

**The Department of the Interior (DOI) Listening Sessions on Underserved Community Recreation Access to DOI-  
managed Public Lands and Waters  
October 19, 2021, 5:00 pm- 7:00 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 19, 2021, from 5:00 pm- 7:00 pm ET.

## Participant Data

Ahead of the virtual session, registration totaled 160 registrants. The listening session saw a maximum number of participants in the session around 90 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:

- 19% identifying as or representing a racial or ethnic minority group,
- 12% identifying as or representing people living with disability,
- 7% identifying as a member of or representing the LGBTQ+ community,
- 23% identifying as or representing those who live in rural areas or communities,
- 7% identifying as or representing persons impacted by persistent poverty,
- 1% identifying as or representing religious minority groups,
- 5% identifying as or representing another underserved group not listed, and
- 25% not identifying as or representing the underserved community groups identified in EO 13985.

Regarding age, about 6% of participants were between the ages of 18-24 years old, about 27% of participants were between the ages of 25-34 years old, about 47% of participants were between the ages

---

<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.

of 35-54 years old, about 18% of participants were between the ages of 55- 74 years old, and about 2% of participants were 75 years old or older.

Participants participated from a wide geographic landscape including the following states: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, Maryland, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Washington, D.C, Washington state, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

### 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 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 Shannon Estenoz, Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Assistant Secretary Estenoz welcomed everyone to the space and thanked them for making this conversation a priority. Assistant Secretary Estenoz shared personal anecdotes about her relationship with public lands and stressed that recreational spaces are an instrumental part in forming individual, familial, and communal identities. She also highlighted that understanding the barriers to access is essential in increasing the ability to visit publicly managed lands and waters.

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 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 benefits of accessing these spaces for mental health benefits, but to also a recognition of the dark history that acts as a barrier to being a welcoming space. Additional themes included the physical distance people feel from these spaces, not seeing themselves reflected in staff or other visitors, not feeling safe, and how in many circumstances time and money add to the inaccessible nature of these lands and waters.**

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 raised that many organizations are continuing to research the access barriers, but there is not a comprehensive study of the needs of each community as it relates to public lands and access. Additionally, participants raised concerns about a lack of information and understanding of the needs of various communities, particularly those who identify as having mobility issues.

#### *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 themes of safety to ensure that all communities can feel safe in these spaces, signage and marketing materials such as websites in multiple languages, ensuring DOI staff has participated in anti-bias training, more accessible transportation to parks, and more clear guidelines on how to use public lands.**

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. A participant representative of those who have experienced a spinal cord injury described his experience in being able to access public lands, but not always being able to enjoy all aspects of trails due to some trails being inaccessible to trikes and other assistive transportation. Additionally, participants raised the differences between being *invited* to the space and *welcomed and accepted* into these spaces. Recreational spaces can not only be welcoming for those who show up consistently, they need to be intentionally welcoming for all individuals and communities, which is crucial in preventing further harm to underserved populations.

#### *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. **One theme that emerged during this topic was related to adaptive outdoor activities to accommodate all levels of ability. Additionally, participants described physical, resource-related, and intangible barriers. Physical barriers included the difficulty accessing these spaces due to limited transportation options, large physical distances to travel, and limited accessible development (for those with mobility challenges). Resource-related barriers included lacking the time and/or money to visit public lands and waters. Intangible barriers included the fear of encountering unwelcoming staff or other visitors, uncertainty about how to navigate public recreation spaces, and not feeling as though the needs of people with mobility issues will be met with current amenities.**

Sarah Franklin 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 raised additional concerns about needing off-road motorized recreation opportunities to accommodate those who depend on motorized vehicles to have access to public lands and waters. Multiple participants recommended that this should be considered in park and trail design. Additionally, participants noted that participation in outdoor recreational activities generally requires equipment and the knowledge to be successful. This led

to a larger conversation about how mentorships and partnerships between recreational non-governmental organizations and DOI could provide ways to overcome these barriers and allow more people to access public lands and activities through a variety of mentorship, lessons, and partnerships.

### *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 recommendations for intentional invitations to spaces with targeted outreach strategies, partnering with those in the recreational industry and non-governmental organizations to offer additional opportunities, for more diverse representation in DOI staff, teaching people the benefits and responsibilities of being outside, and having more "free access" days for those from underserved communities.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, then opened the space for additional recommendations and reflections on the discussion. Participants took the time to express their common humanity in that this work helps raise awareness for all groups and all needs to create more accessible spaces. Additional participants raised awareness of recently passed [Oregon Senate Bill 289](#), which prosecutes hate crimes on public lands and could serve as a model for DOI. Many participants expressed their appreciation for having the space for these conversations and suggested participants could continue having these conversations with DOI and to begin talking with staff at local DOI-managed lands and waters to continue these conversations at all levels.

### **Overarching Recommendations**

Participants throughout the session, and not solely during the recommendations' discussion, provided input and feedback to inform the Department. Many of these recommendations touched upon themes of welcoming, physical barriers, accessibility, and community needs. Many participants expressed that it is one thing to be invited to DOI managed land and waters, but it is another to feel welcomed in these spaces. The key recommendations the Kearns and West facilitation team heard and would like to emphasize included:

- Being intentional when inviting underserved communities to visit public lands and waters-ensuring that staff have undergone anti-bias training, that underserved communities can see themselves represented in marketing material and staffing, and that there is programming that promotes awareness of the harm that has taken place on public lands and waters.
- Offering more "free access days" to underserved communities.
- Promoting more partnerships and mentorship opportunities that could exist between DOI and organizations that are looking to create more inclusive outdoor programming. It is the hope that

through these partnerships, DOI as stewardships of the land, 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 19, 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



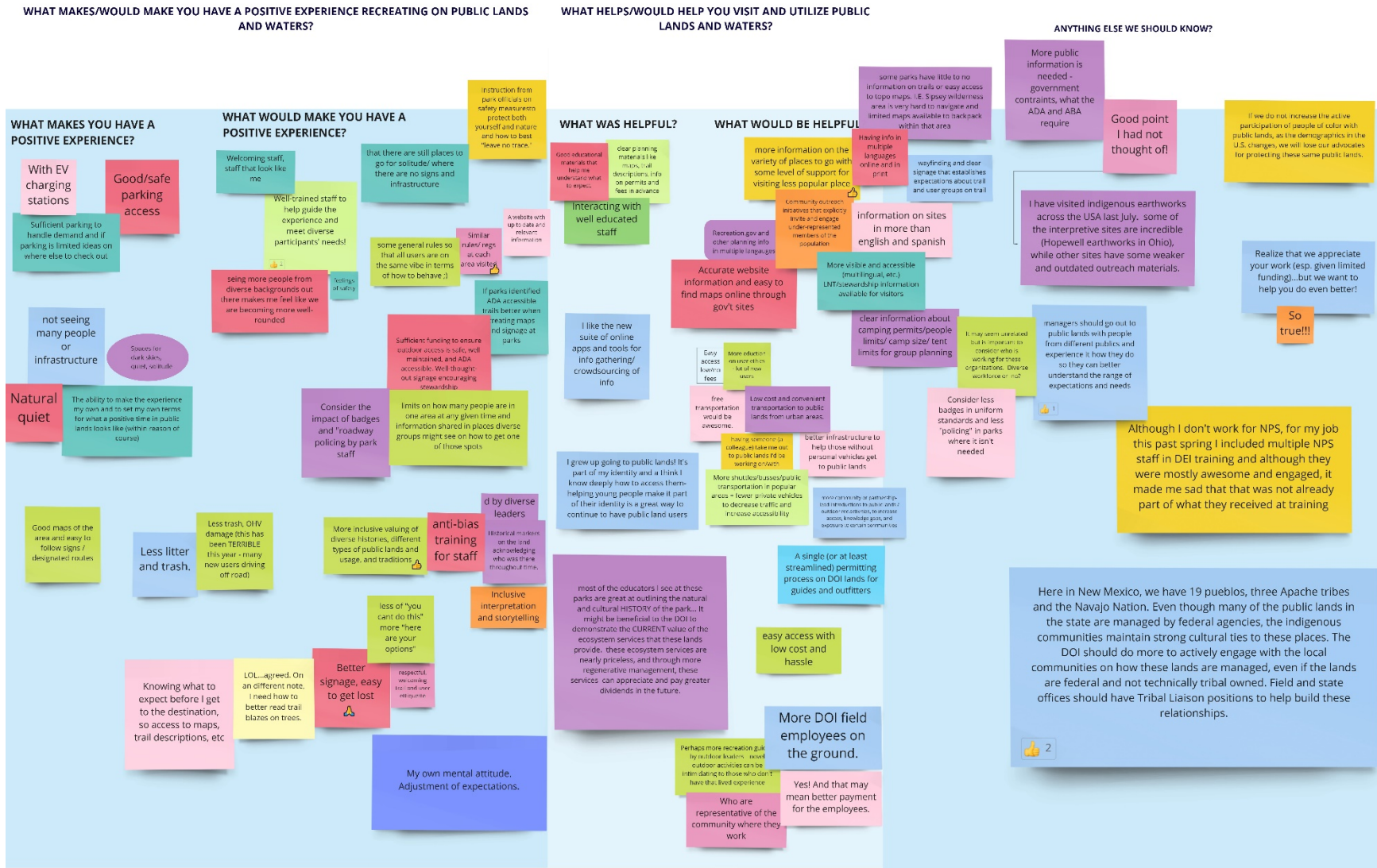


Figure 2: What is working now? What could be working? Miro Board Screenshot



Figure 3: Barriers Miro Board Screenshot



Figure 4: Recommendations Miro Board Screenshot