

**The Department of the Interior (DOI) Listening Sessions on Underserved Community Recreation Access to DOI-  
managed Public Lands and Waters  
October 21, 2021, 8:00 pm- 10:00 pm ET<sup>1</sup>**

## Background

[Executive Order 13985: Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government \(EO 13985\)](#) directs agencies to conduct equity assessments of select programs to determine whether underserved communities face systemic barriers in accessing benefits and opportunities. Per EO 13985, underserved communities are defined as, “populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life...such as Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.” As part of implementing [EO 13985](#), the Department of the Interior (DOI) is assessing the equity of its programs related to three initial focus areas that support the agency's mission and have high potential for equity impact: (1) contracting, (2) recreational visitation, and (3) tribal discretionary grants. DOI contracted with Kearns and West to conduct 15 virtual listening sessions where the public were invited to provide comments and feedback on the barriers that limit access, diversity, and equity as well as recommendations of actions the Department should take to reduce barriers.

On behalf of DOI, Kearns and West facilitated a listening session on Underserved Community Recreation Access to DOI-managed Public Lands and Waters on October 21, 2021, from 8:00 pm- 10:00 pm ET.

## Participant Data

Ahead of the virtual session, registration totaled 43 registrants. The listening session saw a maximum number of participants in the session around 22 participants.

Participants were invited to voluntarily use Poll Everywhere to understand who was participating and as a tool for building community in a virtual space. Participants were asked about their geographic location, how they identify, and their age.

The polling data highlighted the diversity of participants with the following:

- 31% identifying as or representing a racial or ethnic minority group,
- 6% identifying as or representing people living with disability,
- 13% identifying as a member of or representing the LGBTQ+ community,
- 25% identifying as or representing those who live in rural areas or communities,
- 6% identifying as or representing persons impacted by persistent poverty, and
- 19% not identifying as or representing the underserved community groups identified in EO 13985.

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<sup>1</sup> This meeting summary was prepared for the U.S. Department of the Interior by Kearns & West, Inc. (K&W) pursuant to an existing IDIQ contract.

Additionally, participants identified with a diversity of age groups. Most participants were between the ages of 35-54 years old (50%), but the session also saw representation from the following age brackets: 25–34-year-old (33%), 55- 74-year-old (8%), and 18–24-year-old (8%).

Geographically, participants joined from the following states: Alaska, California, Colorado, Montana, New York, Virginia, Washington, D.C, and Washington state.

### Agenda Overview

Public land visitation data suggests that certain underserved communities are underrepresented as visitors to DOI-managed public lands and waters. Therefore, the purpose of this listening session was to identify major barriers and understand how the Department can address barriers and better support members of underserved communities in recreating on public lands and waters. Keeping this goal at the forefront, Kearns & West, an independent, third-party neutral consulting firm, and DOI designed a two-hour facilitation plan to engage with members of the public, especially those representing underserved communities, around recreation access.

Miro, an interactive, collaborative virtual whiteboard was used to capture participants' responses to developed facilitation questions. Prior to the session, participants were sent a session reminder email with instructions on how to use Miro, which included a PDF of Miro Tips and a YouTube video tutorial. Sarah Franklin, Kearns & West, provided an additional demonstration on the Miro board, with instructions for those uncomfortable with the technology to express their ideas verbally or using the chat function. Miro provided participants the space to reflect and respond to the following questions:

- What are underserved communities' and individuals' key barriers to visiting public lands and waters managed by DOI and its bureaus (National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Bureau of Reclamation)?
- How can DOI remove or reduce barriers (e.g., update policies, practices, or programs)?
- How can DOI establish and maintain connections to a wider and more diverse set of stakeholders representing underserved communities? How can DOI better share information with underserved stakeholders about recreation opportunities? What are the best ways to notify and engage about these opportunities?

Utilizing these questions, Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, led participants through a series of discussions. Each segment corresponded to a dedicated conversation through the Miro board, the chat function, and participants' verbal remarks. Each section began with an introduction to the topic matter and a preview of the questions featured on the Miro board. Each discussion segment concluded with a summarization of themes, and its relationship to the larger goals of the listening sessions.

In addition to guided facilitation of virtual activities and open reflection, the listening sessions opened with words from Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Land and Mineral Management Laura Daniel-Davis. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Daniel-Davis stressed access and equity on Interior-managed lands and underscored that improving programs and addressing issues required public input. Daniel-Davis mentioned that public lands belong to everyone and shared personal anecdotes of being outdoors on public lands on described how recreational visits can impact visitors spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Daniel-Davis emphasized the need for the Department to improve equity and noted her appreciation for those participating in the listening session, acknowledging that some experiences may be painful to share.

The session closed with remarks from Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, who reiterated that the listening sessions are providing a foundation for future conversations around how DOI can engage with underserved communities on public lands and waters. He also reiterated his appreciation for all who participated in these conversations and encouraged participants to continue to have conversations with the Department.

### Themes and Concepts

Four thematic conversations were held during the listening session: (1) perceptions, (2) what is working now and what could be working, (3) barriers, and (4) recommendations. A summary of each conversation is included below.

#### *Perception*

This section looked for participants to begin the conversation by answering the following questions:

- What do you feel are the benefits of visiting public lands and waters?
- Do you feel that you/your community is welcomed and is able to easily get to public lands and waters?
- How would you describe your/your community's relationship to public lands and waters?
- Anything else we should know?

Participants were encouraged to describe their experiences or their communities' experiences when visiting DOI-managed recreational areas. Participants' words, reflections, experiences, and recommendations from this segment were captured on the Miro board, which is included as *Figure 1: Perceptions Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A. **Themes that arose during the Miro board activity included an emphasis on the mental health benefits associated with visiting these spaces and being in nature. Participants also described their perceptions and challenges associated with safety, lack of transportation, and cost. Participants noted that the lack of representation in public lands frontline staff causes them to feel less welcome, and some participants whose native language was not English reported feeling like outcasts due to limited materials and interpretation in other languages.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, opened additional space for participants to reflect on comments from the virtual Miro board or for general comment about participants' or their communities' experiences on public lands. Several participants shared their experiences on public lands as people of color outdoors. Existence of closed-off recreation communities (an example shared was a local salmon fishing community) that pass down knowledge only to their own can also be an access barrier. Those who shared their experiences verbally also expressed safety concerns as women of color, described the time intensive research required to plan all their outdoor recreation activities (camping, fishing, hiking, etc.) to be safe, and highlighted the cost barriers (particularly around procuring equipment).

#### *What is working now? What could be working?*

This section moved participants to begin thinking more about their experiences on public lands and waters by answering the following questions:

- What helps/would help you visit and utilize public lands and waters?
- What makes/would make you have a positive experience recreating on public lands and waters?

As participants began to share their perceptions, they were also encouraged to share their experiences or their communities' experiences while visiting public lands. Participants shared positive experiences as well as recommendations for what could make them have a positive experience on public lands. Through the Miro board, participants had the opportunity to record recommendations, experiences, and reflections. A screenshot of participants comments and reflections is included in *Figure 2: What is working now? What could be working? Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A. **Some themes that arose included the notion of being seen and how this can have a positive impact. Participants noted that feeling seen can happen through staff with similar identities, staff who speak the languages they speak, signage to fit their needs (language, ADA accessibility assistance), and other approaches to help visitors feel safe and welcomed into recreational spaces. Additionally, participants advocated for more ways to access nature through increased public transportation options.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, then opened the space for additional reflections and experiences from participants to further understand how to create positive visitor experiences for all communities. Participants shared their experiences of being introduced to nature through educational programs. Participants also noted that existing recreational opportunities are perceived to be primarily for white heterosexual couples with kids. Some participants shared experiences with non-profit programs that gave people of color an opportunity to go to public lands with people they trust (people who look like them) and form a sense of safety. For many, these non-profit programs facilitated their first exposure to recreating outdoors. One participant also mentioned the lack of accessibility for the elderly community. Both verbally and in the chat, participants shared resources of existing programs like [Ticket to Ride](#) and The [Trailhead Direct](#) program in Washington state.

### *Barriers*

This section moved participants to explain the barriers they face when accessing or recreating on public lands and waters by answering the following questions:

- What recreational activities do you participate in when you visit public lands and waters? If you haven't visited these spaces: what type of activities are you most interested in when you recreate?
- What recreational activities would you like to do more of or be able to do on public lands and waters in the future?
- What prevents you from or acts as a barrier to you utilizing or visiting public lands and waters?

Participants used the virtual Miro board to expand upon what acts as a barrier to visiting public lands and waters, and what can be done to overcome these barriers. Participants explained these barriers in their own words, which can be seen in *Figure 3: Barriers Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A. **Participants raised concerns about the difficulty associated with acquiring permits, crowds in many parks, access to amenities, and fear of negative interactions with park law enforcement.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns and West, opened the space to encourage participants to continue to expand on their thoughts or to encourage additional reflections. Few participants decided to share their thoughts verbally. Those who did expand verbally are notes captured in the Miro board as shown in Figure 3.

### *Recommendations*

This section empowered participants to share recommendations or ways to improve access to public lands and waters for themselves and/or their community by answering the following questions:

- What would you recommend the Department of the Interior do to ensure that you/your community have more enjoyable visits and/or improved ability to visit public lands and waters?
- How can we best engage with you in the future?

Participants' discussion built upon previous discussions on the barriers, perceptions, and experiences to continue providing recommendations on how to increase access to DOI-managed lands and waters. Participants recorded their recommendations on the Miro board, which can be seen in *Figure 4: Recommendations Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A. **Themes that emerged from the Miro board reiterated the recommendations for more diverse representation in DOI staff and increasing opportunities for people to access DOI managed lands through public transportation. Participants highlighted the need to acknowledge indigenous populations as the original stewards of the land, and to acknowledge the exclusionary history towards those that identify as underserved community. Participants on the Miro board also recommended DOI allocating funding to underserved communities to visit and or participate in outdoor recreation activities, growing relationships, and partnering with local organizations to increase visitor opportunities. Lastly, participants expressed the desire to learn more about examples of successful programming and to increase programming around the black community building positive relationships with the outdoors.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, then opened the space for additional recommendations and reflections on the discussion. Participants took the time to ask DOI how they will continue to engage and how they plan to increase their engagement.

#### Overarching Recommendations

Participants throughout the session, and not solely during the recommendations' discussion, provided input and feedback to inform the Department. The key recommendations the Kearns and West facilitation team heard and would like to emphasize included:

- Increasing opportunities for underrepresented groups to access DOI managed lands
- Partnering with non-profits and providing grant funding for non-profits to take community members into DOI managed lands
- Improving mobility on DOI managed lands through signage, wheelchair accessibility where possible, and audio tours.
- Encouraging or sponsoring opportunities for visitors to rent outdoor recreation gear
- Acknowledging Indigenous populations as the original stewards of the land and educate visitors about the exclusionary history toward BIPOC communities
- Highlighting successful past and active DOI engagement programs communities

## Appendix A: Miro Board Screenshots

This Appendix features participant responses to a DOI listening session on Underserved Community Recreation Access to DOI-managed Public Lands and Waters on October 21, 2021, from 8:00 pm- 10:00 pm ET. The sticky notes included on the boards reflect participants' own words, experiences, reflections, and recommendations.



Figure 1: Perceptions Miro Board Screenshot



Figure 2: What is Working Now? What could be Working Miro Board Screenshot



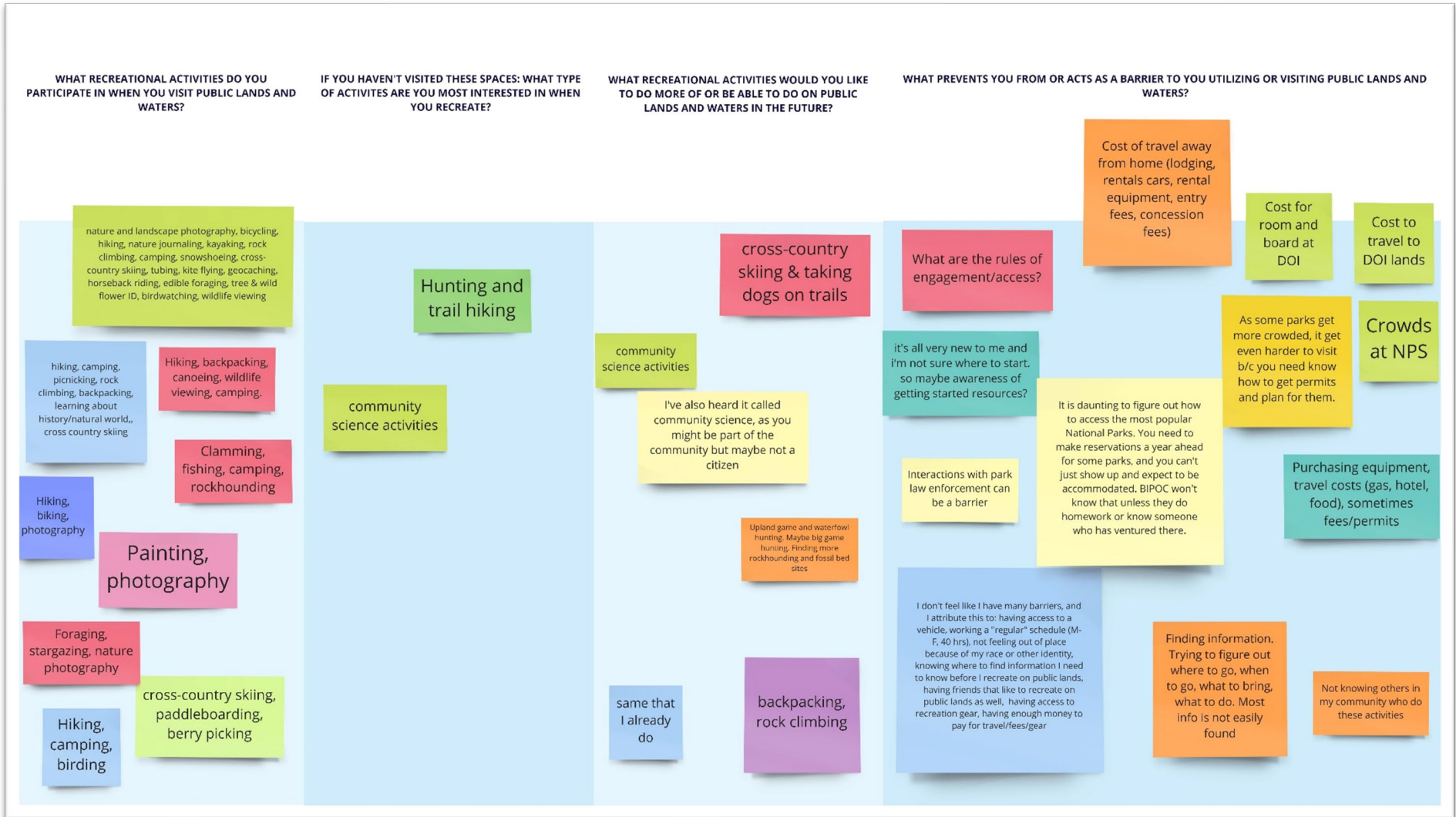


Figure 3: Barriers Miro Board Screenshot

