

**The Department of the Interior (DOI) Listening Sessions on Underserved Community Recreation Access to DOI-
managed Public Lands and Waters
October 27, 2021, 1:00 pm- 3 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 27, 2021, from 1:00 pm- 3:00 pm ET.

Participant Data

Ahead of the virtual session, registration totaled 136 registrants. The listening session saw a maximum number of participants in the session around 98 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:

- 38% identifying as or representing a racial or ethnic minority group,
- 2% identifying as or representing people living with disability,
- 13% identifying as or representing a member of the LGBTQ+ community,
- 23% identifying as or representing those who live in rural areas or communities,
- 11% identifying as or representing a person impacted by persistent poverty,
- 2% identifying as or representing religious minority groups,
- 2% identifying as or representing another underserved group not listed, and
- 20% not identifying as or representing the underserved community groups identified in EO 13985.

¹ 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, 53% participants identified themselves as falling between the ages of 35-54 years old, 30% between the ages of 25-34, 10% between the ages of 55-74 and 6% between the ages of 18-24.

Participants joined from a various parts of the country including Virginia, Arizona, Washington state, California, Colorado. Lastly, most participants selected hearing about the listening session through email announcement from the DOI (48%) and word of mouth (33%).

Agenda Overview

Public land visitation data suggests that certain underserved communities are underrepresented as visitors to DOI-managed public lands and waters, so 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. Sara Omar, 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 corresponds to a dedicated fifteen minutes of conversation through the Miro board, the chat function, or 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 hosting a series of listening sessions.

In addition to guided facilitation of virtual activities and open reflection, the listening sessions opened with words from Director of Office of Intergovernmental and External Affairs Shantha Ready Alonso. Director Alonso welcomed participants, thanked everyone for prioritizing this session and emphasized that public programs can only be improved if the public is heard. Alonso acknowledged that these conversations might be difficult to have but that diverse perspectives are needed and stressed that the Department is committed in transforming the way the department engages with and advancing benefits for underserved communities, embedding equity into their programs.

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 physical, mental, and spiritual health benefits of visiting public lands. Although it was greatly acknowledged that public lands and waters provide refuge and connection, barriers to accessing these spaces were continuously named including fear for safety, having to travel long distances, lack of access to public transportation to get to the spaces, and costs with getting there and equipment needed.**

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 from underserved communities shared their experiences and the importance of accessing public lands for healing and educational purposes. Participants additionally shared their concerns of safety such as a general feeling of hyper-surveillance and policing of communities of color, the lack of information for participants to identify potential safety risks, and the limited funding for search and rescue program.

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*. **Themes that emerged included the need for diverse representation in DOI frontline staff and other users, increasing language access for non-English speakers, and the importance of naming the narrative of "whiteness" that exists within the history of public lands.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, then opens the space for additional reflections and experiences from participants to further understand how to create positive visiting experiences for all communities. A participant that self-identified as Afro-Latino shared the important role mentorship played in their early life in learning how to navigate public lands and waters. This mentorship created a pathway for them to become an educator that introduces youth from underserved communities to natural spaces for them to become environmental stewards. The participant shared their concerns with general law enforcements' hyper-policing of communities of color they faced when visiting public lands with their family and students. Another participant reiterated that many public spaces are not safe and welcoming for Black, Indigenous and People of Color due to the policing by general law enforcement and identifying the urgent need for DOI to establish protocols to handle incidents of racism and hate that occur between visitors on public lands. Participants that identified as Black, Indigenous or as a person of color, additionally stressed that mentorship, representation in staff that are culturally competent, and culturally specific programming are essential for increasing access to and conservation of public lands and eliminating barriers.

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. **Themes that emerged during this topic were like those that had been identified previously in the conversation, including people of color not feeling welcomed in public lands, participants mentioned "high visitation costs", and lack of culturally specific programming and mentorship opportunities.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns and West, opened the space to encourage participants to continue to expand on their thoughts or to encourage additional reflections. Participants raised concerns of the disproportionate access to public land due to income as those that can go to these spaces are those that

can afford to and have access to reliable transportation, information, and equipment. A participant identified the need of representation not only in staff but also in communications and marketing materials for people of color to see themselves welcomed in public lands.

Lastly, participants stressed the important of establishing and providing funding for culturally specific programming, partnerships, and hands-on educational opportunities outside of the classroom that expose youth and adults to natural resources as these programs have been successful in reducing barriers, increasing access, and creating pathways for underserved communities. A participant shared the program, [“Vamos a Pescar” \(Let’s go Fishing\)](#) as a successful culturally specific program from the Hispanic Access Foundation, and raised the need of investing in programs like these as they are currently underfunded.

Recommendations

This section empowered participants to use their imagination and think of recommendations or ways to improve access to public lands and waters for them 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 continued to reiterate investing in culturally relevant communications and programming and establishing meaningful and targeted relationships to increase access to public lands and waters for underserved communities.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, then opened the space one last time for additional recommendations and reflections on the discussion. Participants shared their experiences with successful programming themselves and underserved communities- including opportunities for youth of color, adults, LGBTQ+ communities, formerly incarcerated people- have benefited from and expressed the importance of establishing relationships with community members, leaders, and organizations to expand these opportunities. A program that was shared included [Brown Girl Surf](#), which conducts community surf programming, environmental education, ocean conservation and advocacy that addresses barriers that prevent communities of color from feeling welcome in the world of surfing. Participants additionally voiced the need for more diverse staff in public lands and suggested reducing barriers in application process to make it easier for underserved communities to access employment opportunities. Additional recommendations included ensuring that as access is increased for all, safety and protection of public land is also taken into consideration.

Overarching Recommendations

Throughout the session, participants provided recommendations to the Department of the Interior to make public lands more welcoming and accessible by:

- Investing in inclusive, culturally relevant programming and communications.
- Establishing protocols for when incidents of hate occur between visitors while not increasing hyper-surveillance of communities of color.
- Creating marketing materials that are culturally relevant, inclusive of non-English speakers and represent diverse communities.
- Hiring culturally competent staff that are representative of underserved communities.
- Reducing barriers in hiring processes.
- Ensuring public lands and water are physically safe for everyone.

Participants additionally highly supported the recommendation for future partnerships and mentorship opportunities that could exist between DOI and community organizations that are looking to create more inclusive and culturally relevant outdoor programming. It is the hope that through these partnerships, DOI could use the expertise of others to both welcome and accommodate the needs of underserved 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 27, 2021, from 1:00 pm- 3:00 pm ET. The sticky notes included on the boards reflect participants' own words, experiences, reflections, and recommendations.

WHAT MAKES/WOULD MAKE YOU HAVE A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE RECREATING ON PUBLIC LANDS AND WATERS?

WHAT HELPS/WOULD HELP YOU VISIT AND UTILIZE PUBLIC LANDS AND WATERS?

ANYTHING ELSE WE SHOULD KNOW?

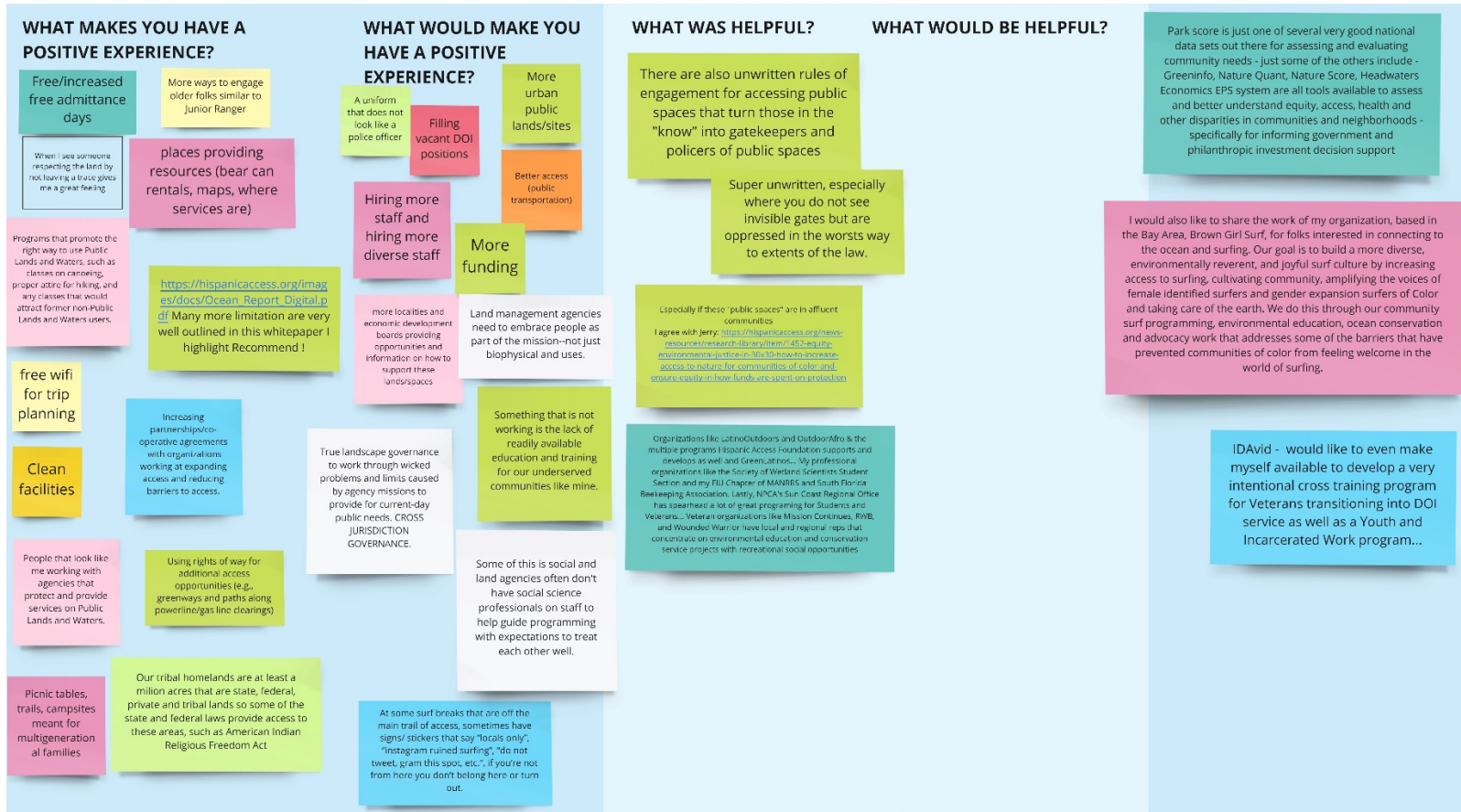


Figure 2: What is working now? What could be working? Miro Board Screenshot



Figure 3: Barriers Miro Board Screenshot



Figure 4: Recommendations Miro Board Screenshot