

Shaping Communities & Sensitive Lands: The Triple Bottom Line the Managing Recreation in Sensitive Lands

Kristina Kachur Webb, AICP, & Taylor Broyhill, AICP,

11/06/2024



(Photo: Scenic observation deck near a wetland)

Shaping Communities & Sensitive Lands: The Triple Bottom Line for Managing Recreation

By: Kristina Kachur Webb, AICP, Taylor Broyhill, AICP, Logan Simpson

Western states are often characterized by a strong connection between clean water, abundant wildlife, productive agriculture, and cultural heritage, which has provided a high quality of life for generations. As a result, western states continue to experience unprecedented growth, increased demand for recreation amenities, and pressures on natural and cultural resources. Planning for sensitive lands *in concurrence* with outdoor recreation amenities and facilities is critical to ensuring that the places we love to visit will remain.

Most Gateway and Natural Amenity Region (GNAR) communities are trying balance it all, and need to take their "triple bottom line" – **ecosystem services, outdoor economic vitality, and community values** – into

consideration when developing new outdoor recreation amenities.

All GNAR communities fall somewhere along the "Spectrum of Outdoor Recreation Vitality" (included below). The Spectrum provides a visual tool to describe the impacts of outdoor recreation on a GNAR community's triple bottom line:



There are three main points along this spectrum:

EMERGING destinations and/or communities:

Ecosystem services and habitat are thriving and community values are shared. There's a sense of harmony among community values. However, the outdoor economy of such communities is in start-up phase. The recreation economy is likely under-developed and in the initial stages of expansion. Visitors to recreation destinations are typically locals.

LOVED TO DEATH destinations and/or communities:

They are over capacity from visitation and suffering the impacts. Ecosystem services and habitat health are declining or sustaining damage from human impacts. Visitation from outside the community is extremely high, often with a national or international draw, and visitor behavior may increasingly be in conflict or disrespectful to local community values. User experience is often diminished as a result, and this can harm the outdoor economy as reports of overcrowding or damaged resources proliferate media and word-of-mouth within the outdoor recreation community at large.

And finally, in the middle:

SUSTAINABLE & BALANCED destinations and/or communities:

They are in that happy medium where ecosystem health and natural resource protection are balanced with outdoor recreation. The outdoor industry is peaking but stable. Community values are respected by visitors. This is the goal of GNAR communities: to achieve equilibrium and a sustainable coexistence between ecosystem services and outdoor recreation.

It is important to note that these positions along the Spectrum of Outdoor Recreation Vitality are not static, but fluid states of existence. And for those communities

that have achieved a state of equilibrium, it is a constant management practice and a continuous effort to maintain that delicate balance, and avoid pushing the community into either extreme.

This article highlights how to reach equilibrium and stay there, through the following steps:

1. **Define Needs and Challenges**
2. **Identify and Assess Sensitive Lands**
3. **Plan for Recreation Management**
4. **Promote Responsibly**

1. Define the Needs and Challenges

Whether you are a community leader, or you manage a resource like an open space program, regional park, trail system, or thousands of acres of National Forest, your needs and challenges will vary depending on the lifecycle stage of your organization. Emerging organizations may focus on quickly acquiring high quality lands for conservation, developing new amenities, and promoting the asset or destination, while mature organizations must focus more on restoration, maintenance, and visitation management.

The needs and challenges should also be informed through community outreach. A grassroots vision for a project that is aligned with community values will garner broad public support, making it easier to implement policy and management practices as well as leverage funding. There are many different strategies for public engagement, but the key is to employ multiple strategies that provide both online and in-person opportunities to engage, and intentionally involve historically under-represented or under-resourced populations in your community.

Finally, always work with regional partners to define needs and challenges. Forging regional relationships at this stage can be mutually beneficial for future grant applications or policy implementation. At minimum you should involve partners such as recreation user groups and adjacent land managers, but also think beyond the usual constituents to include planners, public works professionals, developers, tourism bureaus, indigenous knowledge holders, and local businesses who are key contributors or beneficiaries of the success of your project.

Want to see an example? [Check out the Gallatin Valley Sensitive Lands Protection Plan, Needs Assessment.](#)

2. Identify and Assess Sensitive Lands

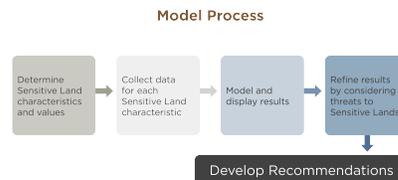
After defining needs, challenges, and local values around the project and sensitive lands – which will vary by

community – consider investing in technical analyses for data-driven decision making.

Geospatial modeling combines analytical procedures to produce project maps that identify the most sensitive lands in need of protection. This could involve analyzing geospatial data documenting natural features such as wetlands or wildlife movement corridors, as well as data analyzing threats to those natural features, such as human development patterns.

The results of this analysis will help shape recommendations related to land use planning, land acquisition priorities for conservation, development requirements and/or programs (ex: transfer of development rights areas or conservation-oriented development patterns), transportation planning, and even staffing needs.

Want to see an example? Check out the [Gallatin Valley Sensitive Lands Protection Plan Modeling Tool](#), and see an example model process below:



3. Plan for Recreation Management

After developing a thorough understanding of your program needs, community values, and the geographic location of sensitive lands, it is essential to *proactively* plan recreation management tactics for your resource area or jurisdiction.

There are six fundamentals to proactive recreation management: 1) prioritize safety; 2) practice proactive stewardship; 3) design intentional access management; 4) educate, inform, inspire; 5) enhance the visitor experience; and 6) leverage partnerships.

- **Prioritize safety** to address real or perceived threats to health, well-being, and security of visitors.
- **Practice proactive stewardship, conservation, and adaptive resource management** for healthy habitat and ecosystems.
- **Design intentional access control** for equitable access to trails, nature, and outdoor experiences while avoiding resource damage caused by unregulated human access such as the creation of social trails.

- **Educate, inform, and inspire** visitors to practice trail etiquette, respect the environment and other users, and obey regulations by facilitating an *understanding* of management practices.
- **Enhance visitor experience** by investing in amenities and facilities that anticipate visitor needs. Be creative: put the “fun” in functional!
- **Leverage partnerships** for a coordinated approach to management, maintenance, stewardship, and a consistent user experience. Such partnerships are most successful when partner agencies have been involved since Step 1.

Want to see an example? Check out the [Wheat Ridge, Colorado Open Space Management Plan](#).

4. Promote Responsibly

The economic benefits of destination-quality trail systems are well documented. Trails have helped transform failing rural economies – those with a focus on manufacturing and natural resource extraction – into hubs of economic and recreational activity.

However, the boom in visitation to trails and outdoor recreation destinations is a double-edged sword. Many communities in the mountain West have learned the hard way that the economic benefits of trails and scenic landscapes come with their own set of challenges: negative impacts to the resource, higher maintenance costs, and diminished user experience from increased conflicts and, in some areas, rising property values that price-out longtime residents. It is critical to consider these impacts when determine when, where, and how to promote your outdoor recreation destination.

Promoting your resource or destination will look different depending on where your community is along the "Spectrum of Outdoor Recreation Vitality" above. Communities experiencing the negative impacts listed above may consider ceasing all promotion, while emerging GNAR communities seek to establish themselves as the next trail town or outdoor recreation destination. Wherever your community falls along that spectrum, if you choose to promote, responsible recreation principles should be a core element of your messaging. Below are some helpful tips:

Start educating potential visitors before they arrive. Incorporate responsible recreation messaging into the digital footprint of your destination: the webpage, social media, print media, and all marketing campaigns. See the [Arizona office of Tourism's "Appreciate AZ Campaign"](#) for a great example.

On your website, make a first impression that prioritizes responsible recreation messaging. You can expand this messaging to trailheads and sign kiosks as well, so that this message is the first thing a visitor sees when they arrive. Reinforce that message by continuing it throughout the site or along the trail corridor as appropriate at junctions, access points, rest areas, and destination points within your site, to encourage desired behavior.

Finally, provide a method for two-way communication in which visitors can submit feedback or report issues such as graffiti, littering, wildlife encounters, or trail conditions. Equip your visitors to be part of the solution. This could take the form of a QR code on a trailhead sign that leads to an online comment form, a posted phone number to call, or even a written comment card and collection box in backcountry settings without cellular service. Get creative like the [Town of Breckenridge's muddy meter](#) that provides an interactive mechanism for trail users to communicate trail conditions to other visitors.

Conclusion

Every GNAR community falls somewhere along the "Spectrum of Outdoor Recreation Vitality." Ultimately, every community's goal is to achieve a sustainable and balanced state for their triple bottom line: between community values, ecosystem services, and outdoor recreation. This requires a constant and diligent management practice to maintain balance, but is well worth the effort.

Regardless of where your community is on the Spectrum, you can apply the four steps to reach equilibrium and stay there:

1. **Define Needs and Challenges**
2. **Identify and Assess Sensitive Lands**
3. **Plan for Recreation Management**
4. **Promote Responsibly**

Kristina Kachur Webb, AICP, is an environmental planner specializing in environmental land use, outdoor recreation planning, NEPA, public involvement, and GIS. She leads a variety of environmental, park and recreation, open space, natural resource, and comprehensive planning projects at various scales, working with local, county, and federal clients.

Taylor Broyhill, AICP, is a parks, recreation, open space, and trails planner with over a decade of experience advancing parks, recreation, and trails projects throughout Colorado and the Southeast through creative and inclusive community outreach and multi-disciplinary collaboration. Whether planning for trails and connectivity or facilitating

a long-range vision for outdoor recreation, Taylor aims to help communities achieve transformative and enduring results