

**The Department of the Interior (DOI) Listening Sessions on Underserved Community Recreation
Access to DOI-managed Public Lands and Waters
October 25, 2021, 5:00 pm- 7:00 pm ET¹**

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 25, 2021, from 5:00 pm-7:00 pm ET.

Participant Data

Ahead of the virtual session, registration totaled 149 registrants. The listening session saw a maximum number of participants in the session around 100 participants.

Participants’ demographic information was voluntarily collected through 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:

- 29% identifying as or representing a racial or ethnic minority group,
- 2% identifying as or representing people living with disability,
- 12% identifying as or representing a member of the LGBTQ+ community,
- 13% identifying as or representing those who live in rural areas or communities,
- 10% identifying as or representing a person impacted by persistent poverty,
- 12% identifying as or representing religious minority groups,
- 2% identifying as or representing another underserved group not listed, and
- 19% identifying as or representing none of the above.

Participants saw a diversity of ages. About 51% of participants identified as being between the ages of 35-54, about 25% identified as being between the ages of 25-34, and then 5% identified as being between 55 and 74 and 18 and 24, respectively.

Geographically, participants joined from the following states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, North Carolina, Philadelphia, Utah, 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 Shantha Ready Alonso, Director of Intergovernmental and External Affairs at U.S. Department of the Interior. Director Ready Alonso welcomed everyone to the space and thanked them for making this conversation a priority. Ready Alonso emphasized the Department's commitment to transforming the way that it engages with communities, and that is embedding equity and access for underserved communities into everything that it does. She stressed the importance of sustaining lasting relationships with communities to create the transparency, accountability, and trust necessary to continue this work for the long term.

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.

Perceptions

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 or if they were to visit 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 the mental and physical health benefits associated with public lands and the feeling of a greater sense of connectedness with nature on public lands. However, there was also recognition of a dark history of injustice and hate that has prevented public lands and waters from being a truly welcoming space. Additional themes included the physical distance people feel from these spaces, and how in many circumstances lack of time, money, and of culturally relevant information and programming add to the inaccessible nature of public lands.**

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. Participants voiced that DOI lands haven't been open, welcoming, and safe for black and brown people, particularly those people who speak different languages and or who hold different beliefs. Additionally, participants emphasized that while there is a desire and willingness to connect to nature, there needs to be a recognition of the histories of marginalized communities on public lands and action to address the reality that many people continue to feel unsafe in these spaces.

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 Appendix A, as *Figure 2: What is working now? What could be working? Miro Board Screenshot*. **Some themes that arose included the need for improved access to transportation and amenities, accessibility, and representation to ensure a greater feeling of safety and belonging in these spaces. Additional themes included educational opportunities for youth and underserved communities about nature and activities that can**

be done in DOI managed lands and waters. Participants also stressed the incorporation of more culturally and linguistically appropriate programming and activities.

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, then opened the space for additional reflections and experiences from participants to further understand how to create positive visiting experiences for all communities. A participant expressed that not all communities are monolithic and that, like how indigenous group are discussed in interpretive signage on public lands, there needs to be mention of Black people as people who helped to shape the country. Additionally, participants voiced a need for funding towards local programming for groups that have not had adequate opportunities to access these spaces. Participants stress that communities of color are not going to participate in spaces that are not accepting of their presence there, and that recreational spaces need culturally competent teams with empathy that can help groups overcome inherited trauma and a complicated relationship to the outdoors.

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. **Some themes that emerged during this topic included having more relevant educational programming, particularly with respect to essential outdoor skills, aquatic safety, and plant identification. Barriers included limited availability and access to permits, transportation limitations, the cost of fees and equipment, and lack of accessible information.**

Sara Omar and Ben Duncan, Kearns and West, opened the space to encourage participants to continue to expand on their thoughts or to encourage additional reflections. Participants spoke to how dominant environmental narratives have discussed recreation as a form of extraction. Participants recommended that these narratives need the integration of perspectives based in reciprocal stewardship that could result in more culturally relevant programming promoting sustainable recreational practices. Additionally, participants explained the merits of free ways to engage communities in nature through therapeutic practices such as forest bathing, as defined by a participant as laying on the ground and looking up at the sky. This led to a larger conversation about how wellness focused community organizations can collaborate with outdoor groups and environmental agencies to devise programming for communities to practice mindfulness in nature and heal from trauma.

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. 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 a need for intentional outreach to and lasting relationships with community organizations, partnering with other agencies and non-profit organizations, hiring more staff from underserved communities, creating more sustainable and accessible forms of transportation to and within these spaces, and enacting policies that are more inclusive and work to counter bias and hate.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, then opened the space one last time for additional recommendations and reflections on the discussion. Participants agreed on the need for liaisons or groups that can serve as trusted access points to these spaces. Additional participants reiterated the need to not reinvent the wheel and to use grant funds to establish a better partnership between DOI and local organizations in addition to reimaging the involvement of non-traditional environmental partners and community connections that would extend the reach of recreational programming.

Overarching Recommendations

Participants throughout the session provided input and feedback to inform the Department. The key recommendations the Kearns & West Facilitation Team heard and would like to emphasize include:

- Creating intentional and welcoming spaces for underserved communities on DOI managed lands
- Developing educational and youth programming that encourages future generations to value the outdoors from a young age
- Providing intentional staff training in the following areas: historical harm in policies and programming, appropriate use of backcountry and frontcountry, and how to encourage community visitation in these spaces.
- Partnering with agencies to develop policies that promote diversity and inclusion that could utilize the expertise of others to create, welcome, and accommodate the needs of the underserved community.

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 25, 2021, from 5:00 pm- 7:00 pm ET. The sticky notes included on the boards reflect participants' own words, experiences, reflections, and recommendations.



Figure 1: Perceptions Miro Board Screenshot

WHAT MAKES YOU HAVE A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE?

People accessibility

No conflicts with motorized users

Being able to hear the birds and smell the clean air and less hearing and breathing of cars/vehicles etc

Being able to laugh without looking around at who might hear you.

Being able to mind my time without unnecessary comment from land mgmt staff about what I'm doing/ who I am with

staff and volunteers who truly reflect American's demographics

safety, feeling others of different cultures will be considerate

Clean, safe, and works for intergenerational groups

The recreation site is close to a town, not remote

-When I see other BIPOC folks recreating on the lands and waters

-Having Interp signs and presentations that are multi lingual, culturally relevant, with digestible language for all visitors

WHAT WOULD MAKE YOU HAVE A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE?

Providing better transportation options from communities that can share their experience with others.

Adding more native, historical voices to interpretive services.

Info on how climate change is affecting, will affect the area

Connecting how the resources provided by the area are connected to my every day life (air, water, wildlife, carbon sequestration, etc)

Tours or rite of passage trips for black community

the same way that their is programming that names indigenous groups. Have programming facilitated for other minority groups that are collaborative with local nonprofits etc.

capturing and telling a more complete story of public lands. we have a layered history and such should be told

Seeing more Black rangers, honest history of space share in interpretation, seeing land returned to communities who have been disenfranchised by its taking

having empathy for people who have a complicated relationship with the outdoors

>Ranger companion for our walks.

>Bilingual Junior Ranger Books. (Daniela)

Site has amenities for various activities in one space. For example, bike trails, walking paths, wilderness trailheads, and picnic sites all start in same frontcountry spot

more relevant programming and activities

-Having MORE interp signs and presentations that are multi lingual, culturally relevant, with digestible language for all visitors

-Seeing employees of the agencies who are BIPOC, especially from my community (Latine) who can offer the culturally relevant perspective

WHAT WAS HELPFUL?

Staff at Angeles National Forest had have an incredible program where they bussed people from inner city LA and provided interpretation on the buses during the ride to the Forest. One of the spearheades of the program grew up in inner city LA, they had identified a major transport barrier, and a lack of connection to those spaces for underserved communities, among other things). I would love to see that and work on that where I live in Anchorage.

safe and accessible amenities

Maps with trailheads, amenities, etc. Signage.

good signage and maps

Less complicated permitting processes

I dream of an electric bus (to be able to own/rent to increase access to minority groups to NPS)

WHAT WOULD BE HELPFUL?

engaging and interactive programming and experiences

programming with funding partnering with the local non-profits to be able to bus people there during weekdays and weekends. think of it as a rite of passage trip for those previously banned

Reducing barrier to visit including transportation, recreation fees, information in several languages

Have a relationship with the NPS which will give additional support to organizations like the one that has been established with Olympic national Park

Less reliance on dispersed camping opportunities, more campsite management in frontcountry regions

Support from local BLM field offices to do community events

Cleaner bathrooms

More community-led hikes/events to build community

Development of frontcountry sites and not backcountry sites

make it less complicated-- in the northwest, you may end up having to buy 3 or more different passes to utilize all the different public lands. Not only is this confusing trying to get the right thing but it can be a cost barrier for some.

ANYTHING ELSE WE SHOULD KNOW?

Education is key- to understand the importance of the spaces, how the spaces can be used differently- and that's OK, and why having these spaces- for conservation, for recreation- is so important.

It'll be useful to distinguish between appropriate backcountry uses and frontcountry uses of public land, water

-Provide family oriented activities

-Have many opportunities for youth, especially if it can be incorporated into the school curriculum

Corazon Latino but HAPPY to share other success stories that are specific tailored to the African American residents in DC specially in low-income areas like this one from AWS.

<https://www.aaws.org/2018/06/05/education/corazon-latino-environmental-academy.html>

Sometimes we partner with them to collectively provide solutions/ options

Blacks are not mentioned as a group- should be similar to Tribes in DOI language

and all black people aren't low income is my only issue with how sometimes we get classified is my only issue with some of the existing programs, but most have a bad history with those lands. so if we could destigmatize the programming that would be great

Figure 2: What is working now? What could be working? Miro Board Screenshot



Figure 3: Barriers Miro Board Screenshot

WHAT WOULD YOU RECOMMEND THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR DO TO ENSURE 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?

ANYTHING ELSE WE SHOULD KNOW?



Figure 4: Recommendations Miro Board Screenshot