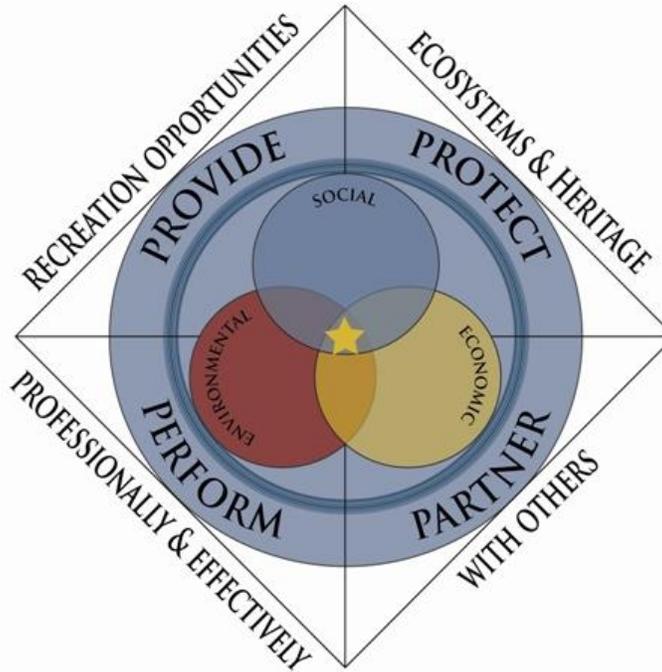


# Sustainable Recreation in the Lake Tahoe Basin: Tahoe Interagency Executive Community Scoping



*“Renewing body and spirit, inspiring passion for the land.”*



*Prepared by Joseph Flower, Natural Resources Specialist, Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit*

*November 14, 2016*

## **Introduction**

The Lake Tahoe basin is an increasingly popular recreation destination. According to estimates provided by the Tahoe Transportation District, 24 million people visited the basin in 2014, including 9.6 million visitor-vehicles. Surveys conducted by the National Visitor Use Monitoring Program consistently demonstrate that the vast majority of visitors come to the basin for recreation. While public demand for recreation has increased, appropriated funding for Forest Service recreation programs has declined. Moreover, much of the recreational infrastructure in the basin is deteriorating and cannot accommodate visitor demand during peak times. Without a coordinated response with a coalition of valuable partners, the Forest Service will not be able to meet public needs and expectations for recreational experiences in the basin.

The Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit recently completed an effort to jumpstart sustainable recreation dialogue with the executive community in the basin. Our objectives were to: 1) conduct confidential in-person interviews with executive partners, 2) identify convergent and divergent definitions, values, and experiences, and 3) deliver a snapshot report and presentation to fuel sustainable recreation dialogue during the Tahoe Interagency Executive (TIE) steering committee retreat on November 14, 2016.

## **Methods**

Nineteen partners from 13 entities were interviewed, including: the Forest Service, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, Nevada Division of State Lands, Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, North Lake Tahoe Resort Association, Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber, Lahontan Water Quality Board, Vail Resorts, Tahoe Transportation District, Tahoe Fund, Placer County Department of Public Works, Sierra Nevada Conservancy, and League to Save Lake Tahoe.

To frame the interviews, partners were asked a list of seven questions, including:

- 1) How do you define sustainable recreation in the Lake Tahoe basin?
- 2) Is there a problem? If so, what is it?
- 3) What is your organization's role in advancing sustainable recreation?
- 4) What are your key challenges and opportunities?
- 5) Who needs to be involved?
- 6) How can we engage more effectively as a community of practice?
- 7) What is your vision for a sustainable recreation future?

Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed and analyzed to identify convergent and divergent definitions, values, and experiences. A synthesis of partner feedback is presented below and was presented at the TIE steering committee retreat on November 14, 2016.

## Results

### ***How do you define sustainable recreation in the Lake Tahoe basin?***

While some partners did not offer a definition of sustainable recreation *per se*, several agreed that the concept encompasses forms of recreation that can be *sustained over time* with the protection of ecological resources. Thematic definitions included “balancing the need and desire for people to enjoy the outdoors without causing undue impact to the resource” and “trying to integrate a quality experience with responsible use and the protection of a set of underlying resources.” Critically, one respondent noted that sustainable recreation centers on “not just looking at environmental factors, [but] how you make the whole system [environment, economy, and community] work”. Although the definition of sustainable recreation varied considerably among partners, most offered definitions that fall within one or more of the three spheres (environmental, social, and economic) that frame sustainability.

### ***Is there a problem? If so, what is it?***

Although partners responded with considerable variation when defining “the problem”, responses can be roughly partitioned into the three spheres of sustainability. In the environmental sphere, several partners agreed that ecological impacts due to recreational activities constitute an ongoing problem, are common in the basin, and require significant investment to restore. “[The perception is] we have too many people and not enough resources to go around.” Problems associated with unmanaged recreation and high-intensity visitation were also cited by several partners. “The problem is focused, intensive use ... over a compressed period of time ... that compromises the [ecological] resource.”

In the social sphere, the lack of multi-modal transit linkages between popular recreation sites and town centers emerged as a key problem. Several partners also noted persistent problems associated with the abundance of private automobiles in the basin, including traffic congestion and parking issues. “Imagine Reno and Sparks trying to move around ... on a two-lane highway system ... it would fail. And that’s what we do. We fail.” Other problems include the reduction of opportunities for quiet, contemplative, or even spiritual experiences in the basin due to heavy visitation. “A big question that’s been rattling around in my head is: who’s not coming here anymore? Who have we already displaced?” In addition, several partners noted the management community in the basin has largely “fallen flat” in addressing the human dimension of land and resource management through social science. “We’ve mostly focused on the physical, chemical, and biological parameters that make up the world ... as opposed to how we, as people living in this basin engage with it and affect those factors.”

In the economic sphere, several partners reported that limited funding and staff has hindered investment in recreational infrastructure and has led to reactive forms of management. At the same time, partners note that current visitation levels often exceed the capacity of road, utility, and recreation infrastructure. For transit-focused entities, the lack of new revenue streams to fund multi-modal transit remains a persistent challenge. Other partners are concerned that, for some, Lake Tahoe is becoming increasingly difficult to access due to economic factors. “It would be nice to retain some semblance of a range of housing and lodging opportunities so that you can accommodate a range of the economic spectrum.”

***What is your organization’s role in advancing sustainable recreation?***

Some partners clearly defined their organization’s role in advancing sustainable recreation, while others expressed interest in engaging in the dialogue to see where they might contribute. The table below summarizes partner responses:

<b>Partner</b>	<b>Potential Role</b>
TRPA	Convene. Cultivate alignment. Update recreation thresholds.
USFS	Lead. Convene. Leverage resources, history, and national perspective.
NDSL	Collaborate. Find consistent and predictable way to control capacity.
LTVA	Enhance stewardship messaging. Visitor engagement.
NLTRA	Promote sustainable recreation culture. Visitor information / materials.
Chamber	Support recreation providers to manage and sustain values.
Lahontan	Coordinated resource management. Recreation / water quality nexus?
Vail Resorts	Engage and continue to explore role.
TTD	Transit leadership. Systems approach. Cultivate alignment.
Tahoe Fund	Engage and continue to explore role.
Placer Co.	Transit, trail, and park planning. Transit leadership.
League	Promote low-impact recreation. Campaign to change behavior.

TRPA = Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, USFS = United States Forest Service, NDSL = Nevada Division of State Lands, LTVA = Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, NLTRA = North Lake Tahoe Resort Association, Chamber = Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce, Lahontan = Lahontan Water Quality Board, TTD = Tahoe Transportation District, Placer Co. = Place County Department of Public Works, League = The League to Save Lake Tahoe.

### ***What are your key challenges?***

When asked about key challenges to advancing sustainable recreation, several partners responded that lack of alignment among the management sectors is their primary obstacle. Others expressed that the importance of sustainable recreation must be elevated and receive attention commensurate with other management priorities in the basin, such as forest health and water quality. Further, there is general acknowledgement that the Lake Tahoe Regional Plan is out of date as it relates to recreation and that recreation thresholds within the plan need to be revisited. A thematic response was the desire to “get ahead” of the issue. “[Our approach] is largely reactionary, we react to other agencies, we react to increased use.” Finally, several partners indicated that defining and beginning dialogue around user carrying capacity is a persistent challenge that needs to be addressed.

### ***What are your key opportunities?***

Partners reported that many opportunities exist to advance sustainable recreation in the basin. For example, increasing integration among transit, recreation site management, and visitor engagement systems could improve visitor experience. Through education and outreach, opportunities exist to leverage people’s passion for the basin and create a culture of environmental stewardship. Opportunities to build on previous successes include using Nevada Highway 28 as a “start-up model” for other transportation corridor projects around basin. To create a thematic experience around the basin, integrate recreational opportunities, and improve way-finding signage, several partners suggested using resorts and National Parks as management models. Finally, un-tapped opportunities exists to enhance the role of social science through visitor surveys and the collection of base-line visitation data.

### ***Who needs to be involved?***

Feedback revealed several key gaps in the current partnership framework around sustainable recreation. For example, partners often reported that the private sector is a critical player and that businesses must be engaged to advance sustainable recreation in the basin. Similarly, the City of South Lake Tahoe was widely recognized as “not at the table”. Because “recreation is people”, several partners suggested that citizen advocates, community organizations, the public, and *regional* constituencies must be engaged through modern tools such as social media. One partner noted that “it’s not just about agencies writing an MOU [memorandum of understanding] and signing a deal, it’s really about getting the people engaged – cause people are really the ones that make a lot of these things happen.” Transit-focused partners often reported that Federal Highways, Departments of Transportation, and travel management association partnerships are critical and could be enhanced.

### ***How can we engage more effectively as a community of practice?***

When asked how the existing management community could engage more effectively, several partners agreed that the TIE steering committee is effective, but has never successfully grappled with recreation. Although member engagement in the TIE steering committee has waxed and waned, the 2015 retreat served to re-energize and re-engage partners. However, partners have little desire to “meet to meet” and often report too many meetings and not enough action. How best to organize and engage a coalition of sustainable recreation practitioners remains an open question. “It’s not, in my mind, a stand-alone deal, where we just create a recreation committee and we’re good. I don’t think it works that easily”. Others noted that “if we were doing a good job, we would already have a recreation steering committee”. While engagement strategies may differ, many partners are looking to the Forest Service for leadership in advancing sustainable recreation - “the land managers who manage recreation sites have to lead.”

### ***What is your vision for a sustainable recreation future?***

In general, partners envision a future for the Lake Tahoe basin in which the region is both a world-class recreation destination *and* a global leader in environmental stewardship. To work toward that sustainable recreation future, many partners agree that a critical first step is gaining alignment as a collective management body. Alignment among the sectors will help to avoid the creation of a system of “winners and losers”, where competing recreational uses are pitted against each other. Instead, as one partner put it, “I want us to own what recreation opportunities we’re managing for and implement a suite of actions that support that over the long run”. Core components of this vision include environmental, social, and economic benefits for local communities. “I would love to see our communities absolutely thriving because we’re tailoring experiences that support them.”

Overall, partners envision a future with fewer personal vehicles and more multi-modal transit linkages between town centers and popular recreation sites. The basin of the future will include coordinated education and outreach programs that empower residents and visitors alike to make good decisions. As a community of practice, the sectors will work together to develop a set of values, measures, and metrics that integrate resource protection, responsible use, and quality recreational experiences. Rather than basin-wide solutions, fine-scale and site-specific management strategies will be based on allowable recreational uses given the suitability of the underlying resource. By using a “scaled approach with a range of management options ... not a big white wash – a bludgeon - we’re managing with ... some grace.”

***Sustainable Recreation References and Resources:***

USDA Forest Service (2010). Connecting People with America's Great Outdoors: A Framework for Sustainable Recreation. Washington DC: United States.

USDA Forest Service (2014). Southwestern Regional Sustainable Recreation Strategy, Albuquerque, New Mexico: United States.

USDA Forest Service (2016). Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit Land Management Plan, South Lake Tahoe, California: United States.

<http://www.reclink.us>