PROCEEDINGS FROM

Outdoor Recreation in Wyoming: Building It The Way We Want It
AN EMERGING ISSUE FORUM AND WORKSHOP

April 26-28, 2023  ∙  Laramie, Wyoming  ∙  By Birch Malotky

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Why talk about outdoor recreation development?
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2024 Outdoor Recreation Summit
Introduction: Why Talk About Outdoor Recreation Development?

Whether you are a dog-walker, a horse-rider, a trail-runner, a snowmobiler, a biker, a wildlife-watcher, a rafter, a picnicker, a photographer, a hunter, an angler, a swimmer, a forager, a skier, a sledder, an ATV-er, a climber, an RV-er, a camper, a geo-cacher, a hot-springs-soaker, a dirt-biker, a birder, a paddler, a snowshoer, or other and all of the above…

You love spending time in Wyoming’s natural spaces.

You’re not the only one. As outdoor recreation has surged nationally, Wyoming recreation sites (from crown jewels like Yellowstone National Park to tucked-away local gems) have seen more visitation and use than ever before. Curt Gowdy State Park, for example, saw a 900% increase in visitation from the early 2000’s to start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

People and communities are seeking outdoor recreation opportunities for a wide variety of reasons, including improved physical and mental health, connection to the environment, higher quality of life, community-building, and the vast potential for economic growth, diversification, and stability. Already, outdoor recreation is a major player in Wyoming’s economy, and it’s continuing to grow. Nationally, the value of outdoor recreation grew at triple the rate of the general economy from 2020 to 2021 and job growth in the outdoor recreation industry outpaced general hiring.

But there can be consequences to growth and development. People in Wyoming have long enjoyed— with relative freedom and solitude—the state’s unmatched diversity and abundance of natural landscapes, from scenic mountain ranges clad in forest and sparse alpine meadows erupting with wildflowers, to wild rivers flush with trout and relaxing hot springs, to singular geologic formations, to wide open sagebrush abundant with big game. Some worry that increased investment from the state and federal government in outdoor recreation could “kill the goose the lays the golden egg.” Executed poorly or in excess, the
growth of outdoor recreation can (and has in certain locations across the country) lead to overcrowding, environmental degradation, loss of open, wild spaces, and higher costs of living in nearby communities.

As the call for outdoor recreation development gains momentum, now is the time to come together and have the conversations that will shape the future of recreation in the state. The 2023 Emerging Issue Forum and Workshop created space for these conversations, provided tools and knowledge that stakeholders could bring back to their constituents, and revealed what needs exist in order to direct future action and support from the conveners: the Ruckelshaus Institute, Wyoming Outdoor Recreation, Tourism, and Hospitality (WORTH) Initiative, and Wyoming Office of Outdoor Recreation. The following pages detail key highlights and takeaways from the forum, including the need to continue gathering. The first annual Outdoor Recreation Summit is scheduled for April 18-20, 2024 in Casper, Wyoming.

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Forum Highlights: A Watershed Moment

For three days in April 2023, the Ruckelshaus Institute, WORTH Initiative, and Wyoming Office of Outdoor Recreation convened “Outdoor Recreation: Building It The Way We Want It” to explore how Wyoming communities could maximize the benefits, while mitigating the impacts, of growing outdoor recreation. Attendees called it a watershed moment, the first attempt to bring together all the outdoor recreation stakeholders around the state.

By the numbers:
- 3 days
- 200 participants
- 50 speakers
- 60 student presenters
- 36 sessions

Topics:
- Outdoor recreation entrepreneurship
- Wildlife conflict
- Values and place meanings
- Funding
- Managing crowds
- Local and national trends
- Conflict and collaboration
- Community engagement
- Accessibility
- Master planning
- Volunteerism
- Education
- NEPA
- Trail-building
- Successes and challenges from across Wyoming

Participants traveled from:

Participants included federal and state agency representatives, local and state government officials, destination marketing organizations, business owners, advocacy groups, recreationists, landowners, researchers, educators, and students.

Recordings and full agenda at:
uwyo.edu/haub/ruckelshaus-institute/forums/rec-forum

ALL SURVEY RESPONDENTS WOULD RECOMMEND THE FORUM TO A FRIEND.

“Excellent job! It was a fantastic opportunity to hear different sides, make connections, conduct meaningful conversations, and explore the drivers in our community.” — FORUM PARTICIPANT
#1 Takeaway

There is broad, measured support for outdoor recreation development.

People are enthusiastic about what they have, but often concerned about what it might become. We have to figure out how to build it “the Wyoming way.”
Themes: Complexity, Collaboration & Community

COMPLEXITY

People recreate in many different ways.

- Recreationists rarely speak with an organized, unified voice.
- People are passionate, which can lead to conflict among users.

Outdoor recreation spans many jurisdictions and impacts many facets of Wyoming

- Private, city, county, state, federal, and tribal managers may be involved in development decisions.
- Outfitting, guiding, hospitality, retail, and service industries grow with recreation and tourism. Access to recreation may also attract businesses and workforces in otherwise unrelated fields.
- Growth of outdoor recreation can stretch community resources like search and rescue, emergency services, roads, and housing.
- Developing recreation is more than just building trails. It’s also permits, funding, parking, signage, bathrooms, campgrounds, education, maintenance, and staffing, as well as off-trail recreation.

Outdoor recreation is just one of many uses of the land.

- Grazing, logging, mining, energy development, private property rights, ecosystem health, wildlife habitat, migration corridors, and water quality all need to be navigated and respected.

“The scale of the outdoor recreation economy, the number of things it touches, and the difficult nature of moving anything forward, it’s a real challenge.”

— PATRICK HARRINGTON, MANAGER, OFFICE OF OUTDOOR RECREATION
COLLABORATION

The Outdoor Recreation Collaboratives (ORCs) are an important tool and opportunity, unique nationally, and broadly supported.

- There is desire to build an operating norm of respect, responsibility, and reciprocity.
- Collaboration means members are additive, not extractive, and willing to care about and support everyone’s goals, not just their own.
- People envision the future of outdoor recreation through the ways they recreate. ORCs are a chance to “listen to understand” and build empathy among different user groups.

Wyoming can balance multiple uses by growing the pie, not dividing it.

- If the focus is on the type of experience desired, managers can be flexible and creative in exactly where and how that’s achieved.
- It’s about the right use in the right place at the right time.

Relationships and partnerships are key.

- It helps when agencies coordinate and collaborate as much as possible.
- Volunteer and citizen led efforts can amplify the impact of a small organization or an understaffed agency.
- Mentorship and support systems like economic development agencies foster leaders and innovators.

Full collaboration means that all voices are at the table.

- It’s not always enough to invite someone to the table. Building relationships with trusted leaders and going to them, rather than asking them to come, helps.
- It’s important to ask and listen to what underrepresented communities want and the barriers they see, rather than assuming.
- Expanding the narrative around what it looks like to be outside can make outdoor spaces and decision-making processes more inviting to a wider range of people.

“United we stand, divided we fall. Wyoming is big enough that we can provide all the outdoor recreation that we want to provide, set it up and design it so that everyone can have their cake and eat it too.”

— DAVE GLENN, INTERIM DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF OUTDOOR RECREATION
COMMUNITY

People want recreation if it fits their community.

- Conflict can be reduced when communities are able to guide the types of recreation they want to see.
- Community input can be valuable throughout planning, development, and maintenance.

Trust is built through transparency.

- Decision-makers should be clear about what community input has the power to affect. People want to know how input was incorporated and why decisions were made.

Recreational opportunities are a community resource in addition to a tourism asset.

- Not everything has to be the biggest or the best. Easy to get to and appropriate for a range of skill levels can be just as valuable.

“Engage with communities early and often. When you think you’ve done enough, do more. And then when you think you’ve done enough, do more again.”

— AMY CRAWFORD, OUTDOOR RECREATION COORDINATOR, OFFICE OF OUTDOOR RECREATION
Priorities: Managing the Growth of Outdoor Recreation

• Educate users on responsible recreation and stewardship
• Disperse crowds to communities that want them
• Concentrate recreation away from sensitive areas into places that can handle it
• Find sustainable, stable funding for outdoor recreation
• Remain adaptable and responsive to changing needs and conditions
• Be patient

Pursue more data to inform better decisions

• Economic impact data
• Usage data: broken down by user group, at smaller scales, in the backcountry
• Better data on non-trail use (dispersed camping, hunting, fishing)
• Surveys to supplement the public participation process
• Resident and visitor sentiment
• Better understanding of wildlife impacts
• Projections for the future

Consider large-scale or master planning

• Helps with fundraising and grant-writing
• Useful for community engagement
• Should include economic development analysis
• Can create continuity when there is a lot of turnover in management
• Helps balance protected areas with development
• Provides a bigger picture that makes it easier to accommodate all uses
• Expensive and perhaps difficult up front, but a worthwhile investment
Participant Commitments: Bringing the Forum to Life

Following up on relationships built at the forum, including by collaborating with the WORTH Initiative and University of Wyoming students.

- “I commit to actually reaching out and continuing conversations from this forum.”
- “Reach out to UW faculty and OREC to discuss student intern programs for USFS units struggling to fill positions.”
- “Continue to build relationships with entities across Wyoming to promote collaboration and share success stories.”
- “Increase collaboration with UW students and WORTH to compile, analyze and visualize data to tell compelling stories about trends and successes in recreation management.”

Getting involved locally with outdoor recreation—especially by contributing to the Outdoor Recreation Collaboratives—and get others involved too.

- “I will put more effort into building collaborative relationships by showing up, being open, and volunteering time.”
- “Spend more time indoors (attending ORC meetings, reaching out to decision makers, advocacy work) to effect the change I’d like to see outdoors.”
- “Encourage the development of a master plan for the community and county.”
- “Look into getting into public land management positions after graduation.”

Reflecting on their own perspectives and actions, particularly to be more welcoming to others.

- “I will make room for all types and cultures of outdoor recreationists.”
- “Recreate locally with non-outdoorsy friends.”
- “I can commit to advocating and supporting Latinx engagement in the outdoors in WY.”
- “Learn more and/or try outdoor rec activities that I don’t currently engage in so I can be a champion for them too.”
The greatest need the forum revealed was an ongoing space for outdoor recreation interests to come together, air issues, celebrate and learn from success and challenges, and work cooperatively to “build it the way we want it.”

Inspired and driven by the forum’s success, the WORTH Initiative and Wyoming Office of Outdoor Recreation are excited to announce the first annual Wyoming Outdoor Recreation Summit!

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**Save the Date**

**WYOMING OUTDOOR RECREATION Summit**

**APRIL 18-19TH**

Best Western in Casper, Wyoming

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**We heard you. Based on survey and in-person feedback, this summit will...**

- Continue to provide ample time and space for networking
- Offer deep dives and presentations on specific topics
- Involve more small group work and interactive breakout sessions
- Be more active
- Include more voices, particularly tribes, motorized recreation, and hunters and anglers
- Possible topics: funding, collaboration, economic impacts, trends

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To register, visit: [gopokes.formstack.com/forms/summit_2024](gopokes.formstack.com/forms/summit_2024)

To submit a presentation proposal for the summit:

For questions, comments, and suggestions please contact: tkruger@uwyo.edu
Save the Date

WYOMING OUTDOOR RECREATION SUMMIT
APRIL 18-19TH

+ APRIL 20TH
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