

**The Department of the Interior (DOI) Listening Sessions on Underserved Community Recreation Access to DOI-
managed Public Lands and Waters
October 26, 2021, 8:00 pm- 10:00 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 26, 2021, from 8:00 pm- 10:00 pm ET.

Participant Data

Ahead of the virtual session, registration totaled 90 registrants. The listening session saw a maximum number of participants in the session around 48 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:

- 37% identifying as or representing a racial or ethnic minority group,
- 8% identifying as or representing people living with disability,
- 11% identifying as or representing a member of the LGBTQ community,
- 11% identifying as or representing those who live in rural areas or communities,
- 13% identifying as or representing a person impacted by persistent poverty,
- 5% identifying as or representing religious minority groups, and
- 11% identifying as or representing none of the above.

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.

Regarding age, there was a diverse population of participants representative of the following ages: 50% identified as being 35-54 years old, 25% identified as being 25-34 years old, 12% identified as being 55-74 years old, and 13% identified as being 18-24 years old.

Geographically, participants joined from the following states: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, 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 Alonso welcomed everyone to the space and thanked them for making this conversation a priority. Director Alonso acknowledged the land and looked forward to the conversation. Director Alonso also reflected their hope for the current administration. Director Alonso mentioned the [America the Beautiful](#) initiatives and [Justice40](#) Initiative.

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 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 access to materials in different languages, acknowledgement of existing transportation/distance barriers, and cost of attendance. Additional themes included that those who represent underserved communities do not feel connected or welcomed into recreational spaces due to the perception of "whiteness" in outdoor spaces.**

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 shared personal accounts of the feeling of exclusion they felt and what their communities are negatively experiencing. One participant shared that the lack of acknowledgment of how the land was acquired and the harm that communities have faced needed to be addressed. Two people in the audience shared racist encounters in Washington and the New Mexico/Mexico border in Saguaro National Park. Specifically in Saguaro, from childhood into adulthood, this participant shared that other park visitors questioned their citizenship and harassed this participant while visiting Saguaro National Park. Additional points focused on environmental education. Another participant discussed teaching the younger generations through environmental education and awareness like the debunking the common myth that dandelions are bad can have a small yet significant impact that can carry from generation to generation. The participants discussed barriers of not having materials available in their first language, transportation assistance, recreational access, and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) accessibility.

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 arose during the Miro board activity included: representation in outdoor recreation staff, language accessibility in terms of offering materials in more languages, and ADA compliance. Participants specifically raised concerns around communication, and how it remains a challenge for those who represent underserved communities to find others on DOI-managed lands that they can relate to while visiting these areas.**

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. Participants shared their experiences with programming in their community to encourage people to get outdoors. One person shared the positive internship experience with Hispanic Access Foundation as a jumpstart to their environmental educational position they have now. Getting the elderly community outdoors to line dance was another example demonstrating how programming doesn't always have to be tied to green space. Participants in the meeting agreed that access to programs to help foster environmental awareness, having an accessible website, more signage, and various materials translated into multiple languages begin to build community and trust among communities who have historically felt left or forced out of public lands and waters.

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 from the Miro board included barriers to visiting DOI-managed lands and waters, such as feeling unsafe while visiting, a lack of necessary equipment, physical transportation barriers, overmilitarized park rangers, lack of accessibility to information before a visit, and a lack of understanding of opportunities that one can participate in recreational spaces.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns and West, opened the space to encourage participants to continue to expand on their thoughts or to encourage additional reflections. One participant shared verbally around frustrations to accessing permits and proper permission to recreate in outdoor spaces. Their time and effort to have their 501(c)3 use areas of land consumes time and energy away from the programming with communities

themselves. Another participant emphasized that access could take different forms in communities “lots of people of color explore green spaces, but it's [not always] to go on a hike or for health benefits. Usually, it's BBQ's, parties, family reunions.”

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. **Participants recommended action based on the following themes: outdoor recreation staff to represent underserved communities, giving staff the tools to build and support intentional relationships with underrepresented communities, and using census data to understand staffing and language needs in various communities.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, then opened the space one last time for additional recommendations and reflections on the discussion. Participants expanded on specific recommendations to reach out to school groups and school aged youth to educate them on the benefits of recreating. Specific DOI recommendations asked the agency to be consistent in communication, build trust, and actively engage local underserved communities. Recommendations focused on DOI establishing authentic relationships in communities, identifying/diversifying staff and having accessible resources. Many participants expressed their appreciation on having the space for these conversations, and many appreciated how they could continue having these conversations with not only DOI, but among each other.

Overarching Recommendations

Participants throughout the session provided input and feedback to inform the Department. Many of these recommendations touched upon themes of welcoming, physical barriers, accessibility, and community needs. The key recommendations the Kearns and West Facilitation Team heard and would like to emphasize:

- Inviting underserved communities through intentional communication from DOI-managed lands and waters that allows populations to feel welcomed in the space.
- Acknowledging past and current harms around public lands and their history, while also creating transparency and awareness around the history of public lands can help build trust.
- Increasing staffing capacity to provide people and communities with the necessary tools to access and utilize outdoor spaces.
- Utilizing intentional communication methods, such as online communications and signage in multiple languages to help welcome underserved populations.
- Adapting the current permitting process to make it easier for visitors to acquire necessary permits.

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 26, 2021, from 8:00 pm- 10:00 pm ET. The sticky notes included on the boards reflect participants' own words, experiences, reflections, and recommendations.

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?



Figure 1: Perceptions Miro Board Screenshot

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?

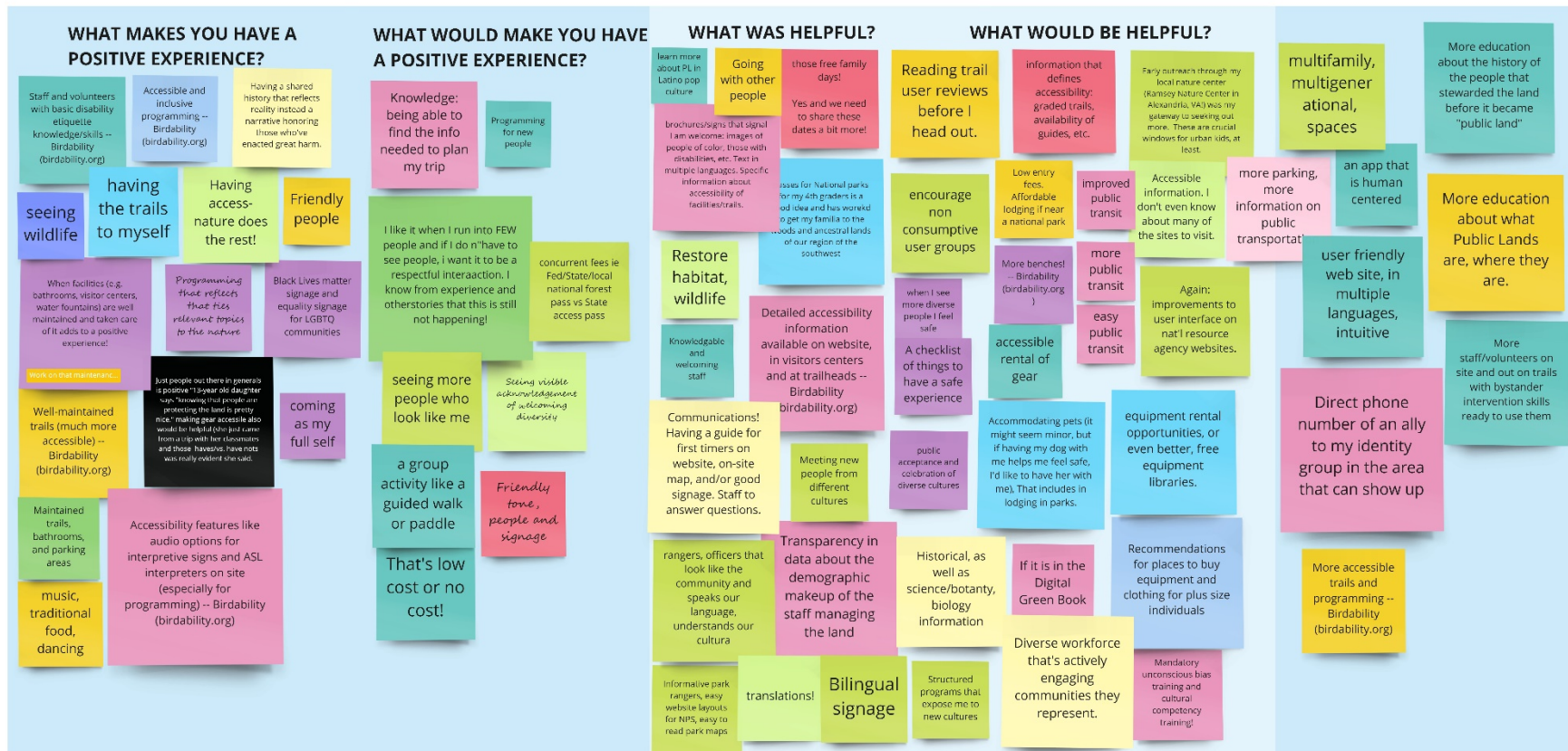


Figure 2: What is working now? What could be working? Miro Board Screenshot

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?



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