Little, noting that this was his fifth time speaking at an Andrus Center event. Governor Little acknowledged the collaborative spirit fostered by the Andrus Center and shared anecdotes of his evolving relationship with the late Governor Andrus. He highlighted successful initiatives like the Boise Foothills, demonstrating the positive outcomes of multi-agency cooperation in resolving complex issues. The Governor emphasized his dedication to making Idaho an attractive place for residents, navigating challenges posed by increasing populations and ensuring the preservation of the state’s vast public lands. Acknowledging the surge in outdoor recreation, Governor Little discussed the challenges faced by rural counties providing necessary infrastructure and services.

He emphasized the need for collaborative efforts to maintain trails, establish campsites, and support law enforcement. The Governor praised successful models like the Boise Foothills, encouraging similar strategies to address growing outdoor recreational demands across the state.

Governor Little expressed confidence in current tools to enhance outdoor recreation without resorting to new taxes. He emphasized the effectiveness of collaborative efforts, suggesting a preference for incentives over creating new bureaucracies. The Governor emphasized the importance of exploring various incentives before resorting to financial investments.

Governor Little responded to audience questions on various topics. He expressed reservations about establishing a dedicated State Office of Outdoor Recreation but remained open to the idea. On the Snake River, the Governor outlined plans to leverage federal Farm Bill dollars to incentivize environmentally responsible practices. He also affirmed his commitment to salmon recovery but his continuing opposition to dam removal.

Governor Brad Little’s keynote address highlighted Idaho’s commitment to responsible outdoor recreation and resource management. He noted the state’s proactive approach to water projects, collaborative models, and incentivizing sustainable practices underscores its dedication to preserving the natural beauty that defines Idaho. As the state continues to navigate challenges, the Governor emphasized collaboration and creative solutions for outdoor recreation and environmental stewardship in Idaho.

“They’re what I’d call a Sticky Wicket, and we’re going to have to get people together to bang their heads together and come up with solutions, but we’ve got some examples in Idaho, like the Henry’s Lake Area and here on the Boise Front. We can do this but it’s never real easy, but if it’s not easy the results of it are usually more beneficial.” - Gov. Little
The third panel delved into the perspectives of recreation users and the challenges and opportunities faced by various stakeholders. Evan Robins discussed Tread Lightly!'s role in supporting responsible motorized recreation. He emphasized the importance of capable trail systems for accessing remote areas, sharing anecdotes about his own experiences and the need for collaboration among outdoor enthusiasts.

“We have substantial resources already built within our programs. What we need is the ability to cut through the red tape and find the right person in those district or field offices who wants to get things done.” -Evan Robins

Katie McKalip reflected on her upbringing as an active user of public lands, emphasizing the need for robust funding to address increased pressure on these shared spaces. She proposed the idea of an “outdoor legacy tax” on outdoor gear to contribute to conservation funding.

“Backcountry hunters and anglers, as an organization, is invested in conserving important public lands and waters and sustaining and expanding opportunities for the public to access them. We’re equally invested in ensuring that the agencies charged with managing these resources are robustly funded and have the tools they need to do their work.” -Katie McKalip

Ashley Korenblat presented the organization’s role in advising communities on recreation economy strategies. They conduct recreation asset reviews, providing recommendations for communities to leverage their unique outdoor offerings. She emphasized the importance of stakeholder involvement, research, and policy considerations in developing successful outdoor recreation projects.

“There’s this idea that the federal estate is prohibiting local communities from generating wealth because the federal government owns the land, which made sense in the 19th century. Today there’s a million ways to earn a living that don’t involve land ownership, and what we’re seeing is communities thriving and prospering because they have access to shared public land. This is asking a lot of people to make a switch from what their grandfathers told them about how they should feel about public land, but it’s happening.” -Ashley Korenblat
Eric Weiseth shed light on the diverse outfitters community, fostering collaboration and problem-solving. He shared anecdotes illustrating the transformative impact of outdoor experiences on individuals, emphasizing the role of outfitters as advocates for nature. Outfitters take people to incredible places and help them fall in love with those places and then go on to be life-long advocates for protecting those places. Much advocacy is autobiographical and positive personal experiences go a long way.

“Obviously, there are great people at the agencies at the ground level but the system incentivizes them to say no because the process is too long and too hard. They’re incentivized to say no and they need to be incentivized to say yes a little bit more.” -Erik Weiseth

Brad Wilson detailed the facility’s evolution from a skiing area to a year-round recreation destination. Their emphasis on accommodating the surge in demand, spurred by the pandemic and population growth, led to innovative ticketing strategies and plans for expansion. Challenges like climate change and wildfire risks were acknowledged, emphasizing collaborative efforts with the Forest Service. The panelists collectively highlighted the significance of responsible outdoor recreation, the need for sustainable funding models, and the importance of collaboration to address the challenges facing public lands. They urged diverse stakeholders to work together in shaping policies that support a balance between conservation access. Regarding the funding of public lands, there were differing perspectives. Some suggested a need for agencies to help communities first, emphasizing the connection between land management and local economic development. Others advocated for a shift in the narrative, urging for increased funding for agencies to provide necessary services for communities.

“Bogus Basin is a 501-3C, we’re one of a handful of non-profit mountain recreation areas in the country and we’re the largest one....with the pandemic, the huge demand and the huge increase in volume really forced us towards creative thinking around how we can accommodate all these extra people. We looked at how we sell tickets and how we manage the mountain recreation. Our night skiing operation runs until 10 o’clock which really promotes our accessibility to the community. Just about anybody can find time for skiing or snowboarding in their schedule. It allows us to provide a really inexpensive opportunity for people to come up and learn to ski.” -Brad Wilson
Mary Mitsos introduced the organization’s mission, emphasizing their role as a non-profit working to connect the American public with national forests and grasslands. She outlined the strategic plan, focusing on tripling investments in forest restoration, recreation infrastructure, and engaging more people. Mitsos highlighted the importance of collaboration in addressing challenges, encouraging conversations across jurisdictional boundaries, and considering diverse perspectives for future planning. She stressed the need to decrease pressure on public lands, address wildfire concerns, and learn from Indigenous communities’ traditional ecological knowledge. Mitsos addressed the funding challenges, expressing skepticism about the sufficiency of tax dollars and emphasizing the need for public-private partnerships. She explained how the National Forest Foundation raises funds, particularly for maintenance, and underscored the importance of engaging the public through marketing campaigns. She advocated for diverse funding sources beyond tax dollars, emphasizing the public’s role in supporting public lands. On the policy side, Mitsos emphasized a non-advocacy, bipartisan approach. She expressed reservations about additional legislation, citing complexities and potential conflicts with existing laws. Instead, she advocated for maximizing the effectiveness of current legislation, citing the Land and Water Conservation Fund as a positive example.

Former Governor Steve Bullock addressed the challenges of declining funding for public lands management, the wildfire crisis, and forest restoration. Bullock highlighted the critical role of public lands in shaping personal and familial memories. He introduced the Foundation for America’s Public Lands, of which he is the chair, emphasizing its mission to support public lands’ economic and heritage value. Bullock acknowledged the limitations of government and emphasized philanthropy’s role in filling gaps, testing ideas, and inspiring public support. Governor Bullock detailed the foundation’s inaugural programs, focusing on awareness, restoration, and outdoor recreation. He underscored the need to educate the public about the value of public lands, especially the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The foundation aims to leverage funds for restoration projects in the Colorado River Basin and collaborate with the BLM to refine its outdoor recreation strategy. Bullock stated that the foundation’s success should be seen as a collective effort and encouraged corporate and philanthropic partnerships. He also mentioned that during his time as Governor he saw the value of the Good Neighbor Authority for state and federal cooperation on forestry projects, and agreed with a suggestion from the audience to extend the approach to recreation projects.

“I think any time that you can have partnerships from a federal and state entity in addition to philanthropic it can provide incredible opportunities.” -Steve Bullock
Dr. Emily Wakild, Cecil D. Andrus Endowed Chair for Environment & Public Lands, Andrus Center for Public Policy, Boise State University

Dr. Emily Wakild expressed gratitude for the engaging and thought-provoking conference. Summarizing the day’s dialogue, she acknowledged the dichotomy between the “best of times” and the current challenges faced in outdoor recreation. The discussion highlighted issues such as a fragmented common law, amenity traps affecting rural communities, and cumbersome permits hindering children’s access to outdoor activities. Equity in access emerged as a concern, with a call for a more varied representation in decision-making spaces. She emphasized the need for efficient “air traffic control” among permits and policies, coupled with a demand for education, engineering, and enforcement to manage the surging interest in outdoor activities.

The impact of COVID-19 on outdoor recreation converted an existential crisis into opportunity. Recreation as a recruitment tool for diversifying the tax base was explored, alongside the concept of “parktopias” attracting individuals seeking proximity to outdoor spaces. Infrastructure connecting urban areas to outdoor spaces was identified as pivotal, with an emphasis on creative solutions. Dr. Wakild highlighted the importance of slowing down, appreciating the environment, and fostering each community’s commitment to stewardship. The examples drawn from the day’s speakers included “finding your Park,” respecting, connecting, and protecting public lands, and the significance of public lands in anchoring communities, economies, and souls.

Concrete suggestions were proposed, ranging from trail signs to river permits, ski pass timing, and the acknowledgment that not every solution is a 100% fix, but incremental changes matter. The absence of extensive connections to research and university collaborations was noted, suggesting an area for further exploration. The importance of outdoor recreation collaboratives, foundations as pilots for innovative solutions, and non-traditional partnerships were underscored. Dr. Wakild encouraged a collective effort to support agencies, elected officials, and public land stewards.


Please contact Danielle Trujillo, Executive Director of the Andrus Center for Public Policy, to receive a PDF of the conference program.

Conference recorded videos: Youtube, Andrus Center for Public Policy at Boise State

Transcripts available upon request.

Andrus Center staff and speakers, from left, Lindsay Virgin, Danielle Trujillo, Jenna Whitlock, Emily Wakild, BLM Director Tracy Stone-Manning, Tracy Andrus, Boise Mayor Lauren McLean.

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The Andrus Center for Public Policy is a nonprofit entity within Boise State University in Boise, Idaho. Visit us at andruscenter.org to see reports from previous conferences and sign up for our newsletter.
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