Washington State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan
Executive Summary | 2013 - 2018
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We would like to thank all the residents and recreationists of Washington for their contributions to this planning effort, including their involvement in Town Halls, the Advisory Group, the general population survey, and their contribution of photographs and personal stories. We also thank the recreation providers who participated.

It was important to us to show the face of the public we serve. To this end, we are pleased to feature photographs of Washington residents, many of whom are your neighbors, participating in our state’s various outdoor recreation opportunities. Many of these photos were submitted as part of our public participation process. We have also showcased discussions, comments, and quotes from Washington residents who took part in surveys and the SCORP Town Hall. We are grateful for their thoughts and perspectives, and we appreciate their willingness to partner with us on the development of this plan by contributing their expertise, time, and resources to ensure the success of this planning effort.

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Introduction: Why Create a Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan?

Each year, nearly all Washington residents participate in outdoor recreation activities. Also each year, the state’s population grows, becoming larger, more urban, older, and more diverse, thereby creating more demand for outdoor recreation resources.

A variety of federal, state, tribal, and local governments, private companies, and nonprofit groups provide outdoor recreation facilities and opportunities. These providers must understand residents’ participation and work together to meet outdoor recreation needs.

Over the course of the last year, researchers collected and analyzed data about customer participation, expectations, and needs. They combined that information with data about funding, supply of land and existing recreation facilities, and other key factors such as sustainability, access, and maintenance.

The result—a State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)—will help decision-makers and recreation providers prioritize the acquisition, renovation, and development of recreational resources statewide and ensure the state’s eligibility for federal grants through the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

For me, quality of life is almost synonymous with outdoor recreation opportunities.

— Washington Resident, Town Hall Contributor

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Photograph by David Erickson, Wenatchee, WA
Location: Columbia River, WA
Approach: Create a Plan as Individual as the State of Washington.

Washington State offers a diverse landscape, from the marine coastal climate and temperate rainforests of the Pacific Coast and the high mountains of the Cascades to the dry, arid landscape of the Columbia Basin and Palouse. This variation offers an abundance of outdoor recreational activities. Just as the land itself is diverse, so too are the recreation interests and needs of state residents.

Researchers invited members of the public and recreation experts throughout Washington to participate in the studies that form the foundation of Washington’s State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). As a result, this plan reflects the uniqueness and diversity of the land and the people of this great state.

Public Involvement Was Critical in Plan Development

Members of the public were directly involved in the planning process through surveys, online forums, advisory groups, and public review of the draft document.

Advisory Group: Twenty-four people from across the state provided guidance on the development of the plan. Advisors represented interests such as land trusts, trail associations, boaters, firearms recreationists, off-road recreationists, bicyclists, and the general public. Through in-person meetings and an Internet discussion board, this group offered suggestions that improved and refined the plan recommendations.

General Public: Over 3,000 Washington residents participated in a large-scale scientific phone survey to assess their participation in recreation and future needs. Input from the general public was also solicited through a blog website nicknamed the SCORP Town Hall. Hundreds of people visited the Town Hall commenting on topics such as:

- The role of commercial enterprises or public/private partnerships to raise revenue inside of parks;
- The number of parks, trails, and other recreation facilities available;
- Maintenance of existing facilities;
- Reasons for declining participation in some organized outdoor recreation activities; and
- The role of wetlands in recreation.
In Washington, outdoor recreation facilities and opportunities are provided by federal, state, local, and tribal governments, as well as by some nonprofit groups. These recreation providers participated in surveys about the supply of recreation facilities, their assessment of demand for services, how well they meet current demand, the ability to maintain existing facilities, and future challenges.

First, I appreciate that you asked for our opinions. This is the way our government should work!
—Washington Resident, Town Hall Contributor

I very much appreciate the opportunity to make my voice heard on this subject.
—Washington Resident, Town Hall Contributor

Thanks for giving people a chance to voice their opinions.
—Washington Resident, Town Hall Contributor

The role of recreation in society is undervalued today. There’s no immediate ROI [return on investment] of a child playing on a team, a teen spending a night under the stars, or a family exploring a stream, desert, or woodlot together.
—Washington Resident, Town Hall Contributor

We need to continue to protect our public lands from development and support the people and agencies that work to keep recreation open and available to the public, including our financial support whenever possible. The cost of a DiscoverPass [or a] hunting or fishing license is minimal for the return we receive.
—Washington Resident, Town Hall Contributor

In 2011, outdoor recreation contributed more than $22.5 billion in consumer spending to Washington’s economy, as well as $1.6 billion in state and local tax revenue.

Outdoor recreation has many important benefits, including social interaction, physical and mental health benefits, educational value, economic contributions, and environmental stewardship.

Social elements of outdoor recreation are very important to residents, particularly among youth and young adults. Furthermore, outdoor recreation opportunities strengthen communities by providing a venue for festivals, social events, and concerts, all of which help encourage public investment in the community. Research also has shown that nature and outdoor recreation have a significant positive effect on both physical and mental health.

Washington’s economy also benefits directly and indirectly from outdoor recreation through consumer spending, tax revenue, and jobs. Finally, research suggests that outdoor recreationists are more connected to natural resources and tend to have more care and concern for the environment.
Finding: Most State Residents Participate in Outdoor Recreation. It Is Varied, and Their Interests Are Changing.

Outdoor recreation is an integral part of life in Washington State. About 8 out of every 10 Washington residents visited a county, city, or state park within the past year.

Washington residents participate most often in activities that are either low-cost, less strenuous, or close to their homes. These include walking, hiking, jogging, nature activities, and picnicking. Residents are less likely to participate in activities that are more specialized, require more equipment, or that require extensive travel. In fact, very specialized activities such as horseback riding, flying, parachuting, and bungee jumping have the lowest participation rates.

Most Washington outdoor recreationists reported in the survey that they are satisfied with the activities in which they participate.

The Activities Residents Participate in Are Changing

The same activities were measured in each of three surveys conducted in 2002, 2006, and 2012. The most notable increase in participation is for “picnicking, barbecuing, and cooking out,” which went from the ninth-ranked activity in 2002 to the top-ranked activity in 2012. Other activities that grew in popularity include hunting, shooting, visiting a nature interpretive center, fishing, horseback riding, camping, hiking, and waterskiing. At the same time, there were notable declines in participation in team-based activities.

Top Ten Outdoor Recreation Activities

- Picnicking, barbecuing, or cooking out
- Walking or hiking
- Wildlife viewing / photographing
- Sightseeing
- Gardening
- Camping
- Swimming or wading
- Aerobics or fitness activities
- Bicycle riding
- Playground use
Residents Want to Participate in More Outdoor Recreation

More than a quarter of Washington residents said that there are outdoor activities that they currently do not do but that they would like to do. Leading the list are air activities (e.g., flying, parachuting, bungee jumping), hiking, skiing, hunting, fishing, canoeing/kayaking, camping, and boating.

A third of residents have activities that they do now and would like to do more often. Leading the list are hiking, camping, fishing, walking, bicycling, off-road driving, and hunting.

Social Issues and Lack of Access Create Barriers to Participation

There are many reasons residents do not participate in outdoor recreation, or do not participate more often. Most are social issues such as lack of time, other obligations, finances, distance, lack of equipment, not having a companion, health, or age. These barriers are, for the most part, outside the influence of recreation providers.

Other constraints include not being aware of opportunities, a lack of access, and not knowing where to go. Top problems related to access include a lack of facilities, closed facilities, and costs. Recreation providers have a greater ability to address these issues, compared to social issues, at least within the limits of their resources.
The public is invested in outdoor recreation. Despite diverse backgrounds and preferred activities, the public values the resources and outdoor recreation opportunities. Wherever possible, recreation providers should involve the public to help resolve conflicts, maintain natural areas, and maximize funding and resources. As one Town Hall contributor explained, “My ... concern is compassion and respect for all user groups. We all have the same common interest—the natural outdoors and the protection of this asset. Working together and building on our common interest will get us much further. Bicycles and horses probably shouldn’t share the same trails, but this doesn’t mean we can’t work together to help save or build trails.”

Some Groups Remain Underserved

This study shows that some groups have consistently lower participation rates:

- Residents with disabilities,
- Non-white/non-Caucasian residents, and
- Residents older than 46 (the average age of adults in the survey).

Residents with disabilities show markedly lower participation rates compared to other demographic groups. The research suggests that there is a need to increase support for residents with disabilities. The Advisory Group recognized the need to develop and improve special-needs opportunities for recreationists with disabilities. Additionally, several Town Hall contributors mentioned concerns for people with disabilities, usually in the context of how to make recreation accessible so users with disabilities are easily and naturally included in group activities.

Addressing the needs of a more diverse and aging population is noted in the section on demographic changes. Recreation providers should consider creative approaches to outdoor recreation opportunities that provide access for underserved populations.

User Conflicts and Recreation Compatibility Must Be Addressed

User conflicts and recreation compatibility are key issues of concern in providing quality outdoor recreation experiences to user groups. While the research shows that recreationists are generally satisfied with their outdoor experiences, user conflict is still cited as a concern or issue. User conflicts can have serious consequences, including safety issues, user displacement, and even participation desertion.

As resources become more limited and development of land increases, creating complementary and supplementary opportunities for outdoor recreation is becoming more challenging for recreation providers. Despite recreation providers’ best efforts to minimize user conflicts, these conflicts still occur.
The 2006 and 2012 surveys measured participation in 75 outdoor activities. Because of methodological differences between the surveys, a direct comparison of participation rates was not possible. Thus, for each survey, activities were ranked from 1 to 75 in order of overall participation rates. Relative changes in the popularity of each activity could then be calculated by determining the changes in rank, as shown in these graphs.

The population in Washington has increased dramatically during the past three decades. With a gain of 2.5 million residents between 1980 and 2010, the state has experienced a 63 percent increase in its population. The state’s population is expected to increase another 21 percent by 2030.

- The largest population growth in the state is occurring in the Southwest, Islands, Peninsulas, and Northeast regions. These regions experienced almost 20 percent population growth between 2000 and 2010.

- Between 1990 and 2010, the median age in Washington increased from 33 to 37 years; the median age in Washington is now slightly higher than the rest of the United States.

- Approximately 23 percent of Washington’s population is non-white or a mix of ethnicity.

- Hispanics/Latinos are projected to be one of the fastest growing populations in Washington over the next decade.

- The 2000 and 2010 censuses suggest that the population living in rural housing in Washington appears to be trending downward at a more rapid pace than in the United States overall.

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Increasing Urbanization Limits Open Space and Raises Complex Issues

Census data indicate that the state is becoming more urban. Urbanization limits the amount of open space available for recreation and raises complex issues, such as proximity and accessibility to facilities and opportunities.

Increased urbanization also means changing recreation needs, often involving newly emerging or more diverse recreation interests. Urban and suburban residents tend to participate more often in jogging and running activities, hiking, other aerobic and fitness activities, and playground use. These activities emphasize the importance of providing greenbelts and trails in urban and suburban areas, as required under the state’s Growth Management Act. By contrast, residents of more rural areas tend to participate in pursuits such as fishing/shellfish harvesting, hunting/shooting, camping, and off-roading.

Minority Populations Have Unique and Varied Recreation Interests

Increases in minority populations result in a greater need to meet the recreation demands unique to those groups. Research suggests that it is not enough to increase opportunities generally and expect to increase outdoor recreation participation among minorities. Marketing recreation opportunities specifically in minority communities is important because research shows that people tend to participate in activities within their own communities. Further, it is important to recognize the unique recreation differences between minority groups.

The Aging Population Has a Significant Influence on Recreation

Although recreation activities may decline with age, many older Washington residents remain very active and involved in outdoor recreation throughout the state. Older residents may retire, increasing the time and money they have available to participate in leisure activities. Research has found that the most important outdoor recreation considerations for aging populations include clean and maintained facilities, proximity to home, low cost, and safety.

\[\text{Source: U.S. Census, 2000, 2010.}\]

Finding: For Most Activities, Demand for Recreation Facilities Exceeds Supply.

Over the next five years, recreation providers will face many challenges as they attempt to match the supply of recreation opportunities and facilities with this ever-increasing and changing demand. These challenges include:

- The current supply of recreation facilities does not meet demand;
- Funding for facilities development and maintenance is unpredictable; and
- Ensuring access to outdoor recreation facilities and opportunities is a concern for providers and the public.

The Supply of Recreation Is Not Completely Meeting Public Demand

Recreation providers were asked to estimate how well they met the demand for specific activities. The results indicated that while facilities are sufficient for some activities, overall demand is not completely met. In fact, the study suggests that current facilities satisfy only 30 to 40 percent of demand for recreation across the state.

The ability of providers to meet public demand is challenged by the pressure of population growth and urbanization. Recreation providers are being asked to meet increasing demand, despite working with limited supply.

Providers must prioritize, and they reported that a few recreation activities (e.g., designated motorized trails) that were considered less important to the public tended to have less demand met. The data raise an interesting question: are people participating in some activities less often because (a) they lack interest or (b) there is a lack of facilities and opportunities (that is, providers cannot meet demand)?

Recreation providers also estimate that only about three-quarters of their facilities are fully functional. This means agencies or organizations need to improve about 25 percent of their facilities.
Funding for Outdoor Recreation Is Unpredictable

Funding for both maintenance and new investment repeatedly emerged as an important issue, especially among local providers.

- Most local recreation providers are able to meet only about 25 percent of their funding goals for developing capital facilities for public outdoor recreation.
- About 40 percent of the capital facility development needs state, federal, and nonprofit recreation providers will be unmet in the next two years. At least 33 percent of the land acquisition funding goals also will be unmet.

With the economic slowdown and the political climate regarding taxes, creating new partnerships will be an important issue, as partnerships allow the pooling of resources and sharing of costs for these activities. Funding for capital facilities and maintenance of public parks and/or recreation facilities was discussed at the public Town Hall. Contributors recognize that funding limitations affect outdoor recreation facilities and opportunities, and they are open to discussing creative solutions to funding issues. However, there was no consensus about potential solutions.

Providers Should Consider Ways to Ensure Access

Simply having or creating recreation facilities and opportunities will not satisfy the demand if residents are unable to access and use the sites. Top problems reported by residents include a lack of facilities, closed facilities, travel distance, and costs.

Increasing public access is also a top concern among recreation providers who work to keep access open, available, and accommodating for a diverse public. Providers should consider five factors as they address or plan for access to outdoor recreation:

- **Availability:** This is an issue of overall supply, but also of geographic distribution and matching the supply to changes in need based on demographics.
- **Accessibility:** This factor includes condition of access roads, allowed uses at the site, travel distance, and the need to work with private landowners.
- **Accommodation:** This includes issues such as site maintenance and the ability of sites to accommodate any user’s needs.
- **Awareness:** This refers to improving the public’s knowledge about where the recreation facilities and opportunities can be found.
- **Assumptions:** This factor speaks to the need for ongoing communication to address mistaken assumptions that recreation areas have been lost or closed.
Finding: Providing Recreation Opportunities Promotes Environmental Stewardship.

Recreation providers have the dual mission of ensuring the stability and longevity of the state’s resources while simultaneously providing outdoor recreation opportunities and managing the public’s use of these resources. Balancing these sometimes competing goals and objectives effectively has become increasingly complex because of the challenges confronting recreation management efforts, including increasing populations that place pressure on resources and land supply and land conversion issues that limit resources.

There are two ways to consider sustainable recreation:

- **Environmental sustainability**: Preserving and protecting the longevity of environmental resources and assets.
- **Recreational sustainability**: Preserving and protecting the longevity of recreational assets.

For this study, the researchers focused on environmental sustainability. Recreation facilities and opportunities that promote environmental sustainability provide recreation that is designed to minimize environmental impacts and encourage stewardship and ethical use.

Local recreation providers estimated that only about 58 percent of their sites support sustainable recreation, while federal, state, and nonprofit recreation providers estimated that their average is about 86 percent of sites. Clearly, there is a need for more sustainable recreation opportunities, especially among local providers. There also appears to be a need for education, as some recreation providers seem to be unclear as to what sustainable opportunities are and how they can meet sustainability goals while also providing quality recreation opportunities.
A delicate balance of recreation and conservation, managed carefully to preserve the environment while maximizing the recreational value on a case-by-case basis, will best serve the public. Neither locking people out nor allowing unrestricted use will prove the right answer over time.

—Washington Resident, Town Hall Contributor
Perhaps the broadest, most crucial recommendation for all areas is that Washington should continue its investment in outdoor recreation facilities and opportunities. This recommendation is the foundation for fulfilling all other outdoor recreation needs and expectations in the state.

State priorities for the next five years include:

**Promote the economic benefits of outdoor recreation in communication and outreach.**

The results of a 2012 report suggest that outdoor recreation contributed more than $22.5 billion in consumer spending to Washington’s economy, as well as $1.6 billion in state and local tax revenue. Further, outdoor recreation directly supported 227,000 jobs across the state, along with $7.1 billion in wages and salaries. Simply put, outdoor recreation is a major economic engine that produces jobs and tax revenues. Promote the economic benefits of outdoor recreation in communications and outreach to help increase participation and public investment in outdoor recreation opportunities.

**Continue to offer diverse outdoor recreation activities and opportunities.**

Washington residents participate in a wide variety of outdoor recreation activities. Many of the Town Hall contributors emphasized the importance of expanding the number and diversity of recreation opportunities as a way to manage user conflict. Offering diverse opportunities is also important in meeting the demands of underrepresented populations.

**Continue support of America’s Great Outdoors Initiative.**

The goal of this initiative is to develop a national management strategy for the country’s outdoor recreation assets. In doing so, this initiative works toward addressing inefficient policies, targeting investments, and leveraging the government’s interactions with states, tribes, and local communities. Two state-specific projects in Washington were selected as “showcase” investments for this initiative: The Pacific Northwest Trail and the Lower Columbia River Water Trail. The state should continue its support of such initiatives and pursue similar projects.

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Consider the implications of changing demographics when making recreation decisions.

One of the greatest challenges among recreation providers will be meeting the demands of an ever-increasing and diverse population in Washington. Additionally, Washington is becoming more urban, more diverse, and older. It is important for providers to understand how these demographic changes affect recreation demand.

Increase and improve access for disabled recreationists in Washington.

The research suggests that there is a need to increase support for residents with disabilities. The Advisory Group contended that there remains a need to develop and improve opportunities for recreationists with disabilities, such as providing barrier-free recreation access and facilities. Additionally, several Town Hall contributors mentioned concerns for people with disabilities and wished to make outdoor recreation accessible so that users with disabilities are easily and naturally included in family and friendship activities. It is recommended that the state continue to increase and/or improve access for residents with disabilities.

Maximize sustainability and environmental stewardship.

One of the most important benefits of outdoor recreation is its promotion of sustainability and environmental stewardship. The key to sustainability and stewardship is partnerships among federal, state, local, tribal, and private outdoor recreation providers; their partners; key stakeholders; communities; and recreationists. Sustainability and stewardship require residents and leaders to cooperatively invest in our natural, cultural, and scenic resources. The state’s focus on sustainability and ethical stewardship has resulted in several initiatives that are helping to ensure outdoor recreation issues are a top-of-mind priority. The state should continue supporting these initiatives and work collaboratively with Washington residents to expand major programs and initiatives focused on improving outdoor recreation and environmental stewardship.
Recognize that there are two inter-related factors of sustainable recreation.

When discussing sustainable recreation, it is important to realize that there are two primary and inter-related factors of sustainable recreation. Environmental sustainability focuses on providing recreation designed to minimize environmental impacts and encourage stewardship and ethical use. Recreational sustainability focuses on providing recreation facilities and opportunities that maximize the useful life of the facilities and opportunities, thus encouraging self-supporting design, maintenance, operation, and funding. The second factor is dependent on the first: the longevity of recreation facilities cannot be ensured without the preservation of the resource itself.

Follow the Recreation and Conservation Funding Board’s guidelines for sustainability.

The Recreation and Conservation Funding Board requires Land and Water Conservation Fund grant recipients to “design and build projects to maximize the useful life of what they build and do the least amount of damage to the environment”. Additionally, the Board developed a sustainability policy “to promote and reward sustainable practices in grant programs”. To this end, recreation providers should continue to be evaluated based in part on the sustainability of their project design, practices, and elements, meeting the goals of both environmental and recreational sustainability.

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Use the National Park Service's Green Parks Plan and the Washington State Planning for Parks, Recreation, and Open Space in Your Community as touchstones for promoting environmental sustainability and stewardship.

These resources discuss specific measures for improving sustainability and stewardship among outdoor recreation providers and provide a foundation for improving outdoor recreation sustainability while also adhering to federal mandates for environmental standards. Use the principles outlined in these documents to encourage sustainability and stewardship.

Take advantage of current technology by using a map-based information system to provide an inventory of outdoor recreation supply.

To address some of the challenges highlighted above, it is important for the state to move toward developing a map-based information system to support recreation planning. This system should support federal, state, tribal, and local agencies as well as non-governmental organizations, and it should be standardized for all users so that they know what information can be provided and can easily contribute information to the system. Additionally, the system should be adaptable at each level, providing data exporting capabilities that will allow users to manipulate exported data in their own database management software. The Recreation and Conservation Office should start with a core system designed to meet the needs for SCORP planning and build from that point to meet wider needs.
Additional SCORP Information

The SCORP provides a wealth of information about outdoor recreation in Washington State. The full document can be found on the Recreation and Conservation Office website (www.rco.wa.gov).

In addition to a more detailed discussion of the information found in this Executive Summary, the full SCORP document also includes the following:

- Extensive list of findings and implications
- Full Advisory Group recommendations
- Detailed discussion of methodology and findings
- Detailed tables and analysis of land supply and use
- Detailed tables and analysis of recreation participation
- Participation rates in all activities
- Discussion of active versus passive recreation
- Discussion of recreation equity
- Discussion of technology and its use in recreation
- The wetlands priority component of the SCORP, developed to meet the requirements of the National Park Service
- Discussion and findings from the Level of Service provider survey